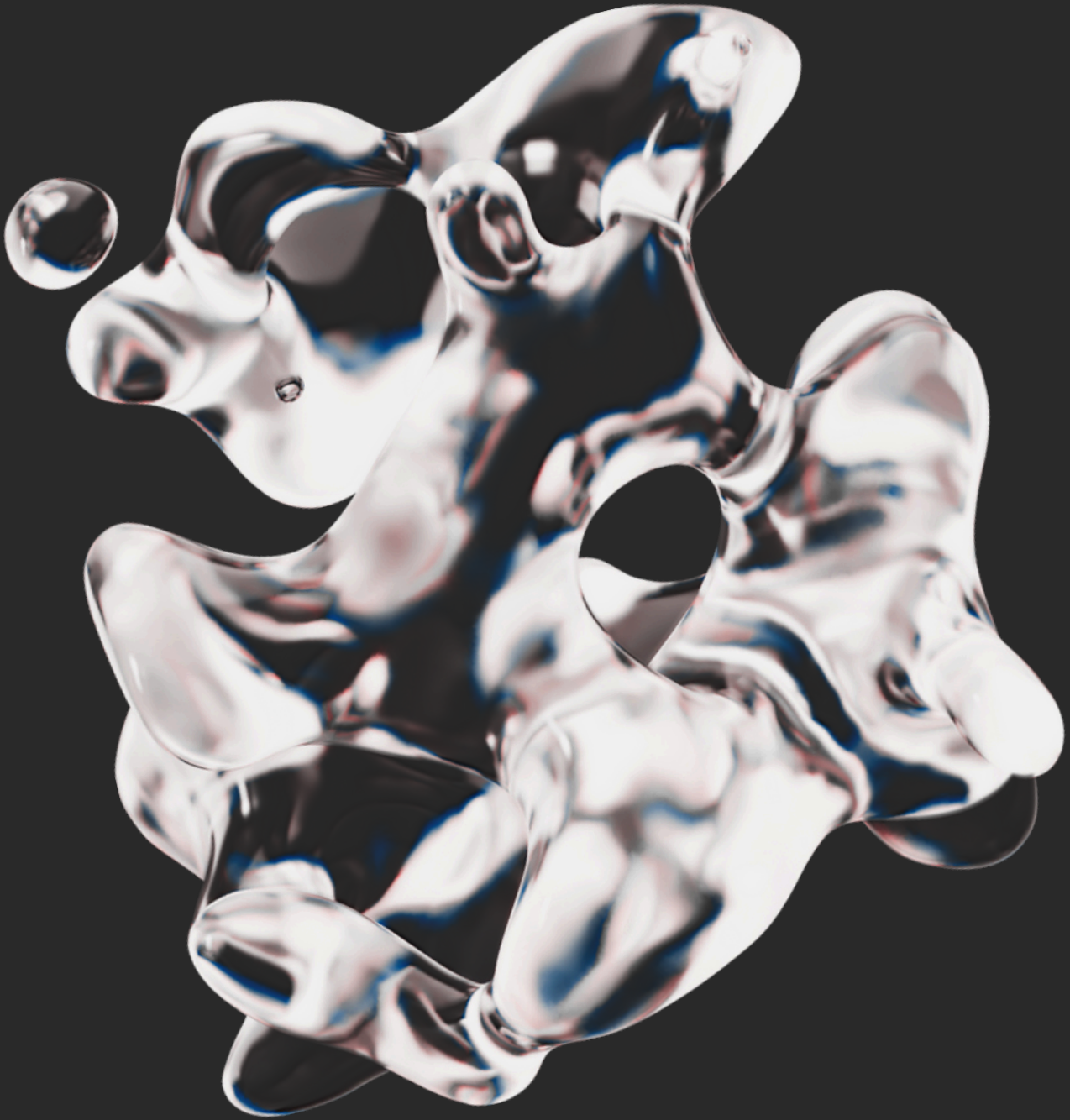


# Emergence

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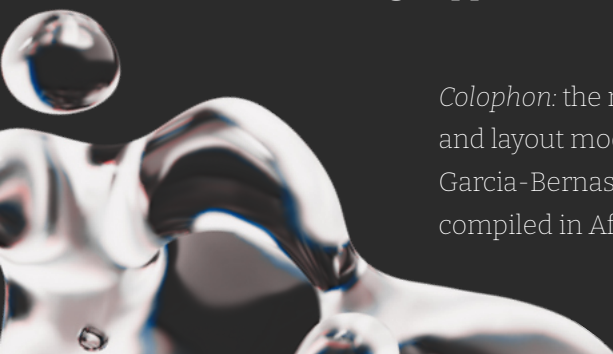
Volume X

“Flow into Form”

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*Colophon:* the majority of this journal uses the Bitter font family, as well as design elements and layout modified from the "Black & White Minimal...Cover" by IdeaTrader on Canva. Garcia-Bernasconi's embedded chapbook uses the Spectral font family. Designed and compiled in Affinity Publisher.





## Editor's Introduction

This edition of *Emergence* features creative and critical projects by the 2023-2024 cohort of Arnhold Undergraduate Research Fellows in UC Santa Barbara's Department of English. The Arnhold program allows English majors to explore their intellectual interests beyond the structure of grade-based coursework, while developing a research and writing practice that will serve them in the years to come.

My role as graduate mentor has been to provide some structure with one-on-one and collaborative coaching. In many cases, the fellows also had their own faculty, graduate student, and peer mentors, to whom I am immensely grateful. I had so many generative exchanges with the fellows throughout the year on the direction of these creative, critical, and creative-critical projects; I hope you find as much inspiration in reading them as I did in watching them grow through the year.

"Emergence" is a process-noun, but one that can obscure the fits and starts, the iteration and re-organizing, the abandonment and revival of certain trains of thought – in brief, the *-ing* of writing. It can also conceal the role of chance and serendipity in writing projects: finding the right source at the perfect time; losing weeks of planned writing to emergencies; and, in the case of this journal and our poster session in May, discovering the converging themes and ideas across independently-devised projects. This issue, titled "Flow into Form" to give some specificity to the *process* of emergence, has been organized to reveal thematic connections between works that are often formally very different: each work speaks to something in the next, whether through method, research subject, or tone.

Several of these works also *experiment* with form and flow, with fellows developing their own voices both literally (through first-person reflection) and figuratively (through strong stylistic choices on paragraph length and structure). Such formal experimentation predated their work for *Emergence*, as these and several other Arnhold scholars presented their research via posters in the Spring. I have documented a few projects that were only showcased at this poster session at the end of this issue, to honor the immense amount of creativity that they, too, contributed to this year's Arnhold cohort.

– Leila Stegemoeller, 2024 Arnhold Graduate Fellow

# Healing in the Dark: The Roles of Nightmares and Dreams in Understanding Embodied Trauma

ALLYSON BAKER

"Often we think of spirituality as religion, and don't really understand that shamanism, spirituality, and psychiatry are all the same: that our body is a frequency of color, that our chemistry is electromagnetic energy, that our biorhythms, our delta rates, our REM sleep – all of these are spiritual. . ."

– Wolf Moondance, *Native American Meditations & Dreams*

For centuries throughout North America, different Native American tribes have practiced dream ceremonies. They may take the form of songs, dances, storytelling, or meditations, practiced before sleeping or upon waking up, designed to inspire the content of dreams or understand the meaning of dream-thoughts. Although Native Americans have understood the significance of dreams in relation to other parts of the mind for hundreds of years, western, positivist thought has only recently discovered the value of dreaming in understanding the human psyche. Most often, contemporary western psychology depicts Sigmund Freud as the first person to place emphasis on dreaming in his 1899 book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud's work introduced to early-20th-century American scientists and psychologists what many Indigenous people had already known: dreaming allows us to see beyond conscious thought. Since Freud, over a century's worth of scholars have gone further into dream research, wondering if, perhaps, we may be able to measure the effects of dreaming somewhere in the mind or body.

Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony* demonstrates the physical effects of trauma in the body as the protagonist, Tayo, a member of the Pueblo tribe, journeys through the space in between his body, mind, and spirit. Living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Tayo's perception of life lingers in the context of his trauma. His experienced trauma requires him to adopt extreme survival techniques, most of which he still practices despite the traumatic incidents being years, and even decades, behind him. The way in which trauma percolates through each cell of Tayo's body is marked by his responses to unanticipated events, his interpersonal relationships, and his dreams. The narrative of Tayo's waking life mirrors the narrative of his dream-self, and as he navigates the feeling and healing while awake, so too does his dream-self, with his subconsciousness creating challenges and posing questions for Tayo to confront while asleep. Reading Silko's *Ceremony* alongside Bessel Van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, a 2014 collection of research which highlights the relationship of physical trauma to its emotional, mental, and spiritual counterparts, we can see a more comprehensive picture of Tayo's PTSD in relation to his body, brain, and dreams.

Tayo's past trauma resurrects itself through memories which he physically feels throughout different parts of his body. Tayo experiences an external stimulus which then prompts a stored memory to come to surface. This physical stimulus may present itself as a smell, sound, or physical sensation, which then triggers his nervous system where a memory of that same stimulus is stored. For example, when Tayo walks through a dirty, flooded bathroom inside of a dive bar, he notices that ". . . the floor was covered with dirty water. It was soaking through his boots. The sensation was sudden and terrifying. . . he was afraid he would fall into the stinking dirty water and

have to crawl through it, like before . . ." (Silko 56). The physical feeling of water seeping into his shoes calls back memories of the last time that he was experiencing the sensation of walking through a flooded ground. One of the reasons that this physical sensation evokes such a visceral response and vivid memory is because of the traumatic context during which the memory was initially stored. As Van Der Kolk describes, "Whether we remember a particular event at all, and how accurate our memories of it are, largely depends on how personally meaningful it was and how emotional we felt about it at the time. The key factor is our level of arousal" (Van der Kolk 177). When the memory of walking through a flooded ground was initially formed, Tayo's amygdala was activated into a state of fight-flight-or-freeze, each moment on the muddy battleground in Japan demanding his limbic system's full breadth of awareness. Now, standing in the damp floor of an unkempt bathroom, Tayo's body relives the memory, prompting his brain to prepare itself for the threat of war once again.

In attempts to resist the accompanying memories and sensations of his PTSD, Tayo finds comfort in drinking alcohol, finding its intoxicating properties helpful when silencing the sounds of the mind and body. For the other Laguna veterans who returned from the war, "Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt. . . for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats" (Silko 40). Liquor relaxes the mind as well as the body, decreasing inhibitions and creating space between the conscious, decision-making self and reality. However much alcohol helps relax the lumps forming inside of throats from grief or the bellies clenched from anxiety, it does not dissolve the anger that lies dormant inside of Tayo. Instead, as Tayo listens to another veteran proudly recall his task of murdering people in Japan, the alcohol, ". . . swelled through his blood and made all the muscles loose and warm, but it was also loosening something deeper inside which clenched the anger and held it in place" (Silko 62). The alcohol releases the restraint of Tayo's body, and his body, in turn, releases the deeply buried anger trapped inside the clenched muscles of the nervous system. Tayo's emotional floodgates collapse, sweeping away his physical self-restraint, and ultimately prompting him to punch another person. However, the consequences of his intoxication do not always lead to emotional outbursts.

Alongside its ability to release emotions, alcohol also has the power to numb. At times when Tayo drinks, the liquor smothers his ability to feel his emotions fully, and, "The beer stroked a place deep under his heart and put all the feeling to sleep" (Silko 60). In this case, the liquor suffocates the emotions that are demanding for Tayo to feel them; but even without the dampening effects of alcohol on his nervous system, Tayo's resting state is that of numbness. His default mode network, the part of his brain that stays active while his mind is 'wandering', frequently turns to a feeling of numbness to help him retain a semblance of a barrier of safety. By not entirely letting himself feel fully present in a moment, he maintains a feeling of safety from any threats that may arise in the present moment. Tayo recalls that this feeling of disembodiment occurred during his time in the hospital after returning from his WWII deployment, and that the military, "... sent me to this place after the war. It was white. Everything in that place was white. Except for me. I was invisible. But I wasn't afraid there. I didn't feel things sneaking up behind me. I didn't cry for Rocky or Josiah. There were no voices and no dreams. Maybe I belong back in that place" (Silko 123). In a sterile, white environment, where Tayo feels himself to be as inconspicuous as the air around him, he no longer feels fear. However, it's important to make the distinction that even though Tayo does not feel afraid, he also does not feel safe, noted by Tayo's identifying with the word 'invisible.' Safety does not just entail a lack of fear but requires additional criteria to be met, one of which is being seen by others. As Van der Kolk explains, "Being validated by feeling heard and seen is a precondition for feeling safe. . ." (Van der Kolk 303). Tayo's feelings of invisibility indicate a sense of

depersonalization, which may help explain his lack of dreams in the hospital. Without someone witnessing his existence and sympathizing with his vulnerability, he is disconnected from all parts of his self.

Throughout *Ceremony*, Tayo experiences the effects of both dissociation and depersonalization. Although these words are frequently used interchangeably, they carry different meanings and represent different experiences of the self. According to Van Der Kolk, “Dissociation is the essence of trauma. The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented. . .” (Van der Kolk 66). It is the separation of the body’s feeling capabilities from the brain’s processing capabilities. Sensory memories such as sounds, tastes, smells, and physical or emotional feelings begin to exist in singular forms, disconnected from the experience and living in the brain and body as individual entities. This means that when the neural pathway that contains one of these sensory memories is triggered, the entire experience is relived in the body. Van der Kolk continues to explain that depersonalization, on the other hand, is “. . . one symptom of the massive dissociation created by trauma” (Van der Kolk 72). While dissociation fragments the traumatic memory into smaller parts that exist scattered throughout the body, ready to be called upon and triggered at any moment, depersonalization exists as a response to the trigger. When depersonalization occurs, a person who experiences a trigger from a previous trauma will appear to feel nothing, their body and brain entering a frozen-like state to guard them from re-experiencing the unpleasant memory. As demonstrated in *Ceremony*, prolonged depersonalization can result in an individual feeling extensive separation from the self, potentially leading to depression or other serious mental health difficulties.

Further, during dissociation, a traumatic experience becomes mentally split off and, “. . . other unprocessed sense fragments of trauma, like sounds and smells and physical sensations, are also registered separately from the story itself” (Van der Kolk 44). These sensations, when living isolated in the body, can be difficult to keep track of. It might take the slightest unexpected whiff of a memory or the briefest snippet of a sound to be fully transported back into a traumatic space. Tayo’s visceral reaction to the crunching sound of chewing demonstrates the way in which sounds from traumatic memories exist detached from the rest of the traumatic episode. Upon hearing the sound, “Tayo could not bite down on the seeds. . . . The sound of crushing made him sick” (Silko 45). This seemingly inconspicuous, crunching noise from food resembles the sound that Tayo heard when a soldier was jabbing the butt of his gun into the corpse of Tayo’s cousin, Rocky; but, “Tayo never heard the sound, because he was screaming. . . . he regretted that he had not listened, because it became an uncertainty, loose inside his head. . . . so that any hollow crushing sound he heard. . . took him back to that moment” (Silko 44). Tayo’s visceral reaction to hearing himself chew seeds may be a result of the dissociation that occurred during the traumatic incident of witnessing Rocky’s body being beaten. He was unable to store the sensations of the memory with the memory itself, creating a disconnect between what the mind knows is happening (chewing seeds) and what the body thinks it’s reliving (the traumatic loss of his cousin in Japan).

For Tayo, smells also play a particularly strong role in his recovered memories. Certain, vivid scents even appear in Tayo’s dreams. After returning home to New Laguna from the veteran’s hospital in Los Angeles, Tayo dreams that, “. . . Josiah had been hugging him close the way he had when Tayo was a child, and in the dream he smelled Josiah’s smell. . . the smell he had forgotten until the dream; and he was overcome with all the love there was” (Silko 32). Referencing the findings of dream researchers Robert Stickgold, Allan Hobson, and their colleagues, Van der Kolk relays that their studies discover that dreams can help bridge together lived experiences, even if they’re seemingly unrelated. As they learn in their research, “Dreams keep replaying, recombining,



and reintegrating pieces of old memories for months and even years. They constantly update the subterranean realities that determine what our waking minds pay attention to" (Van der Kolk 262). This can result in people, sensations, and/or experiences appearing in dreams, even if the mind has not actively recalled them recently. While Tayo has intrusive, traumatic flashbacks that come up often in his nightmares, he also experiences other, pleasurable memories that present themselves in his dreams, marking a shift in his healing throughout the novel.

The shift begins to take place through the way that Tayo's trauma resonates in his body upon forming a relationship with The Woman. Unfelt sensations begin to mark themselves in his body, healing the lingering pain from previous wounds and traumas. The Woman introduces a sense of safety, comfort, and security into Tayo's life, his mind and body absorbing her healing presence and allowing them to make changes to his neural structure. Tayo, having spent a lifetime anticipating threats to his physical and emotional safety, releases his body's tension during intimate moments with The Woman: "And he was lost somewhere, deep beneath the surface of his own body and consciousness, swimming away from all his life before that hour" (Silko 99). The vulnerability required in order to be naked and intimate with another person helps Tayo untether himself from the threads of trauma coping mechanisms that have wrapped themselves tightly around his psyche. He does not need to drink to relax his body enough to be here. He can be present without needing to numb his senses, without being afraid.

During his time with The Woman, his dreams, like his body, also begin to lose tension. Dream narratives are no longer threatening, no longer requiring Tayo to evade a terrifying subconscious-conjured situation. Sleeping alongside The Woman at night and receiving her gentle touches during the day, Tayo's dream-self can now relax and have "... dreams that lasted all night, dreams full of warm deep caressing and lingering desire which left him sleeping peacefully until dawn. . ." (Silko 215) or dreams "... of her arms around him strong. . ." (Silko 217). The descriptions of these tranquil and reassuring dreams include language of physical touch sensations, such as 'warm deep caressing' and 'arms around him,' indicating that The Woman's physical presence is correlated to Tayo's mental and emotional sense of security. As Van der Kolk notes, "Safety and terror are incompatible. . . . In order to recover, mind, body, and brain need to be convinced that it is safe to let go. That happens only when you feel safe at a visceral level. . ." (Van der Kolk 212). The emotional trust established between Tayo and The Woman, in addition to their trusting, physical connection, helps Tayo re-establish a sense of safety within his body. The soft touches exchanged between them encourage Tayo to unclench the tensed muscles that have, for years, been expecting a perpetual threat. His body knows that it is finally safe and reassures the mind of this fact, too.

This sense of increased safety in Tayo's mind-body connection introduces a new capability as well: creativity. With the warm touch of his intimate partner melting away distressed thoughts, creativity and imagination can finally enter Tayo's headspace. While asleep, his dreams begin to take on more explorative forms, and instead of waking up in a cold sweat from a nightmare, he wanders through the dreamspace, following the creations of his imagination. Dreaming of following the wandering paths of lost cattle from years ago, his subconscious mind explores the landscape with a sense of safety, rather than the usual nightmarish dread or horror. He realizes that, "The terror of the dreaming he had done on this bed was gone, uprooted from his belly; and The Woman had filled the hollow spaces with new dreams. . ." (219). His physical body makes space for safety and exploration, and his subconscious mind follows suit. Van der Kolk emphasizes the importance of imagination and play in healing from trauma, stating, "Recovery from trauma involves the restoration of executive functioning and, with it, self-confidence and the capacity for playfulness and creativity" (Van der Kolk 207). While Tayo heals the marks of trauma left on his

body and mind, he enters a state of fight-or-flight less often, allowing the prefrontal cortex to take charge with executive decision-making and creative tasks. Feeling safer as his relationship with The Woman grows stronger, Tayo can engage with his creative imagination more regularly.

The use of creativity to heal has an extensive history in Pueblo culture outside of *Ceremony*, as well. In Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross' 2023 nonfiction work *Your Brain on Art*, the two researchers discuss the healing journey of an art teacher named Judy who had spent her life shouldering both personal and generational trauma. During a trip to the desert of New Mexico, Judy observed centuries-old Pueblo Kiva murals, created during Puebloan ceremonies. After a ceremony was concluded, the painting would then be covered with a layer of whitewash, providing a blank canvas for the next painting to be completed on. Drawing inspiration from the Puebloan Kiva paintings, Judy found herself exploring the notion of creating art and painting over it, but instead of using white paint to cover the art underneath, Judy opted to paint over the original image, letting one layer tumble into the next, a myriad of emotions pouring out from her to the canvas in a perpetual artistic expression. "I painted as though a dream were happening on the canvas," Judy said of the experience (Magsamen 70). Allowing her mind to experiment with existing in a free flowing state of art, she was able to explore a stream of consciousness and any subsequent emotions safely on the canvas. Magsamen and Ross report that, "What Judy found in this process of creating and letting go was a pathway into the unconscious" (Magsamen 70). Coordinated mind and body movement during the artistic process of creating and recreating art provides an environment for emotional exploration, a place where one can connect more deeply with the self.

Other researchers study dreams through a more lab-based approach. Dream researcher Robert Stickgold performs additional research into the topic of sleeping, formulating an experiment to look at the relationship between dreaming and memory by asking participants to play the game Tetris for several consecutive days. Then, in a sleep lab, he and his team wake up the participants just as they are about to fall asleep, asking them what they were just dreaming about. Stickgold says that participants would answer with responses such as, "I just saw Tetris pieces floating down. And I was rotating them and fitting them into slots" (Zuckerman). Additionally, when Stickgold asked people with amnesia to perform the same experiment, upon being woken up they would respond to his question with, "I'm seeing shapes. They're rectangles, they're turned on their side. I don't know where they're from" (Zuckerman). Although these participants did not remember playing Tetris, their mind still consolidated the information and revealed it to them in a sleep state. This finding suggests that dreaming may serve a purpose of memory consolidation, storing both recent and past memories during our moments of sleep. While the body lies still at night, the brain is actively working to sort our experiences, compare them to past memories, and creatively explore the relationship between them.

Underneath our closed eyelids, through vivid imagery and creative storytelling, the brain works overtime to understand our body's emotions, memories, and experiences. For those who live with embodied trauma, the healing power of dreaming especially cannot be replaced. Sleep researcher Gina Poe describes the healing nature of dreams specifically when it comes to PTSD, stating that people with trauma must "... incorporate the context of safety. 'That was then. That was there.' In order to incorporate that new piece of information. . . into that old memory, you need REM sleep" (16:04-16:17). The nightly routine of information consolidation, new formations of memory connections, and opportunities to solve problems from the past provide the subconscious a way to understand the body's emotions and confront past trauma head on. As Silko depicts through the mind-body-spirit journey of Tayo in *Ceremony*, healing occurs when the body feels safe. A safe body



knows that it can finally rest, encouraging the mind and spirit to follow suit, while dreaming or awake.

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# **The American Creed and the Abnegated Self: Analyzing the role of master narratives in configurations of the self in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time***

MAX MOHINK

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the role of national and religious narratives in configurations of the self in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. I explain the set of constructed master narratives regarding citizenship, race, and religion as the American creed, and document the impact these master narratives have in the process of self-narration. Baldwin witnesses a collective confusion among Americans, which I introduce as a product of the dichotomy between mythological master narratives and historical reality. I argue that this confusion or ambiguity within our national identity and history manifests as ambiguity within the self, or a lack of integration with one's individual reasons and desires; described as self-abnegation. As Baldwin documents his "religious crisis," I explore the Church's role in sanctifying the American creed, and the adopted dynamics of oppression and social stratification within the alternative Nation of Islam. In my analysis, I explore how national and religious master narratives impact two spheres of interiority and exteriority through Baldwin's fear of the "evil within" and the "evil without."

## **1. Introduction**

From a contextual approach, an individual's understanding of self is anchored to their circumstances; whether those be social, geographical, or historical. In this paper, I explore the role of narrativity in the construction of the United States – the American creed – and its manifestations within personal narratives and configurations of self. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin analyzes the forces of national and religious master narratives, and the reverberations within identity development, and self-narration.

Despite the dominance of the American creed, Baldwin consistently finds himself needing to adopt alternative narratives while constructing his personal narrative. Baldwin is shaped by his hometown of Harlem, and verbalizes the covert internal and external impacts of racialization through the "evil within" and the "evil without." Due to the external corset of structural racism, and the internal cyst of digested master narratives– Baldwin depicts his father's defeat, and urges his nephew to resist the encystment provoked by internalizing narratives of the white world. Baldwin also analyzes the role of religion and understands Christianity's sanctification of the American creed. Religion is determined to be an institution intertwined with the American creed, and a site of narrative construction similarly dependent on hegemony and racial stratification.

Throughout the book, the American creed is dismantled and proven to be 1) constructed, 2) mythological, and 3) ahistorical. Due to the dichotomy between the American creed and our historical reality– Baldwin elucidates ambiguity within the self and the abnegation of self as a product of internalizing master narratives, despite a lack of alignment within one's lived experience and process of self-narration. One's narratives of agency and agentic capacities are thus dictated, and limited, by the internalization of master narratives within the construction and understanding of self.

## 2. The American Creed: a Collection of National Master Narratives

It's widely accepted that Americans largely assemble their identity deriving from national narratives. These narratives instill cultural values and ideologies that Americans may internalize in their process of self-narration– often understood in literature, as master narratives. In “Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives,” McLean and Syed explain that master narratives are unique to culture, and are developed to instruct the populace of the principles expected and required of “good” members of society (5). Master narratives guide citizens on what to believe, how to think, and how to behave– however, certain disempowered individuals may need to implant alternative narratives which differ from or oppose the master narrative entirely.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin depicts these master narratives which constitute colonial, Christian attitudes, as the exceptional hegemony within the United States. Baldwin is shaped by the authority of master narratives yet is forced to adopt supplemental alternative narratives in order to explain himself and his position in society. Due to intersecting factors of race, class, and gender, Baldwin is unable to accept the American creed as truth. Baldwin is disillusioned and dissociates himself from the creed, yet he finds himself circumscribed by these narratives with no visible path to liberation.

Baldwin elucidates that despite its dominance and propensity for collective internalization, the American creed is more representative of exceptionalism than truth. Sensibly, Baldwin becomes confused and frustrated when notions of equality, justice, and freedom are not awarded to him, despite his status as a free American.

Baldwin illuminates that race is a key factor in the construction of personal narratives and their alignment with master narratives. White Americans can more effortlessly accept the American creed because it is more aligned with their lived experiences, while African Americans are continuously forced to adopt or construct alternative narratives.

Despite the dominance of the American creed, Baldwin reveals that American master narratives are: 1) constructed, 2) mythological, and 3) ahistorical.

## 3. Constructing the American Creed

*A New American Creed: The Eclipse of Citizenship and Rise of Populism* by David Kamens provides historical context regarding the originations of the United States, and the need to construct a new national identity:

The United States was a new nation and a frontier society that had to create a distinct set of cultural understandings concerning citizenship, the nation, and the role of the state. Since it had rejected European models of state and society, diplomats and leaders had to invent new myths of nationhood and narratives of agency in society. (22)

Due to the settler colonial foundations and the canonical influences of European Protestantism, the relationship between whiteness, religion, and citizenship in the United States is largely linear. The construction and calcification of American identity were dependent on the “closely affiliated religious and racial categories of Christianity and whiteness” (Drake, 1). Thus the determination of citizenship and individual personhood was largely contingent on the existence, and classification of the “other.”

Both Native Americans and African Americans have been historically “othered” during and after the construction of a national identity and subsequently excluded from citizenship, in addition to creedal ideologies. In *Constructing the Self, Constructing America* by Phillip Cushman, he explains how hegemonic notions of civility were used to alienate Native Americans and

construct a national image in opposition to the White Middle-Class worker– solidifying them within the national imagination as “savage”, “lazy,” and “sexual” (61). Compulsory assimilation was constructed as a reformation of the Indian or even salvation of his soul within a Christian context. Intersecting political powers in America worked vehemently to solidify Native Americans as the “other” and thus, contributed to structural oppression aimed at Indigenous people including the denial of citizenship, and suppression of personhood. These constructed narratives constituting civility and citizenship justified colonial violence, while also providing White Americans with a model for their roles as citizens.

Constructed mythologies regarding the frontier additionally contributed to the formation of social hierarchy in the United States. The American creed calcified an opposing image of citizenry using Native Americans, in which their social subordination was cemented compared to White Americans. Native Americans served as a subaltern anchor, which White Settlers could use to define the boundaries of citizenship and personhood.

The influence of Christianity conjoined with the powers of settler colonialism to uphold hegemony regarding civility and citizenship. As Indigenous Americans were removed from their native land, these powers upheld a strong binary between the civilized Christian and the “heathen.” Due to their failure to assimilate to Christianity, Native Americans were justifiably exterminated, and “their rights to life and property” were negated (Drake, 4). African Americans were also classified as “uncivilized” and thus the brutality of their conditions endured without question, as they were considered “dependents” rather than citizens, even if they converted to Christianity (Drake, 4).

Kamens goes on to explain the structural, calcification of the American creed within society:

The American Creed persists because elites have embedded these narratives of society and citizenship in law and in the state itself. While the structure of state and society have changed over time, these narratives have remained remarkably stable. (43)

Cushman describes two pivotal devices composed in tandem with the American creed in the process of racial formation: minstrelsy and the myth of the frontier.

Both minstrelsy and the myth of the frontier “provided moral and political guidance” to a nation that was in the process of building and defining itself (53). Cushman explains that these technologies achieved the justification and the mystification of the emerging colonial-capitalist agenda, while at the same time providing narratives that solidified understandings of race (53).

The myth of the frontier “othered” Indigenous Americans by establishing a racist mythology, while also aiding in national pursuits of dispossession and extraction. The mythological narrative of the frontier contributed to efforts of reformation, or “civilizing” Native people, and widespread compulsory assimilation. The narrative of the frontier also justified the annihilation of Indigenous culture, lands, and people within the national consciousness.

The conception of minstrelsy was just as destructive towards the configuration of African Americans. White Americans began the tradition of minstrelsy and thus created a system of racialization, independent from reality. Cushman explains that the majority of Northern whites had little to no personal contact with African Americans so the jokes, stories, and songs performed within minstrel shows were entirely imaginative, and isolated from real African American culture (42). Additionally, minstrelsy was largely used as a political device to rewrite the true beliefs and experiences of African Americans. Minstrel shows often portrayed the message that “African Americans loved the South, and they didn’t want to leave” (48). Minstrelsy perpetuated the racist

belief that African Americans were inherently inferior, incapable of autonomy, and dependent on slavery to survive. Cushman emphasizes that these performances would even showcase African Americans who were appreciative and grateful to their enslavers (48). Cushman states that the brutality aimed toward African Americans was exponentially worse because of these false narratives and that their oppression would have been harder for White Americans to ignore if not for the gleeful depictions of African Americans in minstrel shows. The shows provided a “moral justification” for slavery, as they supported the idea that the enslaver and the enslaved mutually benefited from one another (48).

We also must acknowledge that minstrelsy was a hugely popular practice; Thomas Rice, known as the father of minstrelsy, “drew more money into the box office than any American performer in the same period of time” (42).

Due to the expansive scope of both devices– minstrelsy and the myth of the frontier can be understood as primary narratives of racial formation constituting the American creed and must be remembered when thinking about the structural foundations of the United States.

Both minstrelsy and the myth of the frontier illuminate the evolution of national narratives and the hegemonic notions of race and citizenship in America. As these technologies worked to define the role of the citizen, they also solidified a society “held together by a mythology of racial difference” (52).

#### **4. Master Narratives, Alternative Narratives, and Personal Narratives**

The American creed has already been defined as a collection of master narratives, but the supreme power of master narratives cannot be underemphasized. The dominance of master narratives can be understood by their five defining characteristics: utility, ubiquity, invisibility, their compulsory nature, and their rigidity (McLean and Syed, 3).

Master narratives are utilized to guide individuals' understanding of spatio-temporal dynamics, the human experience, one's role in society and the various systems that influence the development of identity. Based on the physical, social, and historical context of one's development; they become conscious within their interactions ranging from interpersonal, to the much larger historical context of settler colonialism in the United States. Master narratives inform an individual how to understand themselves and the structures of their lives, however, narratives are foundationally malleable. This assumes the possibility that one's personal narrative may change over time as well.

While the utility of master narratives forms the ways individuals think – ubiquity speaks to the dominating force of these narratives, best described as hegemony. Invisibility is complementary to the ubiquity, as the breadth and sanctimony of master narratives are unspoken about and yet invisibly accepted, and enforced. Master narratives are compulsory, because “they have a moral component, an ideological message, which tells us how we are supposed to behave and how we are supposed to feel” (McLean and Syed, 18). If one strays and adopts an alternative narrative, there is stigma regarding their morality, their “goodness” and their capability of judgment. Those who deviate from master narratives experience unequivocal social alienation– which explains the rigidity. For example, sexual minorities who deviate from master narratives of heteronormativity experience structural and interpersonal alienation. Master narratives are constructed to enforce social standards, therefore, many Americans internalize and believe the constructed stigma regarding homosexual deviance, and continue to perpetuate it. Other Americans may internalize these ideologies despite being homosexual themselves. A third case may be homosexuals who renounce these stigmas and accept themselves as homosexual, yet are still

bound to the confines of the master narratives produced by the cis-heteropatriarchy, regarding gender roles or marital status.

McLean and Syed describe two processes of negotiation and internalization regarding one's relationship to master narratives within society (5). The process of negotiation describes the process of defining one's relation to society– the ways in which they are a part of the collective, and the ways they are distinct. During the negotiation stage, individuals may need to construct or adopt narratives that are more aligned with their lived experiences. Following negotiation, one begins to construct a personal narrative based on the internalization of both master and alternative narratives. Within a post-colonial reality, *The Fire Next Time* reveals that members of subaltern groups are often forced to adopt alternative narratives in their process of self-narration.

Due to the dichotomy between national master narratives, the American creed, and Baldwin's lived experience in Harlem; He develops alternative narratives during his construction of a personal narrative. However, alternative narratives are inherently derivative of master narratives. McLean and Syed explain that the master narrative will continue to be dominant, and ironically even strengthened by the construction of alternative narratives. Those who align with master narratives will "reify the existing structures" and those who adopt alternative narratives are bound to recognize, or even validate the master narratives in the process (McLean and Syed, 13). Thus, the power and authority of master narratives are omnipresent, and will even subsist within the construction or adoption of alternative narratives.

## **5. The Role of Narrativity in Configurations of Self**

*The Fire Next Time* begins with "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation." Baldwin tethers this letter to its historical context, as both Baldwin and his nephew continue to be constrained by the racism embedded within the country, a century after Emancipation. Baldwin creates a distinction between the "white world" and his own while illuminating the dominant power of racism within the construction of narrative identity, which can be explained as "an individual's internalized, evolving, and integrated story of the self" (McAdams, 2008).

"My Dungeon Shook" elucidates the processes of racial construction and the role of master narratives implemented by the white world. In the letter, Baldwin highlights a national confusion, as the attempts to understand our national history, and ourselves, become obfuscated by master narratives that constitute the American Creed.

Despite the realities of settler colonialism and racism, Baldwin reveals how master narratives adopted by the white world reflect the settler's move to innocence. The master narratives consisting of notions regarding the American Dream, freedom, and equality are in opposition to the historical reality of our country, and it is precisely the maintenance of these narratives that "constitutes the crime" of our country (6).

Baldwin illuminates the present racial stratification as a product of this "othering" enacted by the American creed– visible within his heavily racialized and segregated town of Harlem. He instructs his nephew that "this innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended you should perish" (7). He explains that he was born into his circumstances, geographic and social, as the sole result of his race. In contrast with creedal narratives regarding social mobility and the American dream, Baldwin explains that the nation is unable to see his value as an African American, and expects him to "make peace with mediocrity" (7).



Baldwin describes the American creed and its expansive and dominant nature in reference to the white world. Due to the entwined relationship between power, whiteness, and citizenship in America– the American creed is rightfully classified as a product of the white world, constructed predominantly by white people. Baldwin warns his nephew:

“The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you” (8).

This is Baldwin’s initial reference to the ambiguity of self provoked by the American creed.

McConnel and Golova define self-ambiguity as “a feeling of uncertainty about one’s authentic self, that is, an uncertainty about which values, actions, desires, emotions, bodily features, and so on most reflect who one is” (1).

Baldwin depicts ambiguity within understandings of the self as a manifestation of the narratives that obscure our national history:

They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. (9).

Baldwin compares the Black man in America to a “fixed star... an immovable pillar” (9). The social position of African Americans is paramount to the foundations of the nation, and pivotal within the American creed to anchor national constructions of race and citizenship. White Americans have “had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men” to justify the social hierarchy within America, and explain the disparities between races in spite of national narratives championing equality. The American creed illuminates that the racial hierarchy within America, although believed to be inherent, is merely a product of social construction– however, if White Americans were to acknowledge this– it would result in the upheaval of their own identity and understanding of self.

The inability of White Americans to acknowledge reality, and their commitment to upholding mythological master narratives, sets the precedent for the “defeat” of Baldwin’s father – which I interpret as the abnegation of self. In “The Abnegated Self,” Wieland defines this concept:

A self-abnegating person lacks contact with their agency. This can be against their will, in absence of their will, or voluntarily. This does not mean that they cannot provide reasons for or a narrative about their actions. It’s just that the reasons or narrative are someone else’s. (1)

Baldwin warns of his father's defeat, or abnegation; caused by the internalization of the narratives fed to him by the white world. Additionally, he explains his father's devotion to the Church as a product of this internalization, and his belief in the master narratives projected onto him.

“He was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons he became so holy” (2).

Within a post-colonial reality, subaltern populations risk internalization of master narratives that are dependent on their subordination. This renders defeat, or the abnegation of self, and inhibits one’s agentic capacity.

## 6. Religion as Circumvention

In the central text of the book, "Down At The Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind," Baldwin depicts religiosity as an attempt to mitigate the internalization of the American creed, or the "evil within" as he describes it.

During the summer he turned fourteen, Baldwin underwent a "prolonged religious crisis" within the context of our "Christian nation," and for the first time, he became "afraid of the evil within" himself and "the evil without" (16). Baldwin explains that nothing had changed in his hometown of Harlem, but he became aware that the "whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue" were created by the same circumstances as himself (16). Baldwin's peers were conscious enough to know that "the man" was the source of their oppression, yet that knowledge was unable to prevent them from the same fate on the Avenue (19). As his peers came to maturity, Baldwin recognized that the internalization of master narratives regarding their agentive capacities inhibited them from wholly understanding, or taking action against the abuses of power. Baldwin's peers turned to alcohol, crime, or devastation, as they were unable to face the "incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long" (19).

Baldwin's fear of the "evil within" and "without" is symptomatic of the American creed, and the subsequent racialization he experiences in Harlem. The "evil without" is glaringly apparent through the segregation, and racialization of space, for which, his hometown of Harlem serves as an ultimate example.

Baldwin nods to his Christian perspective when he declares that the "wages of sin were visible everywhere" (20).

At fourteen years old, Baldwin's familiarity with violence and evil signifies that his innocence had long departed. Physical violence was indeed prevalent, however, Baldwin became aware of an alarming, invisible type of social violence, in which his community members were inhibited from their agentive potential.

The "evil within" Baldwin at such a young age represents a similar, invisible violence. The master narratives of his life, both national and religious, contributed to an inner sense of "depravity" that was reinforced by the "evil without" in Harlem.

In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi uses metaphors of a cyst and a corset to explain two processes distributed by "calcified" narratives within a colonized society in both realms of interiority and exteriority:

The calcified colonized society is therefore the consequence of two processes having opposite symptoms: encystment originating internally and a corset imposed from outside (146).

The corset is "imposed from the outside" while the cyst originates "internally."

Harlem itself may be understood as the corset in Baldwin's life, in addition to the racism that shapes his life and the lives of his community members. The cyst lies in Baldwin's propensity to internalize the American creed or the master narratives of our society. The cyst of interest within the book is that of David Baldwin: James' father. The cyst is symbolic of David's premature "defeat" that: "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons he became so holy" (2).

Memmi medicalizes this experience of internalization among subaltern groups which signifies the severity of this internalization, and its potential to harm or immobilize the individual

who develops a metaphorical cyst. This medicalization has also been adopted by Joseph Roach and his conception of “deep skin” which represents a parallel internalization of differences that are only “skin deep” (102). Roach describes “deep skin” as a “melanoma of the imagination” which, again, implies that internalizing master narratives provokes the hindrance of one’s agentive capacity and the abnegation of self to these constructed narratives (102).

Furthermore, Baldwin describes that this internalization of the American creed produced his father's religiosity: “This is one of the reasons he became so holy” (2).

Baldwin illustrates that the externalization and internalization of the American creed are both separate and coalescent. These two processes shape one’s reality, both external and internal, while imposing limits on one’s agentive capacities. The external realities that shape David’s life influence and reinforce this internalization, and both of these processes evoke his need for the Church.

## **7. Religion as an Extension of Master Narratives**

Baldwin discovers that it is impossible to escape the corset imposed by the white world, however, he can consciously thwart the encystment generated by their master narratives. He concludes that the method to escape his internalized “depravity” and encystment from the white world, is through the adoption of a “gimmick,” for which he chose the Church.

Baldwin understands that other African Americans are also inclined towards the Church due to their fear of the “evil within” and “without.” The exploitation, abuse, and oppression experienced by the members of his community provoke their desire for God’s love. The deprivation of love from their fellow Americans forces them to seek external love within the Church.

Ironically, however, the belief that religion is capable of salvation, is embedded within the American creed, and has been used to negate the humanity of Native Americans and African Americans historically.

As he attempts to escape the “evil within” and “without”, Baldwin is made aware of the parallels between the Church and the Avenue. His friend's minister asks “Whose little boy are you?” which “unbelievably, was precisely the phrase used by pimps and racketeers on the Avenue” (28).

After deviating from his father's church, Baldwin's new Church grants him perspective, and he comes to the pivotal revelation that God is white.

Baldwin asks: “And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?” (31).

Baldwin’s disillusionment with the Church is indicative of its principles which Baldwin declares are “Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others” (31).

Baldwin’s interaction with Jewish students at highschool – deemed unsalvageable from the Christian perspective – prompted a further investigation of the doctrine of the Church. For the first time, Baldwin comes to terms with the fact that the Bible had been “written by men, and translated by men out of languages” he couldn’t read, and specifically written by White men (36). Additionally, he recognizes that African Americans are in a similar category to the Jewish boys at school, in which many Christians believe that all African Americans are cursed descendants of Ham, and destined for slavery on Earth.

When Baldwin befriends a Jewish boy, his father becomes so angry that he hits him in the face, and at that moment “all the hatred and all the fear” came rushing back; physically

representing the principles of “blindness, loneliness, and terror” that David Baldwin was so entrenched in, and committed to (37). Despite his repentance and holiness, David Baldwin remained an enforcer of division and hatred, which prompted James to announce that his Jewish friend was a “better Christian” than his father, the Baptist Minister.

Baldwin exposes this “subtle hypocrisy” and leads to his renunciation of the Church, while still holding the knowledge and fear of “evil without” and his potential fate on the Avenue.

Baldwin felt that he was “committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus” knowing that White people created him, that White Christians believed African Americans were inherently inferior, and that the methodology of the Church is much more so based in hatred than in love (38).

He questions: “was Heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto?” (39).

Since both the Church and the American creed were constructed by the white world, the same racial hierarchies exist. As Baldwin comes to terms with Christianity’s ideology that African Americans are inherently cursed and inferior, what rationalizes the idea that Heaven would be any different?

In other words, both America and Christianity were constructed to benefit a certain populace: white people. The church enforces a racial hierarchy through the legend of Ham, and America similarly enforces racial hierarchy through master narratives, and structures depending on these racist narratives. Therefore, one must question if racial hierarchies exist within constructed visions of an afterlife. Since African Americans are segregated and confined to ghettos on Earth, there is no reason to believe Heaven, a White Christian construct, would be a paradise for Black people.

This subsequently shatters the foundations of Baldwin’s Christianity and his belief in salvation.

Baldwin further illuminates the Church as a site of equal injustice and parallel abuses of power. Baldwin admits he has been in the “pulpit too long” and seen “too many monstrous things” (39).

Christianity can be understood as a contributor to the formation of the internal cyst, as the master narratives that constitute the American creed are directly reflected, or sanctified by the Church.

He explains the “love” felt within the Church as a “mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair” (39). Subaltern individuals seeking God’s love may turn to the Church, but the same social hierarchies exist within the Church’s doctrine. Baldwin depicts the convergence of religiosity and American materialism, as the Church further imbues social stratification and exploitation.

“The minister eventually acquires houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their dimes and quarters and dollars into the plate” (39).

Additionally, the Church’s tactics of empowerment through black separatism once again were dependent on the hatred of white people, and fundamental division between people. Baldwin understands that the principle of “love” in the Church is restricted to those who agree with the Church’s doctrine. Baldwin fails to see the significance of salvation if it prevents him from acting with love toward those different from him. He states that the love felt for the Lord is often representative of our fear, distrust, and hatred of strangers, or rather, the avoidance and hatred of oneself.

The “evil within” or the internalized cyst created by master narratives, constituting Colonial attitudes, provokes the need for external validation or love. Thus the love one feels for the Church is indicative of the evil they feel within themselves, and their attempts at mitigating this evil.

## **8. Dismantling Master Narratives**

Baldwin understands that the “evil within” would never be mitigated through the Church, nor would the “evil without.” He references the national and religious narratives that constitute the American creed and proclaims “neither civilized reason nor Christian love” would solve racism in America and deliver the promises of freedom and equality for himself and his community members. (21).

Despite the American creed and historic master narratives– Baldwin understands the Church is unable to provide salvation. Baldwin becomes aware of the constructed and mythological nature of master narratives– both national and religious. He then describes the narrative of the American Dream as an impossible reality for African Americans:

One would never defeat one’s circumstances by working and saving one’s pennies... besides, the social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account. (21)

Baldwin concludes that no amount of monetary success will protect African Americans from racism in our nation, nor grant them true freedom. Regardless of their productivity or success, African Americans will never be treated the same as their white counterparts, nor will they have the same structural privileges. Baldwin dismantles the myths of “civilized reason” and “Christian love” which have been historically used to justify oppression, and sanctification of racial hierarchy. He elucidates these constructs as primary factors in the creation and solidification of racial stratification in America. Baldwin’s subsequent construction of a personal narrative is characterized by his dissection and rejection of national and religious master narratives. He argues that the condition of African Americans in the United States is enough proof that these narratives are mythological at best. Additionally, the hegemonic virtues “preached not practiced by the white world were merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection” (23).

The virtues and narratives perpetuated by the white world are primarily used as a means of controlling subordinate groups, rather than existing as a true model of behavior. Baldwin’s entire system of morality is altered and at this point he considers his proclivity for criminality. At this pivotal moment in his self-construction, and his arc of self-narration; Baldwin remains bound to the lens of the white world, and experiences an ambiguity within himself that is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois’s conception of “double consciousness.”

The Church, which once seemed a method of mediating the “evil within” was now understood as an extension of the “evil without” and further contributed to the feelings of “depravity” and “evil” that Baldwin interiorized.

While many members of the African American community turned to the Church to mediate the cyst of internalized creedal beliefs, the Church affirmed and even fueled these beliefs. The cyst becomes ignited until it consumes an individual as illustrated by Baldwin’s father. His intolerance of Jews is representative of the true intolerance of the Church, and due to his lifelong dedication to the Church– his digestion and acceptance of intolerance.

Both the internal cyst and the external corset, or the “evil within” and the “evil without” are reinforced through these religious institutions. In the pursuit of salvation, or even the feelings of love found within the church – individuals often experience ambiguity within their sense of self.

The doctrine of the church and the hegemonic notions of morality affirm this “evil within” through the implication that salvation is necessary. Additionally, the “evil without” is not mitigated by the Church, as Baldwin sees the same tactics used by those on the Avenue and the same creedal ideologies that impose fragmentation of the self. This fragmentation of self is visible as one’s integration with their reasoning and desires becomes muddled, and the adoption of the doctrine limits one’s views of oneself and others to a starkly European, Christian lens.

“Following Weber’s (1930) connection of the Protestant work ethic with the spirit of capitalism, Christianity may be contextualized as a space within which individual initiative and agency are shaped” (Shwartz, 1).

Just like the American Creed, the narratives of the Church shape the initiatives and capacities of individual agency.

## **9. Alternative Narratives in the Nation of Islam**

The second half of the central text follows Baldwin and his newfound relationship with the Nation of Islam and its founder, Elijah Muhammad. Despite the revolutionary nature of the Nation of Islam, Baldwin witnesses the same structures and tactics embedded within national and religious master narratives.

“There is nothing new in this merciless formation except the explicitness of its symbols and the candor of its hatred” (67).

Hinged on the foundations of Black nationalism, the Nation of Islam represents yet another institution characterized by hatred, only more overtly.

The burning question is asked once more: “Whose little boy are you?” (63).

This phrase bears the weight of “pimps and racketeers on the Avenue,” the Christian minister, and now Elijah Muhammed, and the Nation of Islam. Baldwin’s desperate attempts to outmaneuver his fear of the “evil within” and “without” are mute because this evil is omnipresent.

Muhammed distinctively refers to white people as “white devils.” Within the doctrine, white people maintain a fate mirroring the curse of Ham, in which “there is no hope for them” (67). Almost instantly, Baldwin recognizes the hatred embedded within the Nation of Islam as a simple reimagining of the racism Black Muslims fight to liberate themselves from. The doctrine of racial stratification and social hierarchy was once again a replication of Christian and colonial ideologies.

Baldwin invokes the memory of his father’s house to highlight the parallels.

“I felt that I was back in my father’s house— as, indeed, in a way, I was” (71).

The crux of his religious crisis: the “evil without” – would be found in every church, temple, or school as would the “evil within” be enforced. His father’s self-abnegation remains fixed within Baldwin’s consciousness, as he witnesses the “single-mindedness” of Muhammed and those who adopt narratives that contribute to the sanctification of their own oppression.

## **10. The White World and the Influence of Master Narratives in the Self-Narration Process**

Baldwin is determined to escape Harlem, and never accept his “‘place’ in this republic” (23)-- or in other words, to defy the master narratives of the white world:

I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish me off that way. And yet, of course, at the same time, I was being spat on and defined and described and limited, and could have been polished off with no effort whatsoever. (23)



Baldwin poignantly describes his plight as an African American who wished to construct a personal narrative independent from the master narratives of the white world. The white world views African Americans through a white lens, and due to the dominant power of the white world, Baldwin and Du Bois both describe the process of being perceived as “other” and coming to perceive themselves as “other.”

In the initial essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” W.E.B. Du Bois describes his first conscious experience of racism in school and his subsequent understanding that he, as an African American, was “shut out from their world by a vast veil” (2).

Both Baldwin and Du Bois craft the imagery of two distinct worlds: Their own, and the dominant white world. Baldwin and Du Bois's understanding of self is governed by the lens of the white world, which Du Bois has famously coined as “double consciousness.”

Du Bois describes this sensation as “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (3).

Baldwin similarly explains that “it is certainly sad that the awakening of one’s senses should lead to such a merciless judgment of oneself” (25).

These sentiments reveal the expansive scope of the American creed and the invisible, yet ubiquitous master narratives that guide our process of self-narration. Due to the racism embedded within master narratives of the white world, non-white individuals experience an ambiguity of self as they are simultaneously shut out by the “veil” and yet defined and limited by the authority of the “veil.”

In the processes of negotiation and internalization, one may construct a personal narrative that incorporates the racialized lens of the American creed-- fragmenting integration with the self's reasoning and desires, and hindering one's agentive potential.

## **11. Conclusion**

The institutions which make up society, including religion and education are embedded with master narratives known as the American creed. These structures of authority sanctify the American creed, and are the agents of implementing master narratives in all their utility, ubiquity, invisibility, compulsory nature, and their rigidity. These narratives are structurally embedded in most if not all societal institutions, therefore, Baldwin explains many Americans experience “individual uncertainty” based on their inability to differentiate their personal narratives from the master narratives of society. Additionally, it is their commitment to constructed mythological narratives that blinds them to reality. Baldwin describes how these processes create ambiguity both internally and externally, and that many Americans conflate their personal narratives with master narratives, that are merely “historical and public attitudes” (43). Americans internalize these attitudes or narratives as their own, and yet, “they do not relate to the present any more than they relate to the person” (43). This describes the ambiguity of self, and abnegation of self prompted by internalizing master narratives.

Baldwin's father serves as the primary embodiment of an abnegated self. He has abnegated himself to the American creed, the master narratives, both national and religious that maintain hegemony in the United States and adopted it as his own. The “cyst” and “corset” of the white world has rendered David Baldwin incapable of autonomy and individual agency. He is not able to construct his own personal narrative without the master narrative's insistence of his social inferiority. In turn, he seeks religion as a means of salvation, or integration, and yet, his devotion to religious virtues proves to be an extension of colonial narratives that are dependent on

exploitation, oppression, and social stratification. The love David Baldwin has for the Church, his son explains, as merely an internalized fear of those different to him, and his own internalized self-hatred, or the “evil within” and “without.”

We have highlighted the role of Christianity within the American Creed, and their similar dependence on social stratification. Despite Christianity’s classification of African Americans as inherently inferior, and the Church’s role of implementing and enforcing racial hierarchy: David Baldwin remains devoted to the Church, and has fully adopted the master narratives constructed by the Church.

Baldwin elucidates that the inability to acknowledge our historical past, and our dedication to falsified narratives and narrative structures, known as the American Creed, prevents us from understanding ourselves and embues the abnegation of self. The development of one’s personhood and individual agency are thus informed by these master narratives, and the internalization of these master narratives evokes the abnegation of self, thwarting the natural development of individual belief systems, and permeating constructions of personal narratives. Further, alternative narratives in a post-colonial reality are derivative of master narratives, and thus subaltern groups who adopt alternative narratives, are still inculcated with hegemonic creedal mythologies.

The second piece of the book illustrates Baldwin’s relationship to the Nation of Islam, and despite the radical, empowering motivations of their leader, Elijah Muhammed – Baldwin views the Nation of Islam in the same light as the Church and witnesses the same cycles of oppression, hatred, and domination within this alternative religion.

Once again, we can turn to our understanding of master narratives and their dominant presence within all alternative narratives. While the Nation of Islam constructed brand new narratives in opposition to the Christian Church, their beliefs were still derivative of Christianity and thus enforced the “blindness, loneliness, and terror” that Baldwin attempted to escape. As the alternative narratives of the Nation of Islam were constructed based on the already established dominant master narratives, the subaltern populace of the Black Muslims adopted, and at most rearranged, notions of inherent racial stratification and class stratification.

Thus, the internal cyst– a causal effect of national narratives, is further aggravated, while the external corset is also more properly defined and enforced. Baldwin elucidates Christianity’s role in justifying the horrors of settler colonialism and slavery, and additionally, Christianity’s role in enforcing hegemony within the national population, through coercive moral positioning. Even worse, the conditions and constructions sanctified by the Church are purely beneficial to those in power; white Americans. Those who come to the Church because of their subaltern status and their deprivation of humanity are unintentionally contributing to the sanctification of belief systems and institutions that oppress them.

Religion may be especially damaging for subaltern groups, because they are participating in the institutions that have directly created the circumstances enabling societal alienation and marginalization. White Americans who go to Church do not experience this same phenomenon, because it is a European institution, and the doctrine of the Church has been historically used to sanctify the inherent superiority of whiteness, and has calcified innumerable structural privileges.

In Baldwin’s case, even the most self-determined individuals experience an ambiguity of self, meaning a lack of stability or constancy within understandings of the self, due to persistent racialization. Those who internalize the narratives of the white world suffer from a more

immobilizing fate: the abnegation of self. Baldwin argues that the only plausible method of mediation is love, and that the national and religious master narratives are mutually exclusive with this virtue.

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# Transcending Classroom Norms: Incorporating “Cracked Identities” into Higher Education with the use of Speculative Fiction

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## Introduction:

When reflecting on my first UCSB quarter in 2022, I can't help but think about the radical transformation that occurred as I sat in my Speculations of Color course. Before this course, I was not consciously aware of the normative standard that exists within literary canons and its association with higher education curriculum. When I say normative standard, I am referring to the “example against which people tend to measure themselves and others.”<sup>1</sup> In this case, the normative standard is the sigh-inducing plethora of white male authors that seem to dominate English course syllabi.<sup>2</sup> Since I am a double major in Sociology and English, I had the opportunity to conduct a content analysis on 15 English course syllabi during my Feminist Qualitative Methods course.<sup>3</sup> Within these 15 syllabi, every single course encompassed a majority of white male authors. If the courses included authors of color, they were usually lumped together in a single week reinforcing the ideology that white male authors are the norm and are to be used throughout the quarter. The frustration that stems from this disproportionate system has been felt for decades, like the 1988 Canon War Stanford strike in which, “traditionalists in favor of centering the curriculum on classic works of literature faced off against multiculturalists who wanted to include more works by women and members of minorities.”<sup>4</sup> While my content analysis was limited to only 15 UCSB English course syllabi, ideologies in syllabi at their extreme already have consequences across the country in today's canon wars.

Chris Rufo, a trustee of the New College of Florida, as well as journalist and activist, believes he is being a “normal, responsible trustee” by insisting we stick to “the true, the good, and the beautiful” when it comes to higher education.<sup>5</sup> By this he means staying away from anything that is not normal, true, good, or beautiful like Gender Studies, Feminist Studies, and famously Critical Race Theory. In his attempt to ban these courses in public higher education classrooms, Rufo is further instilling this idea that studies that focus on white males should be the normative and only standard within the furthering education framework.

Although I will be focusing on the English curriculum encompassed within UCSB, it's important to note that this exclusion of identities within education is not specific to UCSB or the English department. This list includes:

- The fight for the inclusion of California Indian history within the California public school system by the California Indian History Curriculum Coalition.<sup>6</sup>

- The idea that literary canons and pedagogies were built upon one white male identity, while excluding any other identity that existed, not only at the time of the creation of these fields, but also at the time of teaching these applicable literary curricula.<sup>7</sup>
- When educational institutions do encompass other identities, it is usually through a bicultural lens, when a multicultural lens would allow more inclusion and a more accurate representation of the world we live in.<sup>8</sup>
- The approach of looking at students and incorporating their views of knowledge building. This approach focuses on treating the students as equals and looking to them for signs of what effective teaching looks like within the context of the inclusion of identities.<sup>9</sup>

When the average English course within the UCSB system sets the normative stage of white, heterosexual cis-male authors, where do other identities fit in?<sup>10</sup> This is where my radical transformation occurred as I sat in a wave of students during my *Speculations of Color* course. Instead of reading and rereading Wordsworth, Eliot, Kerouac, Whitman, etc. this course focused on Nalo Hopkinson, Morgan Parker, and N.K. Jemisin. This was the first time I had felt seen and heard within higher education. Not only did this literature touch on traumas that I have personally experienced, but it also shed light and perspective on intersectional traumas I had never imagined given my own demographic as a white, heterosexual cis-female.

My experience within this context is not unique. My position as a research assistant for the UCSB English Department's Trauma-Informed Pedagogy research team has taught me that many students experience this same lack of belonging within UCSB classrooms.<sup>11</sup> This made me start to question if some identities experience this lack of belonging more than others, which ultimately led to my distinction between Fixed and Cracked identities. Although there are many ways that universities can start the process of more inclusion within the English major curriculum, I argue that making a Speculative Fiction course required is a good place to start. This is because a Speculative Fiction curriculum, and its use of experimentation with fixed realities and norms, fosters an environment that is conducive to the students who have struggled with their sense of belonging within higher education.

### **Definitions:**

Since my research uses numerous nuanced terms, definitions are vital for a full understanding of my argument. I define curriculum as the ongoing process of planning what topics courses will encompass, what readings and various course materials are included, and the integration of these readings and materials into units of discussions, lectures, assignments, and more. I'm proposing that Speculative Fiction should be implemented as a required topic within the UC English curriculum.<sup>12</sup> I believe the planning of the course should encompass Speculative Fiction literature authored by an array of identities with an intentional process of what books, passages, and issues are to be highlighted for the students. I believe the conversations surrounding these works should be just as important as the choice of authors and literature themselves. The process of holding and monitoring these conversations would have to have an intentional and proper structure as well.<sup>13</sup>

I define a sense of belonging in the classroom as how comfortable a student feels in that particular setting. In this situation, I find a list of questions helpful:

- Does the reading material reflect any part of the student's experiences in life?
- Do the conversations highlight the student's experience in a way that makes them uncomfortable?

- Do the conversations highlight the student's experience in a way that makes them feel included?

Following Adam Wolfesdorf, Kristen Park Wedlock, Cassandra Lo, Gabor Maté, and Bessel van der Kolk, I define “trauma” as the negative impact on a student brought on by course materials, assignments, and conversations.<sup>14</sup> As you can imagine, this definition of trauma can manifest in several ways. Here is a non-exhaustive list of potentially trauma-inducing situations within the UC English classroom experience:

- Any traumatic experiences that the student has faced outside of the learning environment, but inevitably carries the weight of it inside the classroom;<sup>15</sup>
- A student goes an entire quarter without the curriculum encompassing their identity through authors, conversations, or materials;
- Experiencing a course that valorizes a single or limited set of identities to the detriment of others;
- A student with a marginalized identity is presented with curriculum that includes the struggles their community has faced without a conversation acknowledging and working through the sensitive information;
- A student writing in formats that are “non-white” and getting reprimanded or marked down for it;<sup>16</sup>
- A student speaking in “non-white” format and getting reprimanded or marked down for it.<sup>17</sup>

Although trauma within the classroom can be subjective and very much a gray area, it is clear that it persists through all classroom settings.<sup>18</sup>

Through my work I have coined the terms “Fixed Identities” and “Cracked Identities.” Fixed Identities represent the dominant identity that our society has catered to in almost every way within the structure of our institutions. Although it is true that identities change over time and within certain contexts, the heterosexual, able-bodied, white cis-male has been at the apex of the matrix of domination for centuries. For this reason, I decided to use the Oxford Dictionary's definition of fixed: “fastened securely in position.”<sup>19</sup> Fixed Identities appear as the ideological image of a CEO, author, sports player, business owner, even the images of a mailman or garbageman conjure up images of this identity. This identity can easily shift through the image of a father, workman, romantic partner and so much more without any part of their identity in question. Yet when you stray from this Fixed Identity, cracks start to emerge.<sup>20</sup>

I define Cracked Identities as any identity that differs from the heterosexual, able-bodied, white cis-male. I was inspired by a workshop I attended with Resmaa Menakem. He mentioned that our society has cracks within it. This imagery led me to think of these cracks as racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so much more. I started seeing these different identities as Cracked Identities slipping through the cracks of oppression within our societal structures. To use bell hooks' definition of oppression as the degree of the absence of choice, any identity that differs from the Fixed Identity has less choice in how they are able to function in our society.<sup>21</sup> For example, a heterosexual, white cis-male who has a disability is going to have less choice in their job position, romantic partner, housing, and more because they differ from the ideal image of the Fixed Identity. A black woman is going to have even less choice in these societal factors due to the intersection of her gender and race; a black trans woman will have even less choice.

Lastly, it is important to define Speculative Fiction. However, there is not a firm definition. When searching for a description of this literary genre, I turned to interviews conducted with



Speculative Fiction author Nalo Hopkinson. Since she was my first introduction to the genre, I found it appropriate to start there. What largely makes Nalo Hopkinson a Speculative Fiction author is the fact she mixes “...elements of science fiction, fantasy, dark fantasy, horror, and magic realism.”<sup>22</sup> Speculative Fiction attempts to answer the “what if” aspect that is present in Science Fiction, but in its attempt Speculative Fiction tries to force the reader to imagine the “what if” in a different way. Hopkinson states, “Speculative Fiction is a great place to warp the mirror, and thus impel the reader to view differently things that they've taken for granted. It can also allow us in a way to accelerate or intensify the status quo, or follow it along a course of logical progression, and to look at what some of the results might be.”<sup>23</sup> This “what if” and “might be” diverges from classic Science Fiction tropes of white people using technology to defeat aliens, species being colonized by their own people or other beings, and when it comes down to it the romanticizing of these experiences, to deliver a raw sense of societal feedback with guided imagery.<sup>24</sup>

Although the defining nature of Speculative Fiction is complex and abstract, it is this complexity and abstractness that allows it to be the genre that it is. It provides a space for the fusion of different literary genres to create an ultimate goal of critically thinking about the issues that exist within our society. This goal is accomplished through transcending tired cliches, and shifting the microphone to communities that have been historically excluded in these imaginations. Speculative Fiction authors like Rebecca Roanhorse, N.K. Jemisin, and Nalo Hopkinson use these aspects of speculative fiction to interweave the complex struggles that women endure as the constantly labeled “inferior” sex to ultimately reconnect their “cracked” selves into empowered subjects of history. They situate their work in Speculative Fiction to highlight their refusal to accept societal norms. This refusal by proto-feminist heroines is highlighted through each author’s use of the Cracked Identity.

### **Trauma in the Classroom:**

There’s an irony to the fact that we live within a society filled with trauma and traumatic experiences, yet there seems to be a societal aversion to recognizing this trauma and acknowledging it. There also seems to be an overall attitude of individualism, meaning the task of working through trauma is solely placed on the person experiencing it. This appears to be counterproductive within the higher education classroom: to expect the student to work through their own trauma, while simultaneously reproducing it in their immediate setting. It is true that 66%-85% of youth state they have had a traumatic experience.<sup>25</sup> In fact within their first year of college, 50% of students have the potential of facing a traumatic experience.<sup>26</sup> When looking at the effect of student trauma, “Research indicates that students with cumulative trauma histories are more likely to have difficulty adjusting to college, get lower grades, and drop out.”<sup>27</sup> I argue that it’s important to shift from an individualistic framework to a structural framework. Instead of putting the blame on the students who have experienced trauma, it’s important to consider “changes in academic structure and culture.”<sup>28</sup>

This is where a trauma-informed framework becomes necessary. This framework is an anti-oppressive approach to learning and teaching.<sup>29</sup> When examining the origin of trauma-informed frameworks, “It is important to keep in mind that trauma-informed care originated in behavioral health systems as an alternative to coercive standard operating procedures that unintentionally retraumatized and revictimized people seeking help...”<sup>30</sup> Our current higher education school system is one of these coercive standard operating procedures. Our classrooms, while commonly unintentional, retraumatize and victimize the students that are seeking an education. This is done through systematic racism, sexism, and marginalization of Cracked Identities. This feeling in the classroom can be described as “To be excluded or dehumanized in an organization, community, or

society you are part of prolonged, uncontrollable stress that is sensitizing” and “...marginalization is a fundamental trauma.”<sup>31</sup> To exist within a society that caters to the Fixed Identity is fundamentally traumatizing, so to exist within a classroom that reproduces this catering actually reinforces this marginalization.

In order to transcend the current system, transformations need to be made. In fact, “To realize the possibility of transformation, a trauma-informed approach must also hold space for pain and risk entering difficult conversations around that pain. Vulnerability lies at the heart of transformation; it is the birthplace of transformation.”<sup>32</sup> Incorporating speculative fiction within higher education classrooms will hold space for these difficult conversations. Whether it’s the sexual abuse of Tan-Tan in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, Essun’s struggle of being seen as an inhuman race in N.K Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*, or Maggie’s alienation in Octavia Butler’s *Bloodline*, these are the conversations that can break the reinforcing trauma barrier. “At the heart of trauma is a sense of powerlessness and disconnection.”<sup>33</sup> But, when we have these difficult conversations surrounding a literary genre like Speculative Fiction, the power is given back to the students. A connection is made between the professor, the student, and the material. Holding a space for marginalized communities to be represented, heard, and incorporated into the conversation allows these students to feel like they belong in the room.

### **Literary Intervention:**

Speculative Fiction is more than a literary genre that encompasses fantastical attributes in the name of reimagining a future, past, or present that takes on societal issues. It also provides a space for the actual authors to exist within a literary sphere. Hopkinson says, “...it is important to me to be identified as a writer of Speculative Fiction, perhaps because it feels like claiming my share of space in a literature that has largely not represented me.”<sup>34</sup> N.K. Jemisin touches on a similar sentiment when she opens her book, *The Fifth Season*, with, “For all of those who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question.”<sup>35</sup> By opening her trilogy with this message, Jemisin is creating a space for identities that have been ultimately left out of society in many ways. From her own experience, being a woman of color within the literary sphere can be imagined as a lot more difficult than that of a white cis-male’s. When society caters to your identity, respect is something you scarcely miss out on. This also rings true for experiences in the classroom. Women and people of color have to fight that much harder to gain respect within the educational sphere. Jemisin carries this message throughout her book.

In *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin, the protagonist, Essun, provides a great example of a Cracked Identity. Essun is an Orogene meaning she can manipulate the earth and stone through the absorption and redirection of heat and energy. In her planet’s societal hierarchy, Orogens are seen as inhuman, monsters, inferior, grotesque, and scary although they look exactly like the “normal humans” (Stills) that surround them. Jemisin writes, “Fulcrum orogenes must never show anger because it makes the stills nervous.”<sup>36</sup> The phrase “orogenes must never show anger” is very similar to the message “black women must never show anger.” The struggle and compromises Orogens must make in order to appease the Stills and conform to the way the Stills want them to behave is very reminiscent of our current social hierarchy. Certain identities have to always be cognizant of how others may perceive them, seemingly conforming to the normative fixed standard that has been established in our current society: white men.

Jemisin reimagines this same ideal in the Sanzed population when she writes, “Everyone is measured by their standard deviations from the Sanzed mean. This boy’s people, whoever they are, have clearly managed to remain outliers.”<sup>37</sup> The Sanzed mean represents the white race in our

society, and the outliers represent everyone who falls outside of our socially constructed dominant race. The Sanzed people encompass the Fixed Identity because they represent what people should look like and how people should behave. These quotes can reach students who have felt like they had to mask some parts of themselves in order to fit the ideal image of how a “normal” student should behave and look like in the higher education classroom setting. The requirement to read about the white western experience or the requirement to read a minority’s experience through the eyes of a white author can un-authenticate the true realities of a Cracked Identity’s experience. By presenting students with speculative literature that disembarks from the white western norm they have become accustomed to, we can begin to foster a learning environment for a spectrum of identities.

Jemisin also uses Essun to show the pressures that come with existing outside the normative standard of a human being. She writes, “You are representatives of us all, the instructors say, if any grit dares to protest this treatment. When you’re dirty, all orogenes are dirty. When you’re lazy, we’re all lazy. We hurt you so you’ll do the rest of us no harm.”<sup>38</sup> Being appointed as representative of an entire group of people is unfair. If someone sees a white male in dirty clothing or behaving in a lazy manner in the classroom, he is often not thought of as a representation of all white males. Yet, if you see a minority in that same situation, stereotypes for that entire community are often conjured up and reinforced. When someone does not fit the normative standard of an identity within the educational setting, their actions are looked at that much closer and often generalized to their racial community. In a study that used eye-tracking software, preschool teachers were found to automatically expect bad classroom behavior from black male children.<sup>39</sup> This unconscious bias starts within education at the preschool level. So, when students with Cracked Identities are participating in higher education, their actions can quickly be seen as a representation of their identity and an entire community who holds that same identity. The speculative situation that Jemisin has imagined within Essun’s experience as an Orogene can provide a place for students who have felt a similar way. This can also show Fixed Identities a situation that they may have never thought of before in an attempt to stop the reinforcement cycle of unfair biases.

Jemisin provides insight on how unfair it is to expect all of these identities to try and fit into this normative standard. We have been told that the U.S. is this melting pot of cultures, languages, and identities, yet our society seems to only want to use one mold. Jemisin touches on this when she writes:

Once Damaya would have protested the unfairness of such judgments. The children of the Fulcrum are all different: different ages, different colors, different shapes. Some speak Sanzed with different accents, having originated from different parts of the world. One girl has sharp teeth because it is her race’s custom to file them; another boy has no penis, though he stuffs a sock into his underwear after every shower; another girl has rarely had regular meals and wolfs down every one like she’s still starving...Once cannot reasonably expect sameness out of so much difference, and it makes no sense for Damaya to be judged by the behavior of children who share nothing save the curse of orogeny with her. Damaya understands now that the world is not fair.<sup>40</sup>

This sentiment can help different identities feel included by reading situations that they themselves have experienced. Many of us have been told that life isn’t fair, but we feel this in very different ways depending on our identity. Essun sheds light on the experience of being stuck in the rigid cracks of stereotypes, stigmas, and biases when she feels no associations with those aspects. Not only are people encouraged to mold themselves to fit into one ideal societal norm, but this

encouragement of performance doesn't even guarantee they will succeed in the "American Dream."

The idea of the "American Dream"<sup>41</sup> has been instilled in many of us in our pursuit for life, health, happiness, etc. However, it's often hard not to feel that the "American Dream" is an unjust and rigged system. Jemisin writes:

Not that she hadn't known it before: that she is a slave, that all roggas are slaves, that the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body. It's one thing to know this, to admit it to herself, but it's the sort of truth that none of them use against each other—not even to make a point—because doing so is so cruel and unnecessary. This is why she hates Alabaster: not because he is more powerful, not even because he is crazy, but because he refuses to allow her any of the polite fictions and unspoken truths that have kept her comfortable, and safe, for years.<sup>42</sup>

The pursuit in winning the game of capitalism becomes a lot easier when you fit the standard it was built upon: Fixed Identities. In fact, "... the domination and exploitation of Nonwhite people will continue to be an integral part of the liberal capitalist market system, regardless of whether this is done consciously or not."<sup>43</sup> When your social identity lessens your potential for success, yet you're still required to exist within that system, one can quickly feel exploited. By shedding light on this exploitation in different ways, like *Speculative Fiction*, there is more of an effort to recognize this exploitation and provide a space for students to metabolize the trauma that stems from it.

Within our educational settings, the history of slavery within the U.S. is painted in many different lights.<sup>44</sup> The fact that the successes of capitalism are often skewed towards Fixed Identities, is partly due to the fact that slavery allowed for the white accumulation of wealth, which ultimately led to intergenerational wealth. This often brushed over fact is highlighted when Jemisin writes:

'Orogenes built the Fulcrum,' he says. She's almost never heard him say orogene. 'We did it under threat of genocide, and we used it to buckle a collar around our own necks, but we did it. We are the reason Old Sanze grew so powerful and lasted so long, and why it still half-rules the world, even if no one will admit it. We're the ones who've figured out just how amazing our kind can be, if we learn how to refine the gift we're born with.' 'It's a curse, not a gift,' Syenite closes her eyes... 'It's a gift if it makes us better. It's a curse if we let it destroy us. You decide that—not the instructors, or the Guardians, or anyone else.'<sup>45</sup>

The intergenerational trauma that exists within the black community because of slavery is tangibly unknown. But for educational systems to brush over the hard truths about our history without a comprehensive conversation isn't beneficial for anyone's trauma. Reading passages like this one can serve as a catalyst to these conversations. These passages can bring a new way for students to perceive a system like slavery without it being immediately politicized. In this imagined speculative world, there is a space for people to build new ways of thinking and conversing.

In Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, she uses numerous rhetorical devices to portray the experience of a Cracked Identity through her protagonist Tan-Tan. Although there are many facets in which I could highlight this portrayal, I will be examining Hopkinson's departure from the normative English vernacular and the manifestation of Bad Tan-Tan from experiencing sexual assault. Before I go any further, if you are triggered by sexual assault discussions please skip the paragraphs with asterisks (\*).

From the very beginning of her book, Hopkinson establishes a vernacular that is different from the one we typically use in the United States. Hopkinson writes, "Runners didn't respect nobody, not even their own mother-rass mayor. 'Turn left here so,' Antonio said. 'That road will take we to the side entrance.'"<sup>46</sup> The use of "nobody," "here so," and "take we to" are not seen as an appropriate use of grammar in our current society. However, there are many identities that exist within higher education that did not grow up with English as their first language.<sup>47</sup> There are many identities that have learned broken English from parents who are immigrants. It's not hard to imagine the minimum effect this can have on a student existing within a classroom that expects them to speak and write not only perfect English, but elevated English. By incorporating texts that show a different vernacular and depart from this normative English standard, their sense of belonging could potentially be enhanced. They might gravitate towards these speculative societies and characters because they see their own life experience portrayed in them.

\*Hopkinson not only describes the sexual assault Tan-Tan endures from her father, but she also sheds light on the manifestations that can occur from such an event. She writes:

Antonio laid her down on the bed. The "special" thing was something more horrible than she'd ever dreamt possible. Why was Daddy doing this to her? Tan-Tan couldn't get away, couldn't understand. She must be very bad for Daddy to do her so. Shame filled her, clogged her mouth when she opened to call out to Janisette for help. Daddy's hands were hurting, even though his mouth smiled at her like the old Daddy, the one from before the shift tower took them. Daddy was two daddies. She felt her own self split in two to try to understand, to accommodate them both. Antonio, good Antonio smiled at her with his face. Good Tan-Tan smiled back. She closed her mind to what bad Antonio was doing to her bad body.<sup>48</sup>

Among undergraduate college students "26.4% of females experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation, and 23.1% of TGQN (transgender, genderqueer, nonconforming) college students have been sexually assaulted."<sup>49</sup> This is only including college related assaults, the number gets much higher as you add other phases of life. Although many universities require sexual assault trainings before enrollment, there seems to be a lack of conversation dealing with the reality of violence towards women within college campuses. Hopkinson provides the space for these conversations through her speculative literature. To deal with the trauma of what was happening, Tan-Tan had to split herself into two beings, along with her father. There was the good version of themselves and the bad version. This is an important distinction for people who have endured traumatic experiences. Victims of sexual assault often blame themselves.<sup>50</sup> As women, we have been historically blamed for being assaulted due to the amount of alcohol we drink or the clothes we decide to wear.<sup>51</sup> The shame we carry often manifests into a mean voice that is constantly criticizing us within our own heads. As a nation, and certainly within higher education, we don't necessarily talk about these things. Opening the conversation through Speculative Fiction, allows students to create their own safe space to digest the material. It allows them the option to come to class to talk about the literature and how it affected them. It also helps shed light on these experiences for those identities that aren't faced with these experiences as much.

\*The inner mean voice that many of us experience can translate in many different ways. The mean voice that follows Tan-Tan says things like, "*Who could care for mud in the street*, whispered bad silent Tan-Tan," when referring to herself.<sup>52</sup> And, "*He right*, said the Bad Tan-Tan voice. You is a trial, you is a wicked crosses for people to bear."<sup>53</sup> Also, "*Stupid*, said Bad Tan-Tan. *You go dead from stupid one Day*."<sup>54</sup> Finally, "*And is what that you doing now?* jeered Bad Tan-Tan. *A chop-head chicken would have more sense*."<sup>55</sup> For many people, life is complicated and difficult enough on its own. But,

for Cracked Identities it is that much more enhanced. There's always that voice that claims if we just try to fit the normative standard then happiness will follow. We often blame ourselves for downfalls that are out of our control. Hopkinson has used worldbuilding to create a situation that many people have endured. Instead of talking about these situations with only a statistical, objective framework, Hopkinson has provided a speculative situation that many identities can relate to in one way or another. However, while the material provides a safe space for metabolizing traumatic experiences, the conversations that education facilitators engage in surrounding this material is just as important.

## Conclusion:

The exploration of sensitive topics within education is not a straightforward or easy task. There are many steps to take. One step would be to reframe how we use and have created the current literary canon within higher education. By shifting the materials to include more female and minority voices, more inclusion can be experienced by various identities existing in the classrooms. By shifting the conversations we typically engage in when talking about materials within the literary canon, we can open more perspectives and opinions on why they seem to be the standard norm when teaching literature. By taking these two steps, we can create an educational space that engages with more identities. This would hopefully bring a sense of belonging to those who have been historically left out of this narrative.

Another important step towards the goal of inclusion within educational spaces would be the incorporation of Speculative Fiction into the higher education English curriculum. Speculative Fiction offers the idea of a safe space for students to be presented with situations that mimic the unequal treatment of different identities within our own society. Authors like Jemisin and Hopkinson show that the ideal image of a successful author or educator doesn't have to be white and male. There is a space for Cracked Identities within the successes of our society. With the incorporation of Speculative Fiction, we are facilitating a way for Cracked Identities to see and feel this sentiment.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Wade, and Myra Marx Ferree, *Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2019), 60.

<sup>2</sup> A good example of this white male normative standard can be seen in UCSB courses like ENGL 103B - BRIT LIT 1789-1900. These classes tend to focus on authors within the standard literary canon including: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Robert Browning, etc. However, there were minority authors that fit the description of this course that aren't used including: Equiano, Cugoano, Sancho, Gronniosaw, Wedderburn, Mary Prince, and Mary Seacole.

<sup>3</sup> I used a random sampling method of 15 syllabi that were generic English courses. This means they did not specifically indicate minority groups within the course title like "Afro-Caribbean Literature," or "Black Studies." It was difficult to get a bigger

sample because there is not a syllabus archive, so more research focused on a larger sample of syllabi is needed. I came up with the following codes for my content analysis, but focused on the authors for my argument in this paper.

Code	Frequency
Dominantly White Male	15/15
White Female	14/15
Male of Color	8/15
Female of Color	9/15
Requires Book Purchase	10/15
Content Warning	2/15
Exams/Essays	5/15
Essays/Exams	10/15
Offers Student Resources	3/15
Strict Absence Policy (less than two absences allowed)	6/15



<sup>4</sup> Rachel Donadio, "Revisiting the Canon Wars." *The New York Times*, (2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Young, "Christopher Rufo's Alarming Crusade against Public Universities," *TIME*, 2023, <https://time.com/6309612/christopher-rufo-public-universities-deceptive-essay/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Allender, Margarita Berta-Ávila, Gregg Castro, Amy Murray, Jenna Porter, and Khal Schnider, "More Than Missions: Native Californians and Allies Changing the Story of California," *University of Minnesota Press* (2019), 58-77.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Lauter, "Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties." *Feminist Studies, Inc.* (1983), 435-463; William H. Schubert, "Journeys of Expansion and Synopsis: Tensions in Books That Shaped Curriculum," *Taylor & Francis, Ltd.* (2010), 17-94; N. Sukumar "Teaching Dalit Bahun Utopias: Notes from the Classroom," *Brandeis University, Center for Global Development and Sustainability* (2023), 306-318.

<sup>8</sup> Lorraine S. Gilpin and Delores D. Liston, "Reflections on Multicultural Education in the US: A Complicated Conversation," in *Examining Social Theory: Crossing Borders/Reflecting Back*, ed. by Peter Lang AG, (Peter Lang inc. International Academic Publishers, 2010), 171-284; Christine E. Sleeter, "Creating an Empowering Multicultural Curriculum," Jean Ait Belkhir, *Race, Gender & Class Journal* (2000), 178-196.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Connelly and Remi Joseph-Salisbury, "Struggle where you are: resistance within and against the university," in *Anti-racist scholar-activism*, (Manchester University Press, 2021), 143-177; Dewey, John, "Democracy and Education 1916, by John Dewey," *The University of Chicago Press in association with the Francis W. Parker School* (2008), 87-95.

<sup>10</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>11</sup> As a research assistant for the UCSB Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Research team, I conducted two focus groups. Each group included four UCSB undergraduate students during a one-hour session. These focus groups centered around students' sense of belonging in classrooms, and every participant had an experience of feeling like they did not belong in the classroom. One participant who identified as a lesbian, Latinx and

white, female said, "I feel like what helps me feel like a sense of belonging is like, when people have similar experiences with me, it makes me feel like validated in my experiences and like my identity, and I can kind of like bond with people more, connect with people more." Another participant said, "I think in English, like before you can kind of get into those like specialized topic classes, they're going to want you to just kind of go through the classics and like the authors that everyone needs to read, which are, unfortunately, still a lot of those kind of like old white men...authors."

<sup>12</sup> I am not contending that the incorporation of Speculative Fiction will fix all inequalities within higher education English majors. I believe all curriculum within the UC English Department should be restructured to fit more identities, but for the purpose of this paper I will be focusing on the implementation of Speculative Fiction specifically.

<sup>13</sup> There would need to be proper teacher training into making sure the facilitation of these difficult and uncomfortable conversations is occurring in a safe and trusting environment. This could look like three training sessions until the teacher is certified, a long required seminar, really anything that starts this movement towards investing in these conversations that are vital in today's learning process.

<sup>14</sup> These authors wrote trauma books such as *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies: A Guide for Responding to Crisis and Inequality in Higher Education*, *The Myth of Normal*, and *The Body Keeps the Score*.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that everyone has different triggers, and there is no perfect system to account and acknowledge all of these triggers. It's important that we have this open dialogue with students, in order to work on an effective system when examining triggering information.

<sup>16</sup> Within this context, I define "non-white" as language, grammar, or accents that do not fit the stereotypical guidelines that have been put in place as a monolingual English society.

<sup>17</sup> Carmen Kynard, "This Bridge: The BlackFeministCompositionist's Guide to the Colonial and Imperial Violence of Schooling Today," *Feminist Teacher* no. 2-3 (2016), 129.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Wolfsdorf, Kristen Park Wedlock, and

Cassandra Lo. 2022. *Navigating Trauma in the English Classroom*, (National Council of Teachers of English, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> “Fixed - Quick Search Results | Oxford English Dictionary,” (2023), <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=fixed>.

<sup>20</sup> Through UCSB, I was able to participate in a workshop of around 10 people with Resmaa Menakem. During this hour-long meeting, we talked freely about how race has affected us as students and within higher education. Although uncomfortable at times, Menakem created a safe and comfortable environment to talk through the tensions that exist around race and our experience as human beings.

<sup>21</sup> Hazel T. Biana, “Extending bell hooks’ Feminist Theory,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* (2020), 13-29.

<sup>22</sup> Nalo Hopkinson, interview by Gregory E. Rutledge, *Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Science Fiction Writer Nalo Hopkinson*, Indiana State University, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Phyllis Thompson and Janice Carello, *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies: A Guide for Responding to Crisis and Inequality in Higher Education* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 5.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* 3.

<sup>34</sup> Nalo Hopkinson, *Speaking in Tongues*, (1999).

<sup>35</sup> N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season : The Broken Earth*. Book One (London: Orbit, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, (2016), 63.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 192-3.

<sup>39</sup> Melissa Healy, “Eye-Tracking Technology Shows That Preschool Teachers Have Implicit Bias against

Black Boys,” *Los Angeles Times*, (2016), <https://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-black-boys-preschool-20160928-snap-story.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, (2016), 193.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Murtoff, “American Dream,” *www.britannica.com* (Britannica, May 15, 2023), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Dream>.

<sup>42</sup> Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, (2016), 348.

<sup>43</sup> Cara Nguyen, “The Relationship between White Supremacy and Capitalism: A Socioeconomic Study on Embeddedness in the Market and Society.,” *Undergraduate Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2020), 8.

<sup>44</sup> Antonio Planas, “New Florida Standards Teach Students That Some Black People Benefited from Slavery Because It Taught Useful Skills,” *NBC News*, (July 21, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-florida-standards-teach-black-people-benefited-slavery-taught-usef-rcna95418>.

<sup>45</sup> Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, (2016), 418.

<sup>46</sup> Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (Aspect, 2001), 5.

<sup>47</sup> California Department of Education, “Facts about English Learners in California - Accessing Educational Data (ca Dept of Education),” *www.cde.ca.gov*, (April 18, 2022), <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/cefelfacts.asp>.

<sup>48</sup> Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (2001), 140.

<sup>49</sup> “Campus Sexual Violence: Statistics,” *Rainn.org*, (2022), <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy E. Snow, “Self-Blame and Blame of Rape Victims,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1994): 378-379, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40435895>.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 380-381.

<sup>52</sup> Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (2001), 165.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 215.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 223.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

# Subverting The Capitalist Rule: A Fanfic Author's Purpose

TEHILLA SIBONI

## Introduction and Abstract

Opinions on fanfiction come in a variety of forms. The harshest opinions tend to dismiss this transformative fiction genre as simply a medium for cringe-worthy, self-insert material that is chalk-full of Mary Sues with severe main-character-syndrome. Fanfiction is also frequently assumed to be written by adolescents, most of whom identify as women, which only further dismisses the material as self-indulgent, amateur, grossly erotic, and regularly outrageous distortions of popular media. Conversations on the feminization of fanfiction and thus the dismissal of fanfiction are unfortunately rampant even among scholars. Author Ashley J. Barner references the feminine way of reading any novel (and this is the umbrella category for fanfiction) as “absorbed reading” and describes that the harshest criticisms of absorbed reading tend to stem from sexist and stereotypical misnomers on women who read in general. She states that critics were concerned women would read such illicit material and it would “harm their sexual purity” they might too, “model their behavior on that of fictional characters” (Barner, 14-15). More recently, however, a range of readers, from literary scholars to celebrities have come forward to legitimize the underrated, underacknowledged form of artistic expression as both enjoyable and worthy of acclaim. Take for example, an excerpt from a fanfiction by user, The Sardine, within the *Sherlock* BBC fandom:

It was windy every day, here. The shrubs bent sadly, lopsided with the prevailing salt-thick wind. The far side of the island was nothing but rock. Less salty, though, rinsed clean with rain. Sherlock had tasted every area, and the saltiest was obviously the rocks at the shore. The smooth, sedimentary protrusions on the far side had a somewhat chalky flavor, higher calcium content, while the camp side leaned more towards iron. Sherlock wanted desperately to return to London. He longed for it viscerally in a way that clutched in his chest, burning his lungs, searing the length of his arms until his fingers closed protectively around his palms. Sherlock ducked against the rocks, head bowed and arms wrapped tightly around himself. Tears stung hotly at his eyes and cooled immediately against his cheeks. He hated it here so much. A sob wrenched itself free of his throat, and then another, each carried off and lost on the ceaseless wind. (*Evidence of Human Life*)<sup>1</sup>

The excerpt above is one of thousands similar to it, containing not just ‘readable’ material, but often engaging and thought-provoking analysis into characters, and worlds to which their source materials rarely do justice. Beyond the literary merit of fanfiction, however, and less frequently acknowledged, is the liberatory potential that both the creation and consumption of fanfiction

offers towards imagining literary life outside of capitalism. This is not to discount, as well, the repression that patriarchal capitalism places on sexuality, race, and gender. Resistance to the exhaustive form of economic Capitalism and its counterpart social systems are not easy to come by and are, more often than not, impossible to maintain. Yet Fanfiction not only provides an escape from these regulations, but the participation and engagement of fanfiction is in itself an act of resistance towards the many systemic and oppressive effects of capitalism.

Before diving directly into the intricate web which connects fanfiction to the economic model of capitalism, it is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of levels of resistance which fanfiction works on, such as but not limited to: queer visibility and minority representation, sexual liberation and feminist empowerment, and even mental health visibility. Fanfiction functions as an act of resistance on all these platforms by addressing these struggles, joining communities together, spreading awareness and visibility to otherwise marginalized peoples, as well as providing an individual outlet to hundreds of thousands of people in the world.

### **Fanfiction is Queer Resistance**

Perhaps the most notable and notorious aspect of fanfiction is its predominantly homosexual themes. Indeed, most published fanfiction tends to work with or around queer relationships, identities, or subject matter in some form or another<sup>2</sup>. This is no mere coincidence and far from unintentional; the massive presence of LGBTQ+ individuals within the world of fanfiction suggests that it is not only an inclusive, safe, and welcoming environment but that it is also, in turn, influenced, run, and created by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Fanfiction works then, that describe the experiences of queer persons both within the lens of oppression and from outside that frame of reference<sup>3</sup>, tend to be written by authors who also identify on some level with some queer identity (Survey Results: Demographics, Centreoftheselights). The need to find and make a safe community for queer representation is a large and important role for fanfiction writers and readers – and what might have been unintentional at first has quickly become a method of resistance against queer repression and misrepresentation in mainstream media. Movies, books, shows, animations and other forms of entertainment frequently engage in acts of queer-baiting where characters of the same gender tend to form strong romantically suggestive bonds that, in the case of a heterosexual dynamic, would have resulted in a romantic pairing of the characters (Clements). Fanfiction serves as a bandaid to these often frustrating dynamics on screen, and while not produced at the same level of industrial proficiency (and sometimes not in the same media form at all) it still soothes the aches of despondency that results from queerbaiting. Returning momentarily to the fact that it is mostly queer writers who create queer fanfiction, it is also important to make note of the solidarity that arises within the fanfiction community as a result of this joint dissatisfaction of queerbaiting. Queer solidarity within fanfiction forms community, and community in turn is a form of resistance.

More than just a form of resistance for women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, fanfiction and online writing is an avenue for transformative fiction – and with regards to members of the BIPOC community – this means seeing minorities represented in common well-loved media. Race-bending characters who might be regularly white is not uncommon and sometimes the boosting of political activism. 2020 on Wattpad saw a surge of Black writers and readers supporting each other in the wake of the BlackLivesMatter movement which was a response to the dark realities of police brutality in America. A Year's Review on Wattpad's website states that:

2020 will be remembered as the year marginalized voices refused to be silenced. Global protests against racism and police brutality spread awareness in the streets and online, inspiring Wattpad authors to write about the fight for equality ... Users spent more than 18 million minutes reading stories tagged #blacklivesmatter ... The global Wattpad community also mobilized to elevate and celebrate Black writers and experiences across different genres this year. Stories tagged #blacklove and #blackjoy saw a significant increase in reading time compared to last year ... Readers came out in droves to support Black authors on Wattpad, spending more than 45 million minutes reading stories tagged #celebrateblackwriters. ("Wattpad's 2020 Year in Review")

The effectiveness of this mostly passive form of resistance isn't to be understated, on an emotional level the community that is built and the bonds that are formed between writers and readers are in themselves acts of resistance in a system which forces isolation, and demoralizes resistance efforts.

### **Fanfiction and Sexual Liberalism**

Among the many other benefits and boons that fanfiction has to offer to the world is an open creative space for sexual exploration and expression. While it is true that our world has slowly evolved to permit a freer display and engagement of sexual liberalism, it also remains true that much conservatism restricts talk and participation even within sexually liberal spheres. Homophobia, transphobia, and the expectation of monogamy constrain and shame individuals who would otherwise gladly explore these parts of their identity. The world of fanfiction, like any space which supports anonymity and community, encourages normally taboo or unconventional conversations to be held without fear of repercussion. Unlike the other anonymous spaces however, which grow toxic to a point of uncontrollable animosity that quickly escalates to predation and violence (such as on websites like omegle and 4chan) the toxicity within fanfiction websites remains largely controlled, monitored, and regulated (Dawson). The liberty of sexual expression on sites like Wattpad, Fanfic.net, and AO3, provide a safe space to explore – through fictional writing – sexually liberal ideas inclusive of homoerotic content, trans-identifying content, and even polyamorous content. The regulations and stipulations of the real world rarely interact or interfere with the production and distribution of fanfiction material and thus rarely inhibit those who read and write or otherwise engage with its content.

Take for example Ashley J. Barner's analysis on "The Three Laws of Fandom" which are widely accepted among fandoms as the unofficial guide rules for behavior within fanfiction spaces. Barner quotes tumblr user ozhawkauthor in explaining that: "If you wish to take part in any fandom, you need to accept and respect these three laws. If you aren't able to do that, then you need to realize that your actions are making fandom unsafe for creators. That you are stifling creativity" (111). The three laws, roughly summarized require participants in fandom spaces to simply avoid content they dislike "Don't like; Don't Read", to understand that kink-shaming has no place in the fandom spaces, and to respect that all "ships"<sup>4</sup> have the right to exist and that you may not police or dox people for their enjoyment of exercising this right (111-13)<sup>5</sup>. The immense freedom available to content creators in fandom spaces (free from the stipulations of censorship which in some countries might be far stricter than in the US) allows then an exploration and self-discovery practically impossible to attain elsewhere. Additionally, the creative space of writing and fantasy by itself already offers individuals a level of liberty from repercussions which frees them from worries of hurting themselves or others. The safety of anonymity and the lack of any real-world repercussions means that sexual fantasies can be actualized in a risk-free environment allowing for individual growth, understanding, and communal bonding. Communal identification too –

such as within subsects of kink exploration like BDSM or Age-Play, or trauma-related bonding such as with works operating around abuse dynamics, underage sex, or rape – all allow for not just greater discussion around these subjects, but a greater understanding of the benefits by which writing, and specifically fanfiction writing, has for individuals.

### **Fanfiction and Resistance to Misogyny and Patriarchy**

In line with the sexual liberation which fanfiction offers to its participatory members is the self-empowerment it offers to marginalized and discriminated communities. While this ties back directly to the aforementioned acts of resistance employed by its LGBTQ+ members this is also in reference to the large female majority who write and read fanfiction materials. In a recent survey conducted on A03 demographics (a fanfiction website), the percent of female-identifying participants exceeded 57% of the total population sample and men or male-identifying participants making up less than 15% (Survey Results: Demographics, Centreoftheselights). This proves that fanfiction provides a safe space for women to express themselves both within a sexual context and within a creative hemisphere. For the longest time, women writers lagged behind their male counterparts – in an article by Greg Rosalsky, they state that “women authored less than 10 percent of the new books published in the US each year. They now publish more than 50 percent of them. Not only that, the average female author sells more books than the average male author” (Rosalsky).

Writing is clearly one of the easier ways to level the playing field within creative businesses and the lack of challenge when it comes to publishing material that does not have to even be approved by an editor makes fanfiction one of the *best* approaches to that rink. However, that very same “rink” is a slippery slope which has sent many fanfiction authors and specifically woman authors into a suddenly competitive, neck-and-neck race through a capitalist minefield. This is most clearly displayed by Wattpad’s platform and the unfortunate corporate structure which forces its writers (predominantly women) to fight for not only attention, but for permanence and stability of any kind. More light on this will be shed in another section.

### **Fanfiction and its ties to capitalism**

Fanfiction is, by definition, works created by fans of an original published work, for fans, without permission of the author or under the rules and regulation of copyright laws. It is by merit of the lack of profit which deems such works as not infringement over the original writer or creator’s intellectual property which allows it to be made in the first place. It is also by this same string of logic, conclusive to say that without the profit incentive, fanfiction has already stepped into the gray market space of the capitalist system. A capitalist system, with regards to the works of creative fiction in the form of books, shows, movies, animations and all forms of visual entertainment, ensures that the single creator of the creative work (the private owner) is accredited with and owns all the means of production and is thus rewarded both the monetary and social benefits of their work. With the example of a published work of fiction: the author produces the book, sells it to a publisher who is, in this situation, a means of investment where the risk and cost is weighed out and deemed beneficial to the author, thereby accreting a profit via the sales of their book. Furthermore, should this work become successful, other businesses (privately owned or otherwise separate branches of this larger capitalist network) will choose to invest their funds into the work and produce merchandise, movies, amusement parks, games, and other attractive goods which then brings in more profit and thus multiplies and grows the original author’s market space. This process could be easily seen with the Harry Potter franchise estimated to be worth around \$43 *billion* as of 2023, the books are worth nearly \$7.7 billion alone and according to

growing figures those numbers will continue to grow with the development of more movies, stage productions, merchandise, phone games, video games, and adaptations (James). Other franchises like Star Wars, the MCU, Pokemon, and the Spider-Man verse are also massively grossing franchises worth over 20 billion in gross income each (Jimenez). In each of these cases, the original author, regardless of the degree in which they participate or benefit from the capital which their work brings, has initiated and grown a large capitalist web of profit-incentives which relies on the demand of the consumers' (the fans) persisting interest and desire for content. Fanfiction then, is a branch or off-shoot of this gilded tree. While it works within the web of the author's marketspace (by virtue of fanfictions requiring a franchise) it does not produce profit for the author, nor does it require monetary compensation from its consumers. Fanfiction, as a rule, is free, accessible to any and all, and unaffected by the author's influence, both creatively and monetarily. A quick look at AO3's parent site, The Organization for Transformative Works (also known as OTW) establishes their mission to ensure that not only are fans protected in their rights to create fanfiction, but that legal charades and copyright infringements cannot hinder any individual's ability to participate in the making of transformative works. Their mission statement says: "The OTW believes that fanworks are creative and transformative, core fair uses, and will therefore be proactive in protecting and defending fanworks from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. This help will not be limited to those fans or projects directly connected with OTW" ("Legal Advocacy"). Their page goes on to list the dozens of appeals and petitions that the company makes on behalf of its writers and participants, ensuring that fanfiction can continue to exist as a form of resistance against the capitalist system.

### **Examining the History of Fanfiction and Fandoms**

To better elaborate on the ties between fanfiction and capitalism it's important to first begin with a brief history or clarification of what fanfiction *is*. The history of fanfiction could begin with fanzines for the Star Trek fandom in the 1960s, but some might argue that it *really* could begin anywhere from Virgil's work on Aeneas, picking up where Homer left off, or with Milton's self-insert, speculative Bible fanfiction also known as *Paradise Lost* (Clements). For the purposes of keeping this history somewhat streamlined and not delving too deeply into the waters of what constitutes fanfiction and what does not meet the requirements I will be using only material from the twentieth century and onwards for this paper. With that said, Alexandra Edwards, in her book *Before Fanfiction: Recovering the Literary History of American Media Fandom* gives a decent account of the history of fanfiction and fandom spaces in general. They state that: "Western media fandom ... might have gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s as female audiences mimeographed and mailed each other Star Trek fanzines" (Edwards 2). Like many who find themselves interwoven into the world of fanfiction and fandom spaces, Edwards was introduced to fanfiction and fandom at the cusp of adolescence due to their own love for the show Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Edwards 2). Through the website named *Bronze* they were exposed for the first time to a crowd of creative woman writers who:

Wrote fanfiction (fanfic or fic), edited each other's stories (beta reading), drew fan art, created mixtapes (fanmixes), made manipulated images (manips), wrote analytical essays (meta), edited television and film clips into music videos (fanvids), sewed costumes to wear at fan conventions (cosplay), crafted replica props, coded and maintained fanfiction archives, recorded audio versions of fanfiction stories (podfic), campaigned against misogyny and rape culture on television (fan activism), and much else besides. (Edwards 2-3)

All of these exciting and new communal activities were already well established by 1998 and in order to find the origin it's necessary to dial back a few decades. Like anything in existence, fanfiction is tainted by misogynistic and patriarchal terminology. Edwards explains that "the terms 'fan,' short for 'fanatic,' and the related 'fandom' were first used in the 1880s to describe sports aficionados who followed the increasingly popular, recently professionalized game of baseball. As the terms 'fan' and 'fandom' spread via print media, they were adopted by the burgeoning film industry as a marketing and publicity tactic" (Edwards 6). The terms retain their bitter aftertaste of misogyny and even until today the term 'fangirl' is never associated with a positive mental image. This interpretation of fandoms and fanfiction and particularly those who participate in fan-culture is something on which Ashley J. Barner extrapolates in her book *The Case for Fanfiction*. In it, Barner defines fanfic reading as a subcategory of something they call "absorbed reading":

Much of the negative reputation of fanfiction, the reputation that makes fans call their reading a guilty pleasure and makes critics call it the end of the world, actually comes from how our culture conceptualizes reading, especially the reading habits of women and young people ... Absorbed reading does not just mean that readers are so absorbed by the text that they are deaf to all that is happening around them – though this can be a side effect of such reading. It is more than that: absorbed readers feel like they have been absorbed *into* the text ... Absorbed readers are, in a sense, entering into the book. (Barner 7)

Absorbed reading then, which is not *limited* to the reading of fanfiction, is what drives participation in fanfiction communities. This absorption into fandom spaces and the full-body experience of reading has been a key motivator for fans even in the earliest forms of participatory culture. It's important to recognize however, that fanfiction is not *just* reading – that we might call the consumership half of fanfiction and there is a married part to it which deals with the production of fanfiction materials. Since this paper focuses on fanfiction within the restrictions and viewership of capitalism it is important to reframe the concepts into the structures of capitalistic language to better see how the larger cog of this leviathan functions. As stated, the *absorbed reading* of fanfiction makes up the consumer half of the participation within fan culture. The other half is that of the producer of fanfiction. Edwards quotes John Fiske in his book *Understanding Popular Culture* as saying: "popular culture is not consumption, it is culture – the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system" (Edwards 7). Edwards summarizes Fiske's theory as further suggesting that to understand popular culture it is necessary to not view fans as an "aggregation of alienated, one-dimensional persons whose only consciousness is false, whose only relationship to the system that enslaves them is one of unwitting (if not willing) dupes" but to instead see and understand that these fans are "active agents" who produce as much as they consume (Edwards 7). Furthermore, to see and understand these fans' participation within fanfiction culture as not an underhanded method of stealing an original author's concepts but rather an art of (and here Fiske quotes French scholar Michel de Certeau) "making do with what the system provides" (Edwards 7). The system in question is, of course, capitalism which markets and monopolizes creative projects from individuals, ensuring that all possible profits are accounted for and returned to the investors.

Understanding then, that fanfiction consists of production and consumption, begets the question of what distinguishes fanfiction from other forms of reader-writer relationships? The key difference between the two forms is something coined the "gift economy" system and that will be further elaborated upon in a later section.



## Fanfiction Tagging and Marketing

It follows that in order to understand the differences between fanfiction and “regular” published works of fiction, one should take into consideration the multitudes of slang and communally understood lingo which is used by fanfic writers and readers. Understanding these terms helps clarify why and how fanfiction writing functions as resistance against capitalism while traditional publishing works within that framework. Most of these terms are easily searchable online and generally get learned as one reads more fanfiction. The first term is in reference to the special sorting system used in fanfic websites such as AO3 and Wattpad and it’s familiarly called “tagging” or “tags”. Tagging ensures that any work posted on these websites prepares readers for whatever contents will appear within the work itself. Tags are frequently used as warnings for material that might contain things generally triggering or distasteful for some people; tags are also used in the opposite way where people can seek out specific tags when searching for materials that cover either a specific trope or pairing which the reader wishes to see.

There are two ways by which to view and understand tagging as a system within fanfiction material. The first way is to connect the idea of tagging with the idea of marketing a product. If tags were to be put on published novels they might look something like: “novella”, “horror”, “science fiction”, “young adult”, “slow romance” and more. Within fanfiction and within fanfiction-hosting sites such as AO3 and Wattpad the tagging system works a little differently. A data log of the top ten popular tags on AO3 for the year of 2023 include Fluff, Angst, Alternate Universe, Sexual Content, Sex, Relationship(s), Hurt/Comfort, Family, Smut, and Friendship (“[Data] The 100 Most Popular Tags on AO3”). These tags are some of the most commonly used and searched for on the site – a fanfic that then has one of these tags is more likely to be marketable to its audience who might single out fics with specific tags related to what they desire to ‘consume.’ The marketability of tagging is far more prominent in works on Wattpad where tags are actually limited to single words and are frequently boosted by status updates related to the tag. Take for example figure 1 which is a snapshot of some tags off a story on Wattpad.



Fig. 1. Screenshot of author-generated tags of Wattpad original work: “Killed by Anex” by Teaseboni.

The tags such as “tribal”, “suggestionswelcome”, “distopia” and “futureworld” might all have separate rankings which encourage the author to further pursue promoting their work in any one genre more than another. Taking a closer look at the mentioned tags for example it is evident by figure 2 that the ranking of these tags is meant to incite and mimic a competitive marketplace for the author to view their own work in comparison with others on the website.

### *Killed By Anex*

#### Most Impressive Ranking

#2	suggestionswelcome out of 23 stories	 >
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#### Other Rankings

#186	tribal	out of 514 stories >
#774	distopía	out of 783 stories >
#95	futureworld	out of 96 stories >

Fig. 2. Screenshot of the rankings of the story “Killed By Anex” written by Teasiboni.

This is a deliberate design choice to encourage writers to engage in activities which self-promote their works, which functions very similarly to methods of advertisement for any product manufactured by any corporation. Moreover, the referenced number of stories which use the tag puts the tag itself into perspective. The story used in figure 2 ranks #2 with the tag “suggestionswelcome” but that tag has only been used by 23 stories on the platform.

### *Cognitive Deviance*

#### Most Impressive Ranking

#1	crime out of 66.8K stories	 >
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#### Other Rankings

#1	dystopian	out of 46.2K stories >
#6	thriller	out of 218K stories >
#1	detective	out of 30K stories >
#14	death	out of 304K stories >
#7	sci-fi	out of 129K stories >
#7	scifi	out of 129K stories >
#7	science-fiction	out of 129K stories >

Fig 3. Screenshot of rankings of Wattpad story “Cognitive Deviance” by JaCrispy\_Jamaine.

When compared to larger stories which hit #1 in major tags (such as seen in figure 3 above) like “dystopian”, “crime”, and “detective” it is obvious to see how much weightier those rankings are when looking at the number of stories within their category. It is not uncommon for stories to monopolize on tags and use them to their advantage in gathering as wide and as large an audience as possible. Looking again at figure 3 the tags “sci-fi”, “scifi”, and “science-fiction” are all three redundant and mean the same thing essentially, yet they are ranked separately and are indeed three separate tags. This redundancy points more to the marketing of the story than to any real utility in the tags themselves. Any story on Wattpad is limited to 25 tags according to the

information provided on Wattpad Creators blog posts, thus any redundancy is absolutely catering to the marketability of the story.

Putting this then, in comparison to tags found on AO3, which off the bat are formatted differently, showcases a very different approach to the tagging system and the purpose of tags in general. Tags on AO3 are not limited to single words but are limited to a number of characters per tag. Moreover, while tags on AO3 are searchable and it is possible to isolate fics based on their use of specific tags, authors tend not to use the tags with the same intent of marketing their fic as much as they use the system to roughly summarize and engage with their readers.

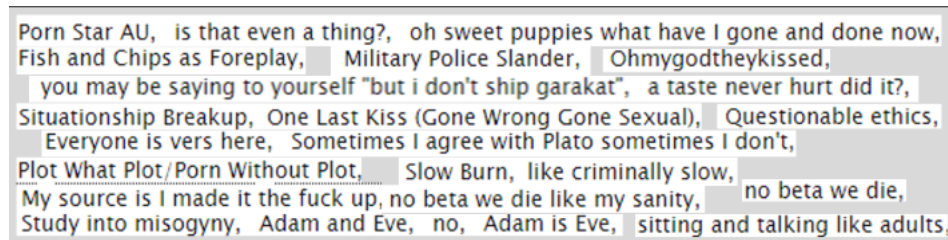


Fig. 4. Collage of screenshots of tags from different fics found on AO3.

In figure 4<sup>6</sup> pictured above it is clear that not only are many of these tags not quite searchable, but frequently don't really engage in the use of key-words at all. Most are self-explanatory but some are "inside jokes" within the writing fandom community. Take for example the tag "no beta we die", this is a commonly referenced tag among many fics where it might be altered in some shape or form so that the format is technically "no beta we die like..." and the comparison is then tailored to the author's preference to comedic effect. The significance of this lies in the reasoning and effect of the use of these tags. Since they are not quite searchable and not quite "marketable" their purpose is entirely communal understanding. But the flexibility of this tagging system doesn't just allow for careful and entertaining browsing for readers, it also allows authors to provide a snapshot or summary of the fic.

Since fanfiction is primarily made for the benefit of a wide audience and is, by definition, *for fans*, the community has established methods of monitoring the rating of fics for the benefit of different demographics. Fanfictions with sexually explicit material are normally rated E or explicit and this includes material with vivid, detailed descriptions of sex, violence, gore, or other mature themes. Mature or M-rated fics are similar to explicit fics in that they deal with adult material but different in that the nature of the fic is less explicit and is often referenced as opposed to described. T rated fics do not have sexually explicit language and are generally appropriate for audiences over the age of 13. Gen rated fics are for "general audiences" and are targeted for all ages. Not Rated fics are usually assumed to contain material from any of the previously mentioned categories and should be treated with caution and with the expectation of explicit material ("Tutorial: Posting a Work on AO3 FAQ").

All these characteristics of fanfiction are part of what distinguish it from other forms of published and edited novels, but they are in no way the most significant difference. Writer Sarah Brouillette discusses at length in her article titled "Wattpad, Platform Capitalism, and the Feminization of Publishing Work" just how the biggest distinguishing detail between fanfiction and traditionally published novels – the detail of cost – gets overridden by the systemic consumerist ideology fostered by capitalism and the American Dream of making it big.

## **Wattpad and Capitalism**

Wattpad<sup>7</sup> is a digital platform that was started up in 2006 by founders Allen Lau and Ivan

Yuen. Initially, the platform was designed to be a free-for-use site which hosted original content and allowed users to read for free at any place. The site began amassing works that were already out of copyright on its launch including “public-domain books like *Pride and Prejudice* [meant] to draw in readers” (“Wattpad | Wattpad HQ”). The website quickly evolved after more and more users joined and began contributing to the free platform with their own original content. By 2011, the site boasted over 1 million users and began collecting funding at considerable rates due to its app-version available on iPhone, Android, and Blackberry.

As the website continued to grow and as interaction began to increase at exponential levels, the platform became not only the (ironically) text-book show-boy for innovative company marketability but also began growing beyond the realm of writers simply sharing their works on the platform for free. As is stated on the platform’s company information page in easy-to-follow bubble texts, for the years 2017 and 2019 Wattpad “launched Wattpad Brand Partnerships, Wattpad WEBTOON Studios, and the Wattpad Stars program ... Wattpad makes strides towards our goal of empowering writers to realize their career aspirations on and off the platform. The launch of Paid Stories (re-imagined as Wattpad Originals in 2023) enables readers to monetarily support writers, right on Wattpad. Wattpad launches Wattpad Books, our own publishing imprint, with the aim of publishing fan-loved and data-driven stories from the platform” (“Wattpad | Wattpad HQ”). The motivating force behind Wattpad by 2019 is clearly no longer to function as a host for the sharing of stories, fanfics and the boosting of community but rather to work as a market space where writers might gather a fanbase before launching their novels – in short ensuring a profitability on their works prior to the monetary investment of publishing. This is not only evident on the company’s platform, but even in the mindset and the motivation of the writers on the website<sup>8</sup>.

Sarah Brouillette in her article titled “Wattpad, Platform Capitalism, and the Feminization of Publishing Work,” gives a thorough investigation of the inner workings of Wattpad as seen from the lens of capitalist corruption. The website itself might not have aimed to function as another cog in the wheel of capitalist ideology, and so much is proved by the intentions of the founder whose dream was to make reader-writer connections more accessible:

[Wattpad] was a way to combine the trends of cell phones and user-generated content. At that time, going through a traditional publisher was the only feasible way for fiction writers to find an audience. Readers and writers were not able to connect directly, and there was no easy way for people to carry around the content they wanted to read. I co-founded Wattpad in 2006 to fill these gaps in the market. (Agrba)

This being said however, the functionality of the website – as it is today – works exactly in the same exploitative and misleading manner as any corporation (“Wattpad | Wattpad HQ”). In Brouillette’s article, she states that: “[Wattpad] encourages free activity that is not exactly work, in that it is unpaid, but that resembles work, in that in other contexts people are paid to do the same activities” (420). By Brouillette’s own words and by clear example, Wattpad writers engage in not only the act of writing as any author does, but also in acts of advertisement, marketing, editing, being their own publicist, and working with the public relations between fans and themselves. Fanfiction writing regularly subverts the negative effects of this work ethic by virtue of working within the framework of a ‘gift economy’ as will be discussed later. But with regards to Wattpad in specific, the unremunerated labor which goes into publishing works and maintaining relevance is not only exhaustive, but also obscured. Brouillette goes on to say that, “by putting Wattpad’s marketing materials in conversation with successful Wattpad authors’ public statements about their own experiences, [it is possible to] glimpse something of the labor subtending a platform that promotes itself as a space of pastoral care and inclusive community” (420).

Recognizing the exploitative nature of Wattpad's platform begins first and foremost with the understanding of the identity of the producers and consumers on the website. Brouillette provides some demographic data on the gender and the age brackets of Wattpad's user base, stating that: "In 2019 Wattpad boasted more than 70 million users, most of them young women between the ages of 13 and 35" (421). A quick look into Brouillette's sources shows that these statistics were sourced off data that is either no longer published, or in the case of the published article by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, sourced off a rough approximation by Ashleigh Gardner, Head of Content, Publishing at Wattpad. Gardner's approximation reflects that "45% of Wattpad users are aged between 13 and 18 and 40% are 18 and 30" (Bold, 123). The tricky bit about these demographics is that while age is a good indicator for making assumptions about audiences<sup>9</sup> they don't necessarily give a broader picture about who, within the system of Wattpad, is being used and exploited the most and how that reflects back on larger systemic models of capitalism. This suspicious lack of data is argued for in Bold's article, explaining how, "Gender, race and location are immaterial in self-publishing on websites like Wattpad" because of how it allows users to feel anonymous and safe in expressing things they might otherwise not want to be associated with (124). However, it also makes demographic data gathering almost impossible on a larger scale. The lack of demographic data published on Wattpad's user base hasn't been unnoticed by other researchers, user fffinnagain on Fandomstats Livejournal published an article early in 2015 addressing this very issue where they stated that "When I saw destntoast's post about the Wattpad stats, my experimentalist alarm bells started ringing because the numbers on each archive come from very different subsets of their users". User fffinnagain was able to gather statistical data information from fanfiction websites such as Fanfiction.net and AO3 where surveys were made extensively and with great accuracy due to a large sample size.

The information about the users of AO3 come from an anonymous survey conducted by Centrum Lumina in 2013. It was posted on tumblr, got widely reblog [sic], and a remarkable 10,000 people submitted information on their identities and their uses of the archive, whether or not they had accounts. Of those who participated, 99.9% reported their ages. (ffinnagain)

New data from centreoftheselights was sourced in an unofficial survey which reached an audience of over 16,000 users in 2024 (Survey Results: Demographics). In an analysis of the data change from the 2013 survey to the 2024 survey, centreoftheselights stated that "the general shape is overall similar. However ... in 2024, 26–35 year olds now seem to be the most common demographic (Eira 2023). It may be that older fans are more likely to use Tumblr, Reddit, Twitter, and other sites where the survey was circulated highly, while younger fans are more likely to use TikTok, where to the best of our knowledge the survey did not gather a large reach" (Survey Results: Demographics)<sup>10</sup>. This is important to note in understanding the broader picture of any possible outliers in the rest of the data gathered on the respondents of this survey as the older Gen-Z and millennial demographic might not be a perfect representation of current fanfiction producers and consumers. Nevertheless, the survey information available for AO3 is not only extensive, and detailed regarding the age of its respondents, but also regarding gender, gender identities, sexual orientations, native languages, ethnicity, and even race. This detailed and careful analysis is *not* visible however with the data available for Wattpad users.

User fffinnagain states, on the matter of finding Wattpad demographics that "I don't know where the numbers on Wattpad user ages comes, but here is my best guess. I don't think they are from an independent anonymous survey of people who use the archive (like the AO3 census). I googled for such a thing and found nothing: were these numbers from a survey, it can't have been

very big” (ffinnagain). The lack of data – and more importantly the lack of published demographic data, reflects on the capitalist-focus of the platform. While AO3 and even FFNet provide data which reveals the personhood of its user base, Wattpad seems to focus primarily on the statistical gains of its members. Livejournal user fffinnagain states that:

Wattpad has some kind of back-end algorithms to adapting [sic] the site experience to each users [sic] account. Unlike FFNet and AO3, which give you access to everything and orders works by very clear criteria like chronology, reviews, fandoms, length, and tags, Wattpad seems much harder to navigate on such explicit criteria. Instead, the design of the site puts much more emphasis on “Recommended works”. From a couple of hours searching for mainly sherlock [sic] works (I was trying to count), clicking through to at most 10 books, expressing zero preference through comments or subscriptions, and posting one dummy work as a test, the site is already suggesting to me specific Sherlock fanfic and romance novels. (ffinnagain)

The algorithmic analysis is only further corroborated by a quick google search for Wattpad demographics, of which nothing more than statistics on the website’s traffic data is found. The overarching conclusion to be made here is that Wattpad’s focus is not truly on the demographics of its users (as stated ironically on the website’s front page) but rather on the traffic and engagement it can generate from its user base.

If however, as Brouillette suggests, we can make the assumption that due to the feminization of fanfiction literature, and due to the general data available for other fanfiction communities such as AO3 and Fanfiction.net, that Wattpad’s user base mirrors those statistics in that the majority of users are female-identifying and between the ages of 13-35 then Brouillette’s other analysis on the corrupted nature of Wattpad becomes even darker.

Wattpad functions much like the American Dream of making it big and getting successful off hard work and a “grind” mindset. Brouillette quotes Aarthi Vadde in saying that because Wattpad is so new and quickly dominating the communal system of writing and reading in the publishing industry it simultaneously allows “‘amateurs [to] share what they love’ while being ‘exploited for their data’; and she foregrounds strategies that authors have been using in their competitive bids to secure career success by ‘learning to game the system’” (420-421). Success on Wattpad, Brouillette continues, translates to success in getting your feet into the wider world of book publishing: “the company acts as an intermediary—an agent, in fact—between writers and the larger industry. Wattpad’s brand signifies that the author is saleable” (Brouillette 424). The unfortunate truth of the matter is that everyone wants to make a living doing things that they love, and Wattpad sells this idea by being a free-to-use platform which might (with time, energy, commitment and luck) boost stay-at-home moms, young women in college, or anyone with a passion for writing, into the professional book-publishing industry, a chance that is slim by any margin and unlikely to reflect the efforts made by all the users. The success stories provided on Wattpad mirror those of entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and other well-known and redundant names.

But perhaps worse than the fact of what Wattpad does, is the way that users and writers who *do* make it big end up not only encouraging the use of Wattpad as a stepping stone into the wider world of publishing, but also glorifying their process and further sell the idea of capitalistic gain via the constant sacrifice of energy, time, and soul.<sup>11</sup> Brouillette describes how “writing career trajectories from amateur to professional are a key story sold across the site ... there is little mention of the details of pay for authors, however. Success is measured instead via fan

engagement” (422). This freely given labor is not only praised and glorified – writers describe Wattpad as a platform which was both “therapeutic and life-affirming”, that it allows them to escape and have the freedom to transverse worlds; “Aspiring writers are encouraged to imagine their work as an activity of uplift and support for one another and their readers, seeing what they do as a form of care that is inherently rewarding even when it fails to pay” (422). While it is not inherently *bad* to see one’s work as an act of philanthropy, especially when it is inherently connected to one’s hobbies which bring them joy and delight, the slope into destroying that joy via capitalist interests is slippery and dangerous. As Brouillette states:

Regardless of why writers are doing this unpaid writing ... Wattpad mines the mostly freely generated content to lure readers, and then uses devotion to the platform as a way of securing contracts with advertisers. It learns from readers’ levels of engagement which material the company should option for production elsewhere, and which writing talent should move into the traditional publishing world ... Given these techniques, there is no need to pay people to write ... nor is there any need to replace writers with machines that can automate ... writers have proven that they will contribute to the platform for free, so Wattpad—at least for now—instead simply makes its information about the “DNA” of a successful story available to aspiring authors who are eager to increase their chances of success. (423-425)

Wattpad, in short, lures in talented writers and devoted readers, encourages them via carrot-on-stick to maintain their levels of engagement on the website and tempts writers with stories of success such as with the story of Anna Todd<sup>12</sup> or Jo Watson.

Both of these writers Brouillette mentions at length to describe not only their success but their stories of getting to that success. Todd started out on Wattpad, spending nearly “five hours a day working on her writing and another three hours promoting it. Wattpad panel presentations suggest that Todd’s experience is common, given the pressures of online posting and marketing” (Brouillette 429). Watson, after experiencing the grief of losing her father began to feel this pressure of constant online posting and marketing in order to maintain her level of success she states on the process of continuing to write, as quoted by Brouillette, that “there’s no choice ... it feels like work now” (431). It is through the stories of Anna Todd and Jo Watson that Brouillette finally makes her claim on the frightening power of Wattpad. That it is through this freely provided, unpaid labor – this pastoral care nurtured by the urge to grow a community and support each other – that Wattpad abuses and exploits its women writers. Brouillette comments on Watson’s experience in struggling to get through her grief for her father’s loss while also maintaining her constant growth and marketability on Wattpad explaining that:

It is a poignant moment in part because the overall discourse of the panel, promoting reading and writing as productive of catharsis and community, fades away, and the platform’s material foundation is revealed: Wattpad’s tremendous profitability—the salaries of its elite management—depends upon a form of subemployment offered to a vast army of contributors. This is mainly contingent work, mostly done by women, produced on an insistent schedule and dependent on the author’s feeling that she has to do it, that she is neglecting a duty of care if she fails. (432)

This carrot-on-stick temptation of fame and success that Anna Todd and Jo Watson both followed and even promoted just by virtue of their own stories is of course challenged by the ugly reality that Wattpad is not really *just* a site to share works between writers and readers. But it is in fact yet another cog of the larger machine of publishing and corporate mindsets. There is no escape even



for fanfiction publishers who generally couldn't dream of monetizing their writing in any legal sense – yet Anna Todd began her success in fanfiction. Wattpad states all over their page that they care for their writers and readers – that they support and wish to foster a community of care and inclusivity – and in some respects the site has lived up to that promise, encouraging more and more LGBTQIA+ works and promoting POC writers over the years. But as Brouillette usefully points out, if Wattpad really did care about its community and was attentive to writer's mental health perhaps they might have offered Jo Watson “a secure wage with an option for personal leave [or] health care coverage to see a grief counselor” (432). The facade that Wattpad promotes is that because you are doing “what you love” for a community of people who “love to engage with what you make” then there is no *need* to professionalize it. Why should you need to make a real living from a job that's “just an app for fanfiction”?

Being a successful writer on Wattpad entails some measure of public assent to and conformity with these modes, as the vocabulary of care work is presented hand-in-hand with acknowledgement of the harrying implications of the compulsive serial repetitions of networked sociality. The consoling logic seems to be that, while the work is hard, it is all worth it—if not for the money, then at least for the emotional rewards. (434)

It seems not only disrespectful to discount and dismiss the work put forth by these writers on Wattpad as undeserving of equal pay, but to assume that engagement alone – in a world that is already corrupted by and works completely within the framework of capitalism – is sufficient compensation. The emotional fatigue from the constant insecurity of keeping engagement high while balancing work that will *actually* put food on the table is exhaustive. Even in the case where the desire to work against capitalism is key to the work published on Wattpad (take for example a fanfiction with no intention of being made monetized) the algorithm and the sorting of Wattpad's works ensures that not only will low-clicked works get ignored, but that it will be utterly swallowed by the precise tags, fancy covers, and sensational titles which get thrown at readers as soon as they open the app. One might open Wattpad intending to find a Star Trek fanfiction and will get hit instead with the top ten works in the relevant country, or top picks for the reader based on their browsing history and clicks, a list of Wattpad Originals follows listing works that allow you to read some chapters for free before you hit a paywall. The more you scroll the more titles you see with tags such as “updated weekly” or “Wattpad HQ handpicked favorite” all designed to sell the work to readers and to distract them from searching anything else out. The format of Wattpad's interface mimics that of most social media platforms, designed to keep users in a state of constant-scrolling and hold their attention for longer spans of time. Similar to streaming services like Netflix, Hulu or Disney + however, users might spend more time scrolling than actually engaging in reading. This mimicry isn't without significance – Wattpad has developed into a platform that no longer functions outside of the capitalist network, it works *within* the framework and builds upon it. Users of the platform can no longer *fully* claim to work against the systemic oppression of capitalism and, as all other forms of oppression function under capitalism, the effects of individual and collective resistance lose their efficacy.

### **A03 as the solution**

Despite the unfortunate downfall of Wattpad however, there remains another site which not only has matured and grown in its user base at a near-exponential rate as of the last year, but has been around for nearly as long as Wattpad and has maintained a strict adherence to its values as a platform functioning outside of capitalist ideology. A03 or Archive of Our Own was launched in 2008 as part of the larger branching non-profit titled “The Organization for Transformative Works”. The website's mission page explains that OTW is a nonprofit organization which was “established



by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms. We believe that fanworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate” (“What We Believe...”). The website, started up in 2007, has strong groundworks in preservation, nonprofit work, advocacy, and perhaps most importantly works under the system of a gift-economy. Figure 5 below is a snapshot of the OTW’s values and it is immediately evident how vastly different the website is compared to Wattpad even in visual representation.

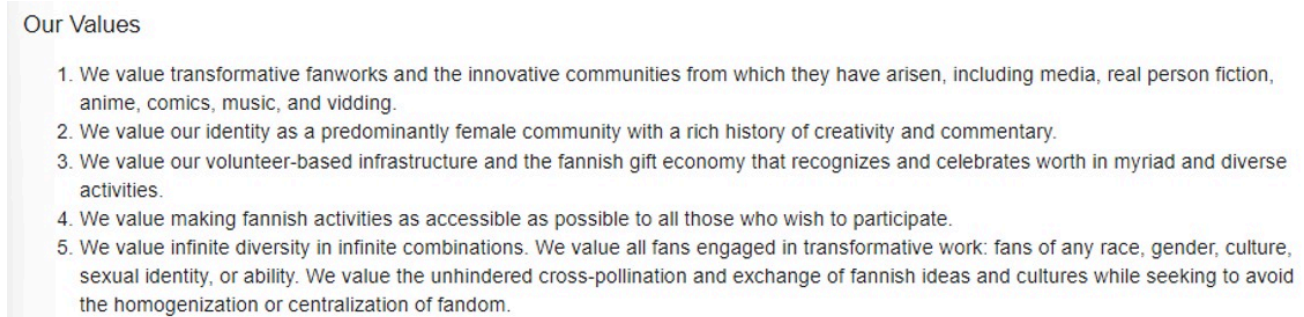


Fig. 5. Screenshot of the front page on OTW’s mission page.

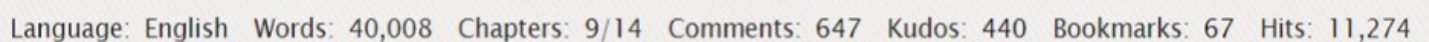
The plain font, lack of color, and clear bulleted list might seem amateur and unprofessional but it is actually simplistic and concise. There is no need to advertise or demand attention as the website functions only to provide information and opportunity to either work with OTW or donate to the cause. The goals of the website, unlike the showy and flashy ones from Wattpad, are stated plainly and no sensational stories are sold to go on with it – no quotes, no links to published authors. OTW – unlike Wattpad – functions as a community first and a platform second.

The fanfiction site AO3 is a noncommercial nonprofit project started by OTW for the sharing of fan-made literature, art, videos, podcasts and more. The project is one of five that the OTW has worked on including Fanlore, Legal Advocacy, Open Doors, and Transformative Works and Cultures or TWC.<sup>13</sup> Journalist Kira Deshler writes about AO3 and its ties to capitalism in her article “Art Under Capitalism – On The Passions of AO3” and makes an assortment of arguments which, when brought into comparison with previously explored themes of fanfiction and capitalism as it applies to Wattpad, sheds further light on the broad-reaching value of fanfiction and specifically fanfiction on sites such as AO3. Deshler states that “Fanfiction, it seems, is a particularly evocative example of what creative works can be like when freed from the constraints of capitalism. In particular, today’s most popular fanfiction site – Archive of Our Own, known colloquially as AO3 – is illustrative of these community (rather than capital) oriented ideas put into practice” (Deshler). As discussed earlier, the transformative qualities of fanfiction allow source materials to be warped, further developed, altered, and modeled to fit a more diverse audience and reflect not only the consumers of the media, but to reflect and represent the minority of people who rarely see themselves in media. By functioning outside of the capitalist market space the majority’s demand does not apply – those whose tastes run along the lines of mainstream media have no reason to seek out content which has a shifted narrative, but those whose desires and existence gets overlooked by mainstream commercialized productions (think accurate representations of LGBTQ+ people, members of the BIPOC community, and non-Christian believers) have the freedom and ability to entertain relatable content through fanfiction.

Individual reasons for writing fanfiction come in a multitude of forms. Often people simply enjoy a show, book, or production and wish to engage with it more. Others find that fanfiction is a safe space to explore parts of themselves otherwise unsafe to explore. Deshler quotes reddit users

who state that they “write fanfiction bc there are things i want to read that don’t exist so i have to make them myself [sic]” and another who states that “they read fanfic for ‘quality LGBT+ content’” (Deshler). Regardless of the reason for engaging in the act of writing and reading fanfiction on AO3 the results boil down to one crucial and critical point: community. Deshler, Brouillette, and countless other researchers in the science of transformative fiction have all made emphasis on the importance of community in the act of writing and reading fanfiction. Sometimes this community is more superficially connected to the fandom itself, with people joining together in shared ‘headcanons’ that become so wide-spread they develop into fanon. That is, according to a 2003 popularly upvoted Urban Dictionary entry: “a term used in fanfiction to describe commonly accepted ideas among authors even if they are not actually expressed in the canon work” (“Urban Dictionary: Fanon”). This shared sense of unity is corroborated by another Reddit user Deshler quotes saying: “Sometimes a story ending is just so devastating, illogical, or unsatisfying that the entire fandom almost universally rejects it and creates their own... collectively” (Deshler). This collectiveness and community found within fanfiction writing and specifically on AO3 is one that is invaluable to both minorities who rarely find such inclusive spaces, and also to those who simply wish to learn more about minority communities and wish to form bonds of a larger kind.

One major difference separating Wattpad’s community between authors and readers to that of AO3’s community is that of the simple “lack of fame” on AO3. Since AO3 allows readers to sort through works based on date published, kudos, comments, tags, etc – there’s no one way to hit a target audience of clicks. Some works which might hit hundreds of thousands of kudos might not even pop up in the recommended fanfics for someone who is sorting for fics outside of that fandom. The limitations on interactions (lack of ability to DM, comment moderation, one kudo per click on fic, etc) are all designed to promote genuine community engagement while also limiting the “fame” and “stardom” that Wattpad propagates. Further enriching the AO3 community is the prevalence of dedication to the joined pleasure of writing and reading fanfiction. Readers might begin a journey with an author and stick with their updates on a daily, weekly, monthly and sometimes even *yearly* basis. One work by user Starrysummernights on AO3 was started in 2017 and is still as of yet ongoing with over 400k words worth of works.<sup>14</sup> Their readers are notified by email when a new chapter or part is added to the collection of that series and, regardless of how long it takes between updates the communal support is so strong as to ensure a hefty reaction from all the dedicated readers. Figure seven below shows the stats on their latest work added to the series and perhaps more significant than the kudos and the hits is the number of engaged comments which ranks proportionally high when compared to other fics of similar length.



Language: English Words: 40,008 Chapters: 9/14 Comments: 647 Kudos: 440 Bookmarks: 67 Hits: 11,274

Fig. 6. Screenshot capture of the statistics on the last work of starysummernights’ latest published work.

Now, in no way is AO3 a perfect model of anticapitalist resistance, so much is clearly stated by Deshler, saying that “Indeed, AO3 and other fanfic communities are not free of some of the more insidious dynamics that permeate digital culture more broadly. Issues like racism, sexism, and ableism still exist on these platforms, and harassment does still sometimes occur despite AO3’s anonymized user base”. The unfortunate reality is that AO3, like any digital platform for community and for socialization, will allow for all sorts of people to inhabit the space – and while some of those people will be writing fanfiction with the sole purpose of subverting cultural and societal norms, many might fanfiction for no other purpose than self-gratification (and this

gratification might come in the forms of cementing beliefs or purposefully throwing others under a metaphorical bus).

That being said, AO3 continues to be not only a safe space to encourage minority presence, but to encourage the kind of community building that functions as the groundwork towards anticapitalist resistance. While AO3 doesn't allow for much interaction on the platform itself it is not uncommon for fics to link towards tightly knitted communities on outside hosting platforms (most commonly Discord) to further engage with a target audience. Reddit groups and other social media groups organized around fanfiction and specific fandoms all function hand-in-hand with AO3's massive reach.

The monetary support, too, both for OTW and for AO3 which comes primarily from AO3's user base is immense and consistent. AO3's yearly fundraisers rarely go more than a few hours before meeting and exceeding their goal. The immediate reaching of this goal is evidence of how deeply the community both loves and cherishes AO3 as a platform, and how strongly its fanbase wants to ensure the site's success. This is clearly demonstrated by the surplus of screenshots provided from multiple different users across social media as seen below.

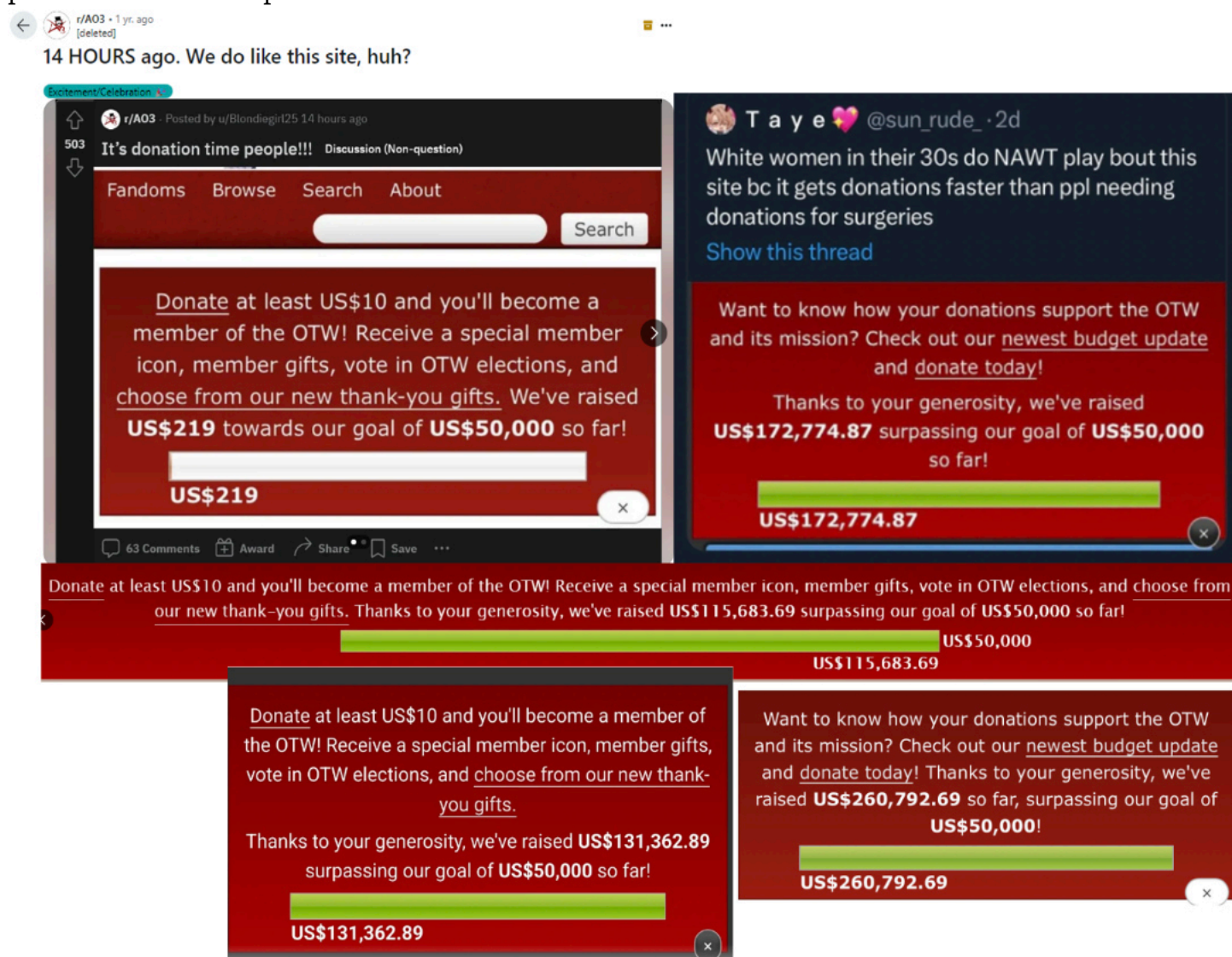


Fig. 7. A collage of screenshots provided by Reddit users and Tia Siboni taken off AO3's website during their fundrives. The figure on the bottom right belongs to Tia Siboni.



The engagement between fans, the works of the fanom, and creators can be a beautiful and encouraging sight to see; fortunately, thanks to AO3's model of simplistic design, systemized tagging, archival platform, and donation-based, volunteer-run set up, it is free from the corruption of capitalist mongering, keeping their vision safe and secure hopefully for years to come.

AO3 is the model on which dozens of organizations, websites, and communities can look to for inspiration and for anti-capitalist resistance. The site provides more than just a platform for community to be made, it serves also as a movement in of itself. The unchanging nature of AO3's platform, and its dedication to maintaining it both ad-free and monetization-free, proves that when communities are united under a common goal and care deeply for it, said movement will be supported for years. More websites might take AO3's model as an example of fostering community and inspiring passive resistance against the capitalist-run world. Small movements and small communities are the start to greater and bigger resistance movements. While AO3 provides an example of freely-given literature and art, more websites and organizations in the future might practice similar models of the gift-economy. Websites and communities like DeviantArt, Tumblr, and even social media sites like Instagram and Tiktok could all take a few notes from AO3's and OTW's platform design to develop healthier and longer-lasting fan-based communities.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The passage excerpted is one from a 16 thousand word one-shot fic (there are no sequels) called "Evidence of Human Life" which delves into a psychological horror love story depicting the struggles that the character Sherlock experiences while stranded on an island with his friend John. The prose gets steadily more poetic as the effects of isolation wear on the two characters. Themes of cannibalism, desire, love, and violence are all explored at length in the short work as well.

<sup>2</sup> The ranking for the 'LGBTQ themes' tag on AO3 in 2023 was 22 in the top 100, with 'homosexuality' ranking 86 as referenced in an unofficial data collection by batcat229 on AO3 in 2023 ("Survey Results: Demographics, Centreoftheselights"). This is further backed up by a survey done in March of 2022 where homosexual male pairing ships made up 26% of what readers choose to read (Rouse and Mel Stanfill).

<sup>3</sup> Some fanfictions work within alternative universes where the existence of homosexuality is looked upon with equivocal normalcy as heterosexuality is perceived in our world – that is to say it is neither acknowledged as outstanding, atypical, or negative in any form.

<sup>4</sup> Ships are the colloquial term for 'relationships' which simply mean the romantic and/or sexual

pairing of any two or more characters from a source material.

<sup>5</sup> See more on the counterarguments and discourse surrounding the topic of "Ship and Let Ship" in Chapter 5 "The Subjectivity of Literary Enjoyment" from Barner's work *The Case for Fanfiction*.

<sup>6</sup> The list of the fics used for the tag collection in figure 4 is as follows: *The Bet*; *Hearthstone*; *Guilty Secrets*; *Flowers, Lies and Fairy Tales*; *EreJean: The Rumbling Series*; *Adam/Eve*; *005*.

<sup>7</sup> The following information about the platform has been sourced from the company's information page ("Wattpad | Wattpad HQ").

<sup>8</sup> And this is apparent by the tell-tale marketable language of the company's information page, notice the usage of terms such as "career aspirations", the fact that the Paid Stories or Wattpad Originals will "monetarily support writers", and the fact that Wattpad Books will aim to publish "data-driven stories" as opposed to books that might not be great hits but still function and serve in a community of writers and readers.

<sup>9</sup> Assumptions such as: is Gen-Z producing more writing than Millennials, are more young people engaging in literature online as opposed to traditional publishing and what might that mean.

<sup>10</sup> “... the distribution has shifted somewhat to the right, with the peak of the distribution shifting from the 19–21 group to the 22–24 group... All this is consistent with the average age of respondents increasing somewhat since the 2013 survey. However, it is unclear if this is due to changes in the overall AO3 userbase, or if it is related to changing social media usage impacting recruitment for the survey. When the 2013 survey was being distributed on Tumblr, the 16–24 demographic made up 46% of the site (Maffeo 2013)” (“Survey Results: Demographics”).

<sup>11</sup> The sunk cost fallacy is appropriate to be mentioned here.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Todd is a well known Wattpad author who started via a fanfiction based on the One Direction band and whose massive following on Wattpad proved her ‘sellability’ to Wattpad who then promoted her to larger firms such as the United Talent Agency allowing her story to be sold in a film deal with Paramount Studios and a \$500,000 US advance payment from Simon & Schuster for her series of novels *After*, *After We Fell*, *After We Collided*, *After Ever Happy*, and then most recently, *Before* (see Brouillette 424–425).

<sup>13</sup> “Fanlore, a fandom wiki, is devoted to preserving the history of transformative fanworks and the fandoms from which they have arisen. Legal Advocacy: OTW is committed to protecting and defending fanworks from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. Open Doors offers shelter to at-risk fannish projects. Subprojects include the Fan Culture Preservation Project, which preserves fanzines and other non-digital forms of fan culture, and the GeoCities Rescue Project. Transformative Works and Cultures: TWC is a peer-reviewed academic journal that seeks to promote scholarship on fanworks and practices” (“Our Projects | Organization for Transformative Works.”)

<sup>14</sup> The work referenced, a series called “As the Summer Rains Fall”, is not available for public access as it is restricted to AO3 users, but the writer Starrysummernights’ profile is cited as the source.

# **Why Must I be Shamed for My Words!: Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and Feminist Critique of Writing Practices**

LHAYLA-ALEXI CERAOS

Confessional poet Sylvia Plath creates dissonance between the feminine speakers and the male-dominated subject matter of her poems "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy." The role of gender within confessional literature takes its place within the recentering of the female experience in a literary genre that was originally created and dominated by men. Sylvia Plath's works "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" capture the male dominant nature within confessional literature through the female perspective, and the overall critique of masculinity within the pieces; breaking the barrier of traditional female voices, as she speaks on the realities of the female domestic lifestyle within a time period that held very conservative ideals. In this essay, I bring light to the differing perspective of gender within the context and analysis of the reading of Plath's confessional poems, and the breakthrough of female suppression through the tool of writing.

## **Women and Writing**

The framework of women and writing always finds its way back to one idea – where men fit. In a 1983 essay collection *On Gender and Writing*, which featured many feminist literary luminaries from the U.K., scholar Cora Kaplan's essay "Speaking/Writing/Feminism" displays the position that writing has within patriarchal society. In particular, she maps the gradual drift of women's writing within the 21st century as she conforms to stereotypical standards to then eventually overturning them. She first speaks on her familial life, and the patriarchal structure of everyday expression within her own home: "[...]peaking up, at home, at school, on the stage, always seemed to involve a sense of danger and challenge which I fed on. Writing, on the other hand, was to begin with an act of conformity with my family and school." (Kaplan 52). Kaplan elaborates a common female experience when it comes to using the female voice, and the threatening nature that comes from a woman that is willing to speak up. She also portrays writing as confinement for women, as words on a page are easier to control rather than words from one's mouth. This places power within the hands of man dictating what is deemed more "acceptable", when in actuality our voices should be able to be expressed in any way we choose. This showcases the inherent conformity that we continue to follow within these small-scale moments in womanhood, and how we must move past pleasing man. This concept of writing as a form of conformity creates a deeper meaning to how the patriarchy strikes deep into our decisions, and what it means to have and use your voice as a woman.

As we might see later on within Plath's work, Kaplan comes to a new understanding of herself as a woman writer. She realizes that rejecting her father's ideas for her pieces completely demolishes the internalized patriarchal cycle to which she was once subjected, leading her to



finally neglect it: "I write for women, rather than my early work, constructing a polemic against men" (Kaplan 61). By switching her focus to the women she writes both for and about, Kaplan finds the purpose of female writing as a way out rather than as a constraint. Kaplan's example depicts writing as a form of community understanding and outreach, speaking to female writers to break the boundaries of conformity through writing. Kaplan no longer sees the role of writing as inferior to the role of speaking, but instead sees writing and speaking as feeding each other – both amplifying the female voice within their own respects.

Kaplan's use of "I" becomes a vehicle for female expression, contradicting the everyday use of "I". The rise of the confessional writing for women brings forth the discussion of what is true, and how the use of "I" becomes more than a personal take. Susan David Bernstein speaks on the role of "I" within her 1992 article "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's 'I' Got to Do with It?." As Bernstein explains, the use of "I" within feminist writing marks a unique form of rhetoric. This concept allows "I" in feminist theory (and by extension, I argue, in Plath's confessional poetry) to act as reflexive rather than reflective: "In contrast to the mirroring gesture of reflective intrusions of the first person, reflexive confessing is primarily a questioning mode, one that imposes self-vigilance on the process of subject positioning both in language and discourse and at a specific historical moment or a particular cultural space" (Bernstein 140). By using "I" reflexively, it creates a more nuanced nature to the use of the first person – creating an awareness of the content that is being written about. By seeing the first person pronoun as a vehicle for a more complex understanding, writing takes on more than a personal anecdote. Reading Plath through these later feminist writers and theorists, we begin to understand how her overall motif speaks to the experiences of women writers more broadly, and not just her "I" narrator.

### **"Daddy" (1965)**

Exploring the use of "I" within my own personal writing has been a difficult journey to navigate. I would not classify myself as a writer, but I assume many would perceive me to be. I fit the criteria fairly well: I am an English major, I write creatively every once and awhile, and I write fairly often for class. For me, the label comes with a sense of fear: one with my writing abilities and two with the label itself. I have always felt an inclination to voice my opinions, but I would not say I have gained any confidence to let these words be free. I believe this to be an account of my voice within society, but more importantly my voice as a woman of color in society. A blend of comfort and disgust stems from seeing our own words with fear, within a society that attempts to silence us. By understanding the nuance of "I" within Plath, and through other writers, I have been able to connect my experiences to the broader picture – using these writers as models for my writing goals. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" push the boundaries for female voices within poetry and writing, showcasing her attack on patriarchal confinement, while also fighting against her internal comfort that comes from abiding to this structure for so long. Through Plath's work, she engages with dialogue that invites a wider audience to understand the struggles that come from working through this process. Exploring the differing interpretations of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" showcases the grasp that the patriarchal dominance has within female writing, and the desire to break free.

"Daddy" initially portrays our first-person speaker's self-induced regression and longing for her dead father; by the end of the poem Plath makes it clear, however, that she is working through the beginning stage of a never-ending, male-dominated cycle of repression. The narrator's regression comes to light within her language, as she reverts back into childish antics and speech from the very first line. "You do not do, you do not do," the speaker begins, evoking the repetitive phrasing and its phonetic ending of babytalk (line 1). The lingering "oo" sound at the end of "do,"

especially, brings to mind baby words such as "goo goo." The baby talk within "Daddy" presents this sense of regression for the narrator, and this innate vocabulary to come about when speaking about her father – alluding to the language that was spoken when she was with her father as a child.<sup>1</sup> The regression within the first line of the poem puts forth a lingering grasp that her father has on her, and the instinctive switch of language portrays her active participation within a male dominated society. This instinctive switch within the narrator's speech displays her self infantilization, forcing herself to comply with the appeal of child-like antics, and force this image on herself to impress her deceased father.

As she continues to regress back into a childish wonder when thinking about her dad, she attempts to find ways to connect back with him. Through her phrases in basic German, she begins to speak to her father for reconnection: "I used to pray to recover you. Ach du." (lines 14-15).<sup>2</sup> She alludes to a feeling of longing for her father, as she desires to bring him back from the dead. She continues to follow the same framework of the "oo" consonant and vowel sound alluding to baby talk, though the recurrence of the "oo" sound in this context seems to convey the sound of a ghost's calling.<sup>3</sup> This ghostly nature when speaking in her father's native tongue connotes that her father seems to haunt her whether this be through his language or simply his memory. This concept of haunting constitutes her victimization, as she is indebted to his memory and her father's grasp on her being.

Plath works through the framework of liberation from her father by replacing him with another man – reinforcing this constant participation in the patriarchal system that continues to take control of her. As she comes to terms with his death, she decides that it is best to move forward through her grief by finding a man that seems to replicate her father: "I made a model of you, / a man in black with a Meinkampf look / And love of the rack and the screw" (line 64-67). Through this replication of her father, she continues to contribute to the patriarchal ideals of male dependency that become so deeply rooted within her being. Her "model" is an explicit manufacture of a man to resemble very close to her father. This contributes broader ideas of Freudian theory within her writing, and the allusion to romantic relations with the speaker and her father. In her 2007 article "The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' and 'Medusa,'" French literary scholar Laure de Nervaux complicates the obvious psychoanalytic interpretation that comes from a poem like "Daddy." Nervaux is not finding evidence of an explicit sexual relation between the narrator and her father, but rather uncovering how the narrator's "self-reading" connects the self to the people around them: "The Freudian pattern of the family romance offers a map of self-reading, a narrative which provides a way of locating the self through its relations to others." (De Nervaux p.23). The use of "self-reading" creates this innate desire to become connected, in this case through her father. It displays that her actions coincide with the relationship dependency that she continues to foster even throughout the death of her father. Ultimately, showcasing the role that patriarchy has over the identity of the speaker, and this allusion to relational dependency that continues to linger within the reading.

These lines underscore the speaker's understanding of how patriarchal power and violence intersect, as well as a certain reluctance to remove herself from her father's power. By describing her new partner as, "a man in black with a Meinkampf look," the speaker details a description of Hitler, who she closely associates to her father (line 65). The recurring motif of her partner being her father reincarnate, accentuates this idea that she will never be completely free from her father

<sup>1</sup> This idea first introduced to me in a lecture by Dr. Yunte Huang; English 104 Winter 2024

<sup>2</sup> "Ach du" translates to "Ah, you" in English

<sup>3</sup> Lecture notes from Dr. Yunte Huang; English 104 Winter 2024

as she consistently finds ways to get back to him. She follows the line with, "and love of the rack and the screw" alluding to a liking for a torturous contraption, and coinciding with the recurring relationship between the narrator and her father (line 66). This desire for torture originates from her father, as he continues to instill psychological torture on her mind. It also connotes the role of "Daddy" within the wider scope, and this sexualized nature of torture that comes from the sexualized act and name ("screw"). This ties back to De Nervaux and the "Freudian romantic family" connoting the eroticism within the narrator's explanation of her father. The speaker confesses that she would rather reinsert harm than free herself from it. This ultimately contributes to her victimization in a patriarchal society, and her active participation in the system that thrives off her own self demise – even if she is attempting to escape it.

Her father's replica becomes another obstacle within her fight to liberation, leaving her to continue within this male dominated cycle. She continues with this execution of her father as a recurring instance: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two— / The vampire who said he was you / and drank my blood for a year, seven years if you want to know" (lines 71-73). This metaphorical murder when she says, "If I've killed one man, I've killed two —" signifies the act of having to kill her father more than once as he continues to find his way back to her. It showcases this overall hold of her father, and this constant attempt to try to purge him from her life, but is ultimately unable to. She continues to present this constant subjugation from her father: "The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, seven years if you want to know" (lines 72-73). These lines suggest the inevitability of falling into her father's trap, and feeds into her own exploitation for the sake of man. The metaphor of "vampire," in particular, exemplifies that anything remotely closer to her father can take control of her, conveying this constant enslavement to her father in any capacity. It puts forward this existing concept that she seems to be conquered by man, and feeds into his desires no matter the consequences. Her addition of "Seven years, if you want to know" connotes a feeling of embarrassment within the speech as she seems to add it on after (line 74). It exemplifies a form of acknowledgement that comes from her subjugation, as she comes to realize how long her participation within this patriarchal system has continued.

Plath's tone within the ending line of her poem showcases her angst towards her father, though it also underscores the wider scope of her inability to break through his persistent grasp. She ends with, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" conveying this cyclical aspect of regression, hatred, and shallow liberation through the text, though it takes its final form within the ending line (line 80). The recurrence of "Daddy, daddy" forms a sense of regression and longing within her tone seemingly juxtaposing "you bastard, I'm through" summarizing the cyclical process she endures with her father. It seems that she always continues to find her way back one way or another. She desires to be free from her father's presence within her life, though leaves room for his presence to come back with the recurrence of referring to him as "Daddy." The connotation of "Daddy" elicits her participation within the patriarchal system, and her ability to fall back into her habitual cycle with her father. This perpetuation ultimately leads her to the inability to be completely liberated from the system, forcing her to be stagnant with her victimization.

### **"Lady Lazarus" (1965)**

Plath's depiction of women within a patriarchal society continues to ring true through her work "Lady Lazarus," presenting the performative role she plays because she is a woman. Within "Lady Lazarus," the poet depicts the female interpretation of the biblical story of Lazarus. The biblical story portrays a local man named Lazarus from Bethany, near Jesus's birth town Bethlehem, who is presumed to be dead in the tomb, but Jesus proclaims him to be asleep and

resurrects him in front of a crowd. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" follows the same framework of becoming a spectacle, though is able to gradually reclaim this act through her own agency – unlike Lazarus.

The recurring use of the first person pronoun "I" within Lady Lazarus feeds into the prominent nature of confessional poetry, and the role it plays within the wider scope of "I" as a vehicle to explore more complex ideas. The use of "I" within the context of this poetic piece presents itself as a metaphorical figure, using this pronoun as a stepping off point for the broader scope of the narrative experience – just as the narrator uses herself as a metaphor to Lady Lazarus (Bernstein 121). Plath's autonomy is claimed very early in the poem, "I have done it again." (line 1). The tone of the poem starts strong, as her active verb choice portrays this experience as intentional and done with confidence. The use of "again" connotes the recurrence of the experience, and the familiarity that comes from enduring her resurrection – foreshadowing her repeated participation as a spectacle. As the speaker takes on the role as an expert for the experience, it is important that the role of the speaker and the author play separate parts within this piece.

Bernstein and her principles of the "I" voice are useful towards understanding Plath's work. The use of the first person pronoun displays itself consistently within not only academic writing, but female academic writing – starting discussion of its place within academic writing. Susan David Bernstein's article "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's 'I' Got to Do with It?" speaks on the role of women as avid users of the confessional "I" within their academic pieces and the critique that comes from writers that choose to use "I." She sees these pieces as unable to speak towards anything, but the truth: "Taken instead as transparent truths, these uncontested categories that generously populate first-person theorizing perpetuate a mystification of 'women's experiences' by rendering their representations self-evident, continuous with and reflective of a 'self' and a 'real world.'" (Bernstein 121). While Bernstein was writing about academic writing, this framework can inform how we read the role of the "I" within the line "I have done it again": it seems completely autobiographical or "self-evident", but Plath's "I," despite her inclusion of autobiographical details in her poetry, is not identical to Plath herself. This frames the piece as having its own dimension, and seeing this character as a female figure to understand and relate to, even if this figure is not completely real. It opens the doors to the multifaceted nature of Plath, and her ability to speak towards the female experience without it being outwardly autobiographical.

The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" puts a heightened attention to the segmentation of her body, displaying her inability to see it as whole. Plath segments the poem into stanzas that present each part of the body as pieces that no longer hold together: "my right foot a paperweight," (line 6-7). She sees her body as segmented through this continuous act of resurrection; this form of exploitation becomes centered on her body, and her inability to piece together herself as anything more than fragments. This displays a loss of self amidst her internal reclamation – presenting the differing sides of retrieval within a patriarchal society and how fighting the patriarchal hold continues to take a toll. The spectacular nature of her resurrection comes into play within the lines, "Peel off the napkin / O my enemy. / Do I terrify? –" (lines 10-12). This imagery suggests the speaker's body is an exhibition. The concept of women's body as vulnerable is present through various female works, such as the poetry of Louise Glück. To explain the power dynamics behind this exposure, literary scholar Kathleen Margaret Lant's "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath" showcases the differing meanings of nakedness between men and women:

For the male writers, the unclothed body of the male speaker betokens joyous transcendence, freedom, power. For the female subject in Louise Glück's verse, nakedness does not bring that female subject closer to the self or to truth or to power. Rather, nakedness for the female subject is experienced, at least within the context of this work, as

yet another barrier between the self and the world or even between the authorial self and the persona it inscribed. (Lant 624).

Lant presents the "barrier" between the narrator and her enemy as depicting a hierarchical power that controls her. This juxtaposition between conventional depictions of nakedness within men and women, places the female narrator within a place of vulnerability; perceiving her body as something to become fearful and shameful of. This place the male dominated society as the culprit of her struggles; deeming them her "enemy".

The parallels between "Lady Lazarus" and the biblical story of Lazarus begin to take a similar sentiment. Both are portrayed as spectacles within the eyes of man, leaving them to entertain an attentive audience: "The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot— / The big strip tease." (lines 25-27). Flooded with desire, the scene creates an atmosphere that begs the audience to see the narrator within her most vulnerable state – naked. Her physical presence becomes an awe amongst the masses, seeing her naked body as a muse. Through this stanza she succumbs to the patriarchal ideals that continue to confine her. The grand reveal of her body showcases the recurring performative tone of the poem, and how even amidst her lack of detail to her body within the poem, she still seems to find herself at the forefront of their desires. Through this continuous desire from men, the body is no longer seen as just a body, but something that desires possession.

Lant's "Big Strip Tease" showcases the juxtaposition of nakedness amongst women and men: "The unclothed male body is--in terms of the dominant figurative systems of Western discourse--powerful in that it is sexually potent, sexually armed; the naked female body is—again, in terms of the figurative systems which dominate this period—vulnerable in that it is sexually accessible, susceptible to penetration, exploitation, rape, pregnancy." (Lant 626). Lant speaks on the double standards of women and nakedness, seeing women as something to be conquered rather than powerful. Reading "Lady Lazarus" through Lant showcases the gendered power dynamics behind the writing. Plath's use of "them unwrap me hand and foot—" continues to present how her agency becomes blurred through the lines, connecting back to her initial depiction of her body within fragments. It creates the shift in agency within the actions, and how she begins to submit to the male figures within the performance, as she is unable to feel whole within her own body. By placing the "gentlemen" before "ladies" when it is traditionally ladies first, moreover, Plath solidifies the position of men within the poem and within society. This line exhibits how prominent the male superiority reigns, even within the minor switch within this common line. Exhibiting that this performance, this scene, this body, is intended first and foremost for man.

Nonetheless, Plath ends the poem by making the narrator's agency prominent. The speaker is able to understand and convey her importance to society: "I am your opus, / I am your valuable, / The pure gold baby" (lines 67-69). The line "I am your opus," creates a switch back to her own agency, but showcases that her current self is the effect of the male manipulated society. She presents a reclamation of self by understanding her value within society, using the "I" to showcase the broader idea of self-vigilance within her situation. This line exhibits that this manufacturing of self due to the societal ideals of women, forces the speaker into something that she no longer desires to be. The narrator understands her strength as a woman wielding the potential power due to her value in society. Using the metaphor, "the pure gold baby," Plath creates this intense value that her speaker brings to society, and pushes the understanding of her worth to society. Presenting herself as "opus", "valuable", and "pure gold baby" cements the reality of women within a world of men – the world lacks value without women within it. This throws a jab at the male

dominated society, but is nonetheless needed to understand the importance that women hold within their own creation.

To end the poem, she continues to present her ability to break free from the roles that have held her imprisoned: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (line 82-84). This allusion relates back to Lazarus and his resurrection as he rises back from the dead. Lazarus' experience coincides with the overall female experience, showcasing his experience with male manipulation and exploitation, and the understanding that comes from being a spectacle. This comes back to the broader concept of Lazarus's experience being the reality of many women within today. By intertwining the two, this coincides with the narrator rising back from the dead. By juxtaposing being risen back from heaven, she nods to her revival being from hell. This presents her desire for vengeance over her struggles of committing to the societal ideals of men, and how she is breaking free from the patriarchy. This shines through with her "red hair" showcasing this switch in appearance within a rageful aura, and her being so consumed by anger that it becomes part of her being. Plath's presentation of this climatic moment presents the built up anger, sorrow, and manipulation that comes from playing the female role within society, and breaking through – both within the poem and through her writing. This fight against the patriarchy bridges the gap between the self and women, seeing this poem as a sense of encouragement to break free from the captivity that continues to hold women. This depicts her plan of revenge, and her desire to consume men. It presents the need to create a punishment for the consequences of their actions, and the need to show them how it feels to be a woman within the society that continues to thrive within.

### **Conclusion:**

The role of gender within literature finds its way into any piece because of its prominence within the wider scope of society. Sylvia Plath's confessional works showcase the world through the gendered lens, allowing readers to interpret the realities of women within a male dominated society. These ideals continue to reoccur within female writing such as *On Gender and Writing* because of the role that continues to consume the female mind when writing pieces of struggle; showcasing the process of "Who am I writing this for?". Each piece creates the breakthrough of understanding within the male dominated society, and how we must use our voices to present these struggles, these emotions, these vulnerable moments in order to move forward past the male dominated confinement that has held us for far too long.

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# The Limitations of Femininity: A Feminist Literary Critique of Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*

MAKENA FERNANDEZ



*An illustration from the 1405 illuminated Book of the City of Ladies.*

## Introduction

"Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong, it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength." - G.D. Anderson

When people hear the term "feminism", what commonly comes to mind is women in the 1970's holding picket signs calling for societal equality, or perhaps the 2017 *Me Too* movement which centered around raising the awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace. Although these were two revolutionary moments in history, feminism is not confined to United States politics; feminist ideals and practices have been recognized in almost every part of the world, dating back hundreds of years. As stated in the G.D. Anderson quote above, feminism itself is not confined to a movement; it is an ideology that focuses not just on women's empowerment, but about altering the societal perception and representation of women. There has been much debate as to what is considered the beginning of this ideology, but a common answer within literary studies lies in Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published in 1405. This text recognizes the gender divisions within medieval European culture, manifesting as a counter history centered on women's history within warfare, education, philosophy, and especially, religion. In this biblically-rooted allegory, Christine uses herself as a protagonist to probe questions about the popular male authors of the period. Her opening example begins with



Mathéolus, wondering “how it happened that so many different men- and learned men among them- have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behavior” (Christine 4). By opening with a critique of the normalized misogynist social mindset against women, she begins to create an argument directed towards a defense of the feminine.

However, prior to critiquing the representations of feminism within this text, we must first define the criteria this work is being weighed against. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines feminism as “Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex” (“feminism, n.”). Beyond this, modern feminist movements also commonly look into the ways marginalized communities more broadly interact with the world and the ways we have socially constructed our systems to exclude those individuals. However, measuring the work of a woman who was born in the 14th century against a definition created in the 1890’s would be doing a disservice to the work itself; we thus need to create a new standard of measure for what is considered medieval feminism in order to properly critique this text as a feminist work. A concept I will continue to lean on throughout this paper is proto-feminism; Reagan McCain defines this as an individual who speaks out about the injustices being made against women, like the restriction to education, inability to own property, as well as many other areas of oppression (McCain). Christine touches on several of these issues with historical examples of women who have overcome these limitations, largely of their own volition. Therefore, with this term in consideration, I intend to show its relation to the text and the ways it helps construct the new criteria for medieval feminism.

To further the construction of this medieval feminist framework, I will first begin by turning away from the feminist wave theory, as it was originally constructed to show feminist activism as a series of peaks and valleys throughout the 20th century – as though there was no gender activism before suffrage movements. However, this truly is limited to United States politics, since it is used to date the “hotspots” of gender activism, as well as reductive in terms of the varying political aims of each “wave”:

The different kinds of activism around gender that have taken place since the early nineteenth century in this country cannot be reduced to one term, feminism. That kind of reduction obfuscates the historical specificity of gender activism in the history of the United States. It obscures the differences in the ideas that have motivated different groups of people to pursue different kinds of political goals at different moments in time. (Nicholson)

With this deconstruction of the wave theory, we are able to measure Christine’s work without the constraints of categorization and therefore analyze the intersection of religion, philosophy and culture within her text and its relationship to the patriarchy. Historically, as well as throughout her examples, we see the ways Christian ideology has traditionally framed women, in comparison to men, as innately immoral as descendants of Eve; both by design as well as her actions within the creation story. However, Christine demonstrates how history itself is socially constructed; men have weaponized Christianity to justify the androcentric bias in history as well as the backing for women’s continuous subordination in society. With this, I will be demonstrating how Christine’s use of a religiously rooted justification for self-worth to recenter female history as well as her use of “virtue” to dissolve the divisions of class is synonymous with medieval feminism.

## **The “Nature” of Gender**

To begin this analysis, it is crucial to understand what gender and gender division looked like in the Middle Ages. Christine’s philosophy regarding education is that “no one can take away what



Nature has given", but rather than focusing on her ideals on education, I would like to highlight how the recurring theme of "Nature" is strictly gendered (155). In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she creates an argument revolving around the validity of femininity with a religious allegory created from womens' stories, but it is evident that her goal is not to create the foundation for the dismantling of the patriarchy. Women as a whole were seen as something that needed to be controlled, limiting their identity to a "cycle of birth, marriage, motherhood and death" (Ward 4). So while an argument can be made that Christine's lack of radicalism denounces her as a proto-feminist, there were very few women in the Middle Ages who wrote outside of the religious sphere, let alone any that were writing about womens' experiences that fall outside standard gender roles. Feminist scholars of the present understand gender as a social construct, however, proto-feminist authors, like Christine, belonged to a society that inherently accepted gender differences as "natural" considering their social structures were designed to make it appear as such. In the Middle Ages, as explained in Tara Williams' *Inventing Womanhood*, women's standard titles, such as "maiden, wives and widows" are all rooted in a relationship to men, therefore it is easier said than done to prove womens' authority outside a framework constructed by men. It is key to understand that gender separation is more than just the distinction of each sex; it is about power. Regardless of her upper class status, patriarchy operates on a series of benefits and punishments in accordance with the rules that have been set in place, meaning Christine was already taking quite a risk producing material like this considering authorship was almost her sole means of income. She sought to take the gendered social scripts that have already been in place for centuries and redesign them into a biblically-rooted defense of the feminine considering it is an approach that relates to both men and women.

### **Narrative Synopsis and Influence of Genre**

To begin, Christine is sitting in her office studying various philosophical works when she is confronted by the three sybils, also known as the three daughters of God, who bestow her the task of constructing a city of refuge for women of virtue. As mentioned previously, this allegorical city is constructed by the telling of dozens of womens' stories; each brick being placed as each individual history is unfolded. While their stories each contribute to the overall message in a series of ways, it is essential to understand the value that stems from this text's genre and its redirection of historical perspective. As she points out, the works of male authors from the same period, like Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*, primarily wrote about women in a way that ignored female diversity and solely focused on those with "fame" regardless of their character "since women are so weak in body and slow in mind"; essentially romanticizing women as a category (Davis xxxix). So while this text is a historical narrative in some sense, Christine chooses to highlight mythological women as well, like the enchantress Circe, who originates from Greek mythology. Simultaneously, the third part of the text intertwines hagiography with the completion of the fictitious city by including Biblical characters, like the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and 26 other female saints.

However, I believe this may be best classified as all of the mentioned above through a unique presentation of a dream-vision, as it follows many of the typical rules of the genre. She incorporates not just one, but three "wise women" who guide her character to "remember your 'place' and 'nature' before God" (Oestreich 255). She intertwined the use of dream-vision with a type of counterfactual history that pushes against the standard patriarchal history presented by society. The blending of these genres to present her defense of the feminine is incredibly creative and in and of itself contributes towards her argument considering that almost all dream-visions were written by men. She styles her form of dream-vision in a way that defends the feminine quite similarly to how she reconstructs typical religious constraints with a feminine perspective to

provide different results. In addition, she is able to follow the traditional path of using these women to guide the main character back to the truth, which in this case, is the legitimacy of women's accomplishments and women's equality to men on the level of morality.

### **The Lens of the Divine**

With Christine's specific choice of genre in mind, it is important to consider the degree of Christian influence at the time, specifically the societal perspective of the value of the female body since it is the basis of the argument male authors of the period sought their justification from, therefore it is where Christine derives her counterargument from as well. In *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, Daniel Boyarin explains how "one of the foundational thinkers for the version of Judaism that was to become Christianity was Philo, a Jew of Alexandria [...] Philo was preoccupied with sexual difference" (Farmer 4). With this in mind, we begin to see how the intentional separation of gender within the practices of the church has been constructed and developed over the course of hundreds of years. As touched on previously, the Biblical creation story, specifically the emergence of Adam and Eve, heavily influenced the way men, as well as women, naturally saw female value:

So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man'. (Genesis 2:21-23)

In these passages, we come to understand that while both men and women were said to have been created in the image of God, women were subsequently created from a small part of a man, leading to enough "natural" justification to the second-class status of women. As seen in the earlier statement made by Boccaccio regarding the weakness of the female body, women themselves likely internalized scriptural interpretations into their own self perception and accepted this representation of the female body as innate; after all, most individuals could not read the Bible themselves, meaning their knowledge came from word of mouth.

However, Christine herself argues against the standard interpretation of this passage. In a conversation between Christine and Reason, one of the three virtues, she comes to the defense of women from a religious perspective:

How can any mouth dare to slander the vessel which bears such a noble imprint? But some men are foolish enough to think, when they hear that God made man in His image, that this refers to the material body. [...] The soul is meant, the intellectual spirit which lasts eternally just like the Deity. God created the soul and placed wholly similar souls, equally good and noble in the feminine and in the masculine bodies. (Christine 23)

Christine herself looks back to the roots behind the anti-feminine practices and ideologies ingrained in Christianity and provides a shift in perspective that allows women to be seen as individuals rather than a subset of men. This is crucial to her argument because her intent is not to be seen and represented equally in all spheres or seeking to dismantle aspects of the patriarchy, but rather taking a proto-feminist angle to demand the basis of equality under the common creator of Christ.

### **The Lens of the Feminine**

In continuation of Christine's defense of women stemming from the origins of Christianity, I would like to shift the perspective of the argument to evaluate what she deems to be feminine

value in comparison to men. As stated, what is intriguing about her argument is that she is not necessarily advocating for the freedom of the female sex beyond the oppression of the patriarchy like what is demonstrated with the 1890's definition of feminism. Rather, she builds an argument for an equal evaluation based on their character alone as opposed to a predetermined, subservient perspective of women solely based on their sex. We see this appear once again in a conversation between Christine and Reason:

I assure you that a large and strong body never makes a strong and virtuous heart but comes from a natural and virtuous vigor which is born from God [...] if Nature did not give great strength of limb to women's bodies, she has made up for it by placing there that most virtuous inclination to love one's God and to fear sinning against his commandments. (37)

What I want to focus on here is not the role of virtue within the quote, rather the role of the female body in relation to God. What seems to be inherently misogynist from a 21st-century lens is realistically a re-appropriation of ingrained societal sexism. Returning back to my original argument, Christine composed a text for women to demonstrate what the social structures created by men to maintain power over women may look like through a different lens. She is not necessarily reinforcing the idea of women's physical weakness, but rather arguing that physical strength is not equivalent to natural, internal strength that comes from God; and in this way, she uses men's argument against themselves.

### **Value of Virtue**

As mentioned briefly above, the central component to Christine's argument is the concept of "virtue". One historical definition from around the mid 13th century defines virtue as "Conformity to moral law or accepted moral standards, the possession of morally good qualities; behavior arising from such standards, abstention on moral grounds from any form of wrongdoing or vice" (Oxford English Dictionary). Factoring this definition in, it is interesting to see the women Christine chooses to uplift to this moral standard considering the root of morality, from a Christian perspective, is doctrine. However, Christine upholds the stories of numerous pagan figures, including Zenobia of the Palmyrenes.

Christine uses Zenobia, the queen of the Palmyrenes, to display the female capacity to fight and to rule when women are given opportunities that lie outside the sphere of traditional femininity. Zenobia belonged to an ancient civilization located in the Syrian desert, which originally broke away from the Roman Republic around 60 BC and survived for the next three centuries. Christine describes Zenobia as often sneaking out of the palace "in order to live in the woods and forests, where, armed with sword and spear, she eagerly hunted wild game" (Christine 52). In addition, Zenobia joined the army alongside her husband in a battle against the Persian King, and she herself took control over Mesopotamia in her husband's name. Zenobia has statues and relics in her honor that still survive today, proving that Christine wasn't merely creating characters to fit her narrative but rather demonstrating historical female figures who have commonly been lost in mainstream male-centered history.

However, in this story Christine provides an interesting detail about Zenobia that begins to support a contrary argument of her lack of proto-feminist ideals:

This woman was supremely chaste. Not only did she avoid other men, but she also slept with her husband only to have children, [...] She bestowed honor upon people according to their goodness, bravery, and strength and never on account of their wealth or noble birth (54).

While Christine chose her as an example for her military as well as physical achievements, she still turns back to her value within the domestic sphere as well as her sexual history, and it is here that we see characteristics in her writing that are almost anti-feminist. Sexuality and sexual acceptance are central in the reclaiming of personhood within the contemporary feminist movement; however, Christine lived in an era where this was far from the truth. In James Brundage's chapter "Sexual Equality in Medieval Canon Law," he discusses how "there was a distrust of, indeed, an active hostility to, pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, as a lore of the Devil and a source of both spiritual and physical impurity [...] The canonists viewed sex, even within marriage, with suspicion and often with loathing" (Rosenthal 67). Therefore, Christine cannot be entirely to blame for highlighting this aspect of her character. Regardless of whether she did or did not believe in the mainstream ideology of the sinful nature of sex, she was still writing to an audience that largely did, putting her in the position to make those conscious decisions as an author writing under a patron. This is why it is crucial to construct a new standard of measure for what is considered feminism in the Middle Ages because her praise of virginity, from a modern perspective, leans into the patriarchal confinement of women's sexual freedom. However, in her period, this is not necessarily the case. Her choice to include that detail is done in order to continue to maintain the validity of her argument against her male contemporaries.

### **Limitations of Femininity or Feminist Manifesto**

Reflecting on this text as a whole, as a reader, there is no doubt that this text was incredibly impactful on its audience. This can be determined by the quantity of preserved manuscripts, with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* surviving in 32 copies and Christine's total works being preserved in over 200 manuscripts (Cooper-Davis 7). This book was revolutionary for its time considering there were very few female writers, let alone ones protesting against the societal dismissal of women's abilities. However, there has been debate over *The Book of the City of Ladies* being the oldest surviving feminist text; so while it may have been critical for the period in the sense of its revolutionary ideals, that does not inherently make it feminist. Therefore, measuring a text written in the 15th century to the current conventions of feminism wouldn't hold equal value, and a new standard must be created.

"Feminism" as a term didn't first begin appearing until 1837 by male philosopher Charles Fourier, but the concept of women's liberation has been around for centuries. Returning to the idea of proto-feminism, the crucial drive behind this term is the outspoken injustices against women in multiple spheres of oppression. In Christine's position, she does just this: she advocates for women's education as well as demonstrating dozens of women who have made impactful contributions to the world across numerous fields of study. This leads us back to one of my earlier examples, where one of the three sybils suggests that the only true limitations of someone's learning potential arise from social influences, like personal bias, yet, "no one can take away what Nature has given" (Christine 155). It is here that we begin to see the feminist qualities in Christine's ideology, as she agrees with her father's teachings: that God gave women the same capacity as men to learn, therefore there can be great benefit from women's education. What is peculiar about this section is that she is not proposing the dismantling and reconstruction of these systems to allow those outside of the upper class and religious communities to have educational access, only that it is just as natural for women to learn as it is for a man. So while she isn't advocating for an end to educational exclusivity, this does fall under the ideals of a proto-feminist, and likely inspired others to consider women's inclusion in education. Her exclusion of reference to the systems in place that have led to the marginalization of women's education is largely due to her role as an author operating within this same system. The degree of radicalism highly depends on the level of

oppression one is pushing against in the first place, meaning in comparison to modern standards, the actions she takes are feminist in relation to her period.

## Conclusion

When considering whether this work does or does not constitute a proto-feminist work, a common issue that arises from feminist scholars in the analysis of medieval works is the projection of modern expectations against works that almost entirely had to draw from male sources and discourses. Christine's ability to step outside of the lens of the patriarchy, even partially, deserves recognition. *The Book of the City of Ladies* truly was one of the first, if not the first, text to stand in defense of the feminine and highlight the individuality of womanhood as the opposed male grouping of the "female sex." The style of this fictitious dream-vision allowed women the opportunity to imagine a future where creating a space that validates the female experience is possible. This proto-feminist work was not necessarily the first feminist manifesto, but rather the beginning of a feminist consciousness, allowing women to imagine a future outside socially constructed gender roles. She creates an allegorical city that measures personal worth solely by character as opposed to class, wealth, or occupation; a concept that is transcending in and of itself and is frankly, feminist. By learning and analyzing women's literature from the past, individuals across fields of study are able to come to understand the realities of womanhood during the Middle Ages, and Christine de Pizan is not an exception. As a woman belonging to one of the wealthiest spheres of society, she used her place of power to critique the society that has allowed her to have an easier lifestyle than the majority of women in the Middle Ages. She defends women of the past and present across a series of backgrounds to exemplify their accomplishments and give them the honor that has been absent from history. All of these examples and more prove that she deserves a space within feminist literary studies as a foundational thinker considering she created an revolutionary work that demonstrates female capability in all fields in addition to the moral equality between men and women, allowing inspiration for an obtainable future where women are able to create a city by and for themselves.

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# Seeking the Ideal Book: The Utopian Print Space of the Cuala Press and Private Printing Presses during the Arts & Crafts Movement

RUZHANG SUN

In “The Ideal Book,” William Morris wrote, “in fact a book, printed or written, has a tendency to be a beautiful object” (180). Every book is a physical container of mystery, enclosing visible text, invisible meaning, the expectation of a reader, and the voice of an author. The combination of the immeasurably enigmatic and the inescapably authentic in a book, as Jack Matthews summarizes in “The Binding of Books and the Matter of Spirit” (1996), lures people to perfect its material exteriors as a way to approach the mysterious innerness of a book. To make a sacred book that achieves both inner and outer beauty thus becomes the driving force of the modern printing movement in the 1900s. A book was no longer a vehicle for conveying an image, but the image itself. William Morris, one of the pioneers who devoted himself to the art of bookmaking, sees books as a point of intersection between literary works and visual arts, bridging and absorbing the merits of the two major forms of art. His ambition of an ideal book was realized by *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, the book that took him 4 years to complete and was finally published by Kelmscott Press in 1896. Paying tribute to medieval manuscripts, the text and illustrations of the book are of the same importance, decorating each other and dazzling the readers by its extreme intricacy and elegance. The success of the book should not be attributed only to its text or its illustrations, but to the keen appreciation of books as an art medium.



Fig. 1. A spread from the William Morris's illustrated Kelmscott Chaucer.

While none could refute the formal beauty of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, it has been contentious among critics, as the content of the book seems to be unrelated to, and separable from, its formal quality. The artistic style of the book does not align with Chaucer's style of writing, and the excessive decoration to the fonts decreases the legibility of the text. In 1922, W.G. Blaikie Murdoch, a renowned art critic, wrote that "William Morris erred pathetically in seeking to revive the cryptography of pre-Renaissance years...he marred his books by prodigality in ornamentation" (qtd. in L. Miller 78). Sixty years later, Hugh Kenner, too, sarcastically commented that the Kelmscott Chaucer was "too big to do anything with save put it on a lectern, its pages too ornate to yield any satisfaction save those of inspecting what looked like black-letter manuscript" (595). The long lasting criticism centers around the fact that the formal concern of the Kelmscott Chaucer has harmed its readability and practicality. In 2004, Jessica DeSpain defended Morris' work through a new lens, arguing that "the decorations and illustrations seem to commentate upon Chaucer's texts rather than working in a consistent harmony with them" (74). She explains that Morris chose Chaucer's work because it is a manifestation of a social system that Morris valued, in which the relationship between the pilgrims and the society was not mechanical but humanist. The subtext aligned with Morris' intention to question capitalism through the Kelmscott edition, which cherishes craftsmanship over mechanical production. The book was thus not meant to be read by a new reader coming for Chaucer, but was designed to carry Morris' imagination of a socialist utopia.

In fact, though being criticized for his prodigality in ornamentation, Morris had recognized early in 1893 that reading involves more than just processing text—it is also a visual experience, which enables a book containing only text potentially to be as beautiful as a well-decorated book. In "The Ideal Book," he wrote, "All here present, I should suppose, will agree in thinking an opening of Schoeffer's 1462 Bible beautiful...without any further ornament than they derived from the design and arrangement of the letters were definite works of art" (179). He closely examined the impact of type, margin design and choice of paper on reading, valuing them as "the necessary and essential beauty" of a book that derives from the fitness between the piece of craftsmanship and its use (186). Nevertheless, he did not directly apply these insights to his own works, but chose to construct books in which he attached great importance to pictorial ornaments, which he described as a path of "endless pleasure" (186). His vision of an ideal book achieved by simplicity and plainness, however, was realized by many successors in the realm of bookmaking, such as T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, and Elizabeth Corbet Yeats.

With both unraveling success and shortcoming, Kelmscott Press motivated followers of the Arts & Crafts Movement to step into the field of bookmaking in the early 1900s, resulting in the flourishing of various private presses in the early 1900s. Founded by T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker around 1900, the Doves Press was one of the most prominent among them. To clarify his aesthetics of bookmaking, Cobden-Sanderson, too, wrote an essay titled *The Ideal Book or Book Beautiful* (1900), which was the first book of the Doves Press, subtly responding to Morris and his Kelmscott Press:

...when many arts combine, or propose to combine, to the making of one thing, as the process continues, & the several arts develop, each will attempt to assert itself to the destruction of the one thing needful, to the making of which they at first all combined in a common subordination. Thus in our own case the illuminator destroyed by over relative development the purely written text. (1)

Cobden-Sanderson indeed found a better balance between written communication and ornaments than "the illuminator." The books of the Doves Press only embellished the initials of



each page in medieval style, and achieved a better readability with the Doves type, a typeface that built upon early Roman typefaces and was later praised as one of the most beautiful types in the printing history. Besides the solemn style of Roman typeface, Doves type features subtle dislocations and turnings in a brisk and elegant manner. Large borders and the use of red ink, inherited from medieval bookmaking and Morris' aesthetics, further enhanced their design. In terms of combining artistic merits in one single object, Doves Press might have surpassed any other private press of the time. Specifically, Cobden-Sanderson sought a transcendental significance in bookmaking, as he passionately expresses his ideal:

...The wholeness, symmetry, harmony, beauty without stress or strain, of the Book Beautiful, would then be one in principle with the wholeness, symmetry, harmony, and beauty without stress or strain, of that WHOLE OF LIFE WHICH IS CONSTITUTED OF OURSELVES & THE WORLD...(Cobden-Sanderson 9)

With the same desire of seeking inner wholeness through books, Cobden-Sanderson was more obsessed with the notion of reaching absolute harmony than his colleagues of the movement. The harmony and balance he sought, however, result in a loss of individuality, and an detached aura of fine-printing books that dissuades readers despite its improved readability. It is reasonable that book historian William Peterson would later describe these books as "boring in their cold perfection" (281). In essence, though Cobden-Sanderson refuted the decorative style of Morris, the books of Doves Press are more or less simplified and renovated versions of those of Kelmscott Press. Their motivation derived not from the purpose of text reading, or to say, they did not prioritize it. However, Sujata Iyengar later defended the creativity of Doves *Hamlet* (1909) in , and rediscovered the performative nature of the typesetting and layouts of these books. It is therefore impossible to comment on any private press in a fixed manner, as they have been continually exploring and evolving through various experiments and developments.

When the Dun Emer Press (later Cuala Press) was founded by Elizabeth Yeats and Evelyn Gleeson in 1902, the typographical lineage was obvious between the Cuala Press and the Doves Press. It is clear to everyone who sees the books placed together that they have similar layouts and share a concise style built upon Morris. The connection was reasonable given that Elizabeth sought advice from Emery Walker, and Morris was a friend of the Yeats family. Nevertheless, Cuala soon pursued a distinct direction. According to its first prospectus, it bore a mission of "finding work for Irish hands in the making of beautiful things." In its forty years of rise and fall, the prospectus of the press has been rewritten several times, but its two major objectives—to seek Irishness and to craft beautiful objects—never varied. It is because of the selection of literary works from Irish writers of the time (mostly involved in the Celtic Revival), and a craftsmanship that serves primarily for text that the Cuala Press earned and secured its reputation.



Fig. 2. Dun Emer Press, c. 1903, featuring Elizabeth Yeats (standing, right).

The form of the books printed by Cuala Press remained relatively unchanged during its life. These books are protected in linen-covered slipcases, usually in blue-gray or green-gray. After Elizabeth's death in 1940, the press began to use yellowish and brighter linen rags, but not saturated either. The capitalized titles on colored linen are the only adornment of the cover, of which the title and author are printed on the same line and of the same size, seemingly suggesting the importance of authorship. Cuala books are usually 21 cm by 14.5 cm, except for those larger ones made to collect broadsides. It is, in fact, hard to notice these unadorned books as works of fine printing at first glance, though the position of titles and the portion of linen must have been carefully considered. Inside the books, the large medieval-style margins, the typical feature of Morris' style, suggest their identity as fine printing books. Caslon Old Face is the only type used for all Cuala books, which is a type advised to use by Walker and praised by Morris. The type is less compressed and spiky, which makes it austere and in a way, clumsy, compared to Roman types. It is also for that reason that it has great legibility and an intimacy that encourages readers to immerse themselves into the text.

The unusual printing style of Cuala Press could be attributed to three major reasons: the lack of capital, practicality, and a utopian imagination that belongs to authors. Cuala Press never earned enough profit to use more costly materials. In Elizabeth's letter to Dard Hunter in 1925, she wrote that she had to ask her brother for financial aid in order to keep the press running (qtd. in L. Miller 78). It was not the first time Cuala Press faced economic crises. Though none of the private presses earned enough to cover their costs, Cuala Press seems to be especially impoverished as Elizabeth had no other income to support the press. Thus, using only Irish paper and linen seems to be both a purposeful and also economic choice. It proved to be a great decision: it encourages everyone holding these books to realize that they are holding an actual fragment of Ireland, sensing the materialized passion for the land. The limited budget of the press, however, would still affect the final quality of its books. The paper was often too light to bear the pressure of the hand presses, resulting in uneven surfaces. The space between letters and the density of ink, too, are often nonuniform. It is therefore reasonable that Roderick Cave describes Cuala printing as without "pretensions of being fine printing" (Cave 199). They were awkward products that stood between a noble ideal and a deficient reality.

With W. B. Yeats as the editor, Cuala published mostly works of the Celtic Revival, some of which had already earned a reputation – such as the works of Æ, Frank O' Connor and Yeats himself – while others were less recognized. Either way, they were contemporary works that have not yet been examined by time, calling for a new audience to recognize their value. Therefore, Cuala books shall not only mark the value of their text by fine exteriors, but also encourage the readers to proceed reading at ease by their design and portable sizes. The combination of utility and beauty demonstrated in Cuala books also indicated a turn of aesthetics during the Arts & Crafts Movement, foreshadowing the emphasis on usefulness and practicality in Modernist design. The furniture design of Morris, the stained glass of Henry Patrick Clarke, and the Dun Emer embroidery industry run by Lily Susan Yeats, were all examples of the time that attempted to bring beautiful things into daily life, from which the middle class benefited the most. It also echoed Elizabeth's own viewpoint as an art teacher in this wave of an art movement. In an unpublished essay written around the 1910s and collected in *The Yeats Sisters and the Cuala* (1994), Elizabeth suggested that art education was important not for training artists, but for allowing students to realize the existence of art in life. In the Arts & Craft vision, beauty should no longer be concealed in museums and bookshelves, but could become accessible in everything from wooden chairs to carpets to a small book.

The attention to legibility was not limited to its practical purpose, but was more because Cuala was a utopia led by authors, not merchants nor illustrators. Though Cuala Press helped some of its authors to gain fame, W. B. Yeats did not use the private press as the primary way to promote his ideals, for limited editions could never get access to enough readers, and in fact, many of the Cuala books were even hard to sell. Both Morris and Yeats have engaged in massive printing projects, which were much cheaper and accessible to their intended audience. Morris was the chief writer of the newspaper *Commonweal*, the official journal of the Socialist League; Yeats, too, worked for *Beltaine* and *The Arrow* as editor, attempting to utilize the medium of the periodical to widely spread his aesthetics. Most of Yeats' works were also published by large publishing houses, whose forms might be criticized by Morris as the dull outcome of the superabundance of books in the age of industrialization. Only a few of Yeats' works were chosen to be published in Cuala Press, posing no threat to the sales of larger presses. In his letters to Æ (George Russel) and Mrs. William Allingham, Yeats suggested both of them that they could publish a small selection of works in the Cuala, so it would not "interfere with the sale of the ordinary editions" (qtd. in L. Miller 44). Yeats consciously differentiates the duty of the Cuala with that of ordinary editions. Though it became a symbol of Celtic Renaissance for its unique significance, the Cuala was never the center of the cultural battlefield, but took on a commemorative purpose, recording the selected moments of the movement that they considered "beautiful."

Therefore, these books were destined to be circulated around a small circle of readers, a selected, educated, and wealthy audience. However, it does not suggest that Cuala Press consciously connected itself with collectors' book shelves and designed its content for elite readers. Rather, Cuala books are more like invitations to a literary utopia, where authors are free to express themselves, and every word is printed in its most perfect form. Occasionally, the Cuala provides a shelter for unwelcome political content that newspapers and anthologies may deliberately neglect. Yeats' "September 1913," for instance, was published by Cuala Press with a four-page long note about its political context in *Responsibilities* (1914). As George Bornstein discovered, the political context dwindles and disappears in anthologies and collected editions, which makes the poem become "an artifact discoursing about Irish politics rather than incarnating them" in time (231). Further, in constructing the utopian print space, authors have participated actively in the printing process of Cuala Press, for no one else cherishes their words more than themselves. In Yeats' letter to Elizabeth, he wrote:

...But there are moments when I think that the winged sword is a little large as well as a little vague in design. I am very uncertain about this, but I think, on the whole, I would like it smaller; small, perhaps, as a penny piece, and up in the top right hand corner. Probably, though, if I saw it small I would think it ought to be big (qtd. in L. Miller 35).

The letter was only one fragment that reflects their collaboration which lasted for twenty years. Yeats often asked Elizabeth to adjust minor details of letter position, or edited his work after the first sample had already been printed. A Pygmalion-like motive lingered in this process of the endless adjustments, which could be traced back to a tradition of writer-owned private presses led by William Blake. For the love of one's own work, the author has felt that only if he could "personally design the vehicle for his texts can the full artistic aim of his work be realized" (Cave 85). Ralph Chubb (1892-1960), for example, printed almost all of his poems in his own hand to ensure their wholeness and beauty, each of which took him years to perfect its inking, decorations, and paper. It was not Chaucer or Shakespeare that was being sacralized here, but the author himself. In the case of the Cuala, Yeats did not own the press, but his active participation in Elizabeth's press as collaborative author, editor, and patron likely arose from the same motive. Only words, not

decorations nor illustrations, are worshiped here in their most perfect form, and their material carriers endowed them with further sacrality as a part of the Celtic Revival.

Therefore, any book of the Cuala, whatever it was about, was destined to be beautiful before one starts reading its content. Political ideals and passionate exclamations were wrapped in a harmonious beauty, which weakened the power of words, for it has trapped its readers in the stance of appreciation before reading it. Still, it is difficult to assert whether there was a significant difference between the way readers read Cuala books and the way the Yeatses imagined their readers. Matthews has stated firmly on this subject of formality and content, "the outer coverings of things always partake of their plenary significance" (482). If there exists, according to his theory, the "mind" of a book, the essence, the ghost in the book's body," then readers may only seek it through its material existence. Consequently, the essence of the Cuala may have already been revealed to readers when they first touched their linen coverings, when they were invited to a utopian print space where beauty ruled the kingdom transcendently, and other phenomenal concerns were only a part of its glory. It was just like how Elizabeth Miller commented on Kelmscott Chaucer: "the very unreality constitutes their revolutionary quality" (E. Miller 492).

The other side of this debate, however, never truly disappeared. In "The Most Beautiful Book," literary critic Hugh Kenner juxtaposes Cuala Press with *Ulysses'* publishing journey, satirizing the excessive attention to formal beauty of the former. He wrote that, due to the numerous typographical errors of printing, "[*Ulysses*] must be, from that standpoint, as ill-printed a book as we have seen since the 17th century," but that nevertheless "the beautiful book with its blue-and-white cover that Darantiere created may be said in many senses, not omitting the literal sense, to outweigh the entire Dun Emer/Cuala list..." (11). Kenner asks the reader to abandon the illusion of fine printing books, and to recognize that a book is not judged by its form, but by its content. It is clear that his viewpoint must be influenced by Joyce's own comment on Yeats and the Cuala. In *Ulysses*, Joyce had his characters make offhand references to Dun Emer sarcastically multiple times, such as a reference to a book "printed by the weird sisters in the year of the big wind" that refers to the ending of W. B. Yeats' collection *In the Seven Woods* (1903); or a joke about "the Druidrum press" with "[c]alf covers of pissedon green" that could produce "[t]he most beautiful book that has come out of our country in my time" (14, 556, 278). There exists both an odd proudness and deep mockery that Joyce invests in this history of seeking the ideal book alongside an ideal Ireland. Similar criticism of fine printing books was not rare, and Matthews responded to it in a direct way that "those literate barbarians who don't collect books like to proclaim: it's the matter that matters, not the edition" (482). Both sides in this debate feel that the other idea has tainted the meaning of a book, and one may never find an objective conclusion to the question of the most beautiful book. Fortunately, presses of the past, the scholars who research them, and the ongoing ambitious projects in the studio of book artists all help us reach our own answers. From Morris to Cobden-Sanderson, from W. B. Yeats to Elizabeth, they have taken the path that values the design, materials, and processes of bookmaking, considering books not as replaceable containers to carry their words. Despite all their complexities, disputes, and paradoxes, their experiments with printing prove their shared belief that the form of a book may allow people to approach its transcendental essence, and that to make an ideal book was to construct a utopian space both within and outside of its pages.

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**Blue, Moon, and Mystic:  
A Reimagination of Saint John of the Cross'  
"The Dark Night of the Soul"**

ISABELLA GARCIA-BERNASCONI



**Editor's Note:** Garcia-Bernasconi's manuscript has very intentional spacing, font style, and pagination, which has been preserved in the following pages - demarcated also by my addition of this frame. The images above are my selection from Garcia-Bernasconi's poster: a detail of Flandrin's *Reverie* (Foreground) and of the Pleides constellation (Background). Both works are in the public domain.

*Reverie*: <https://www.navigart.fr/museedartsdenantes/artwork/110000000004161>  
Pleides: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vhae62xs/items?canvas=255>

## THE ARTIST'S STATEMENT

What you are about to read is a **creative** analysis of multiple works. It might not be what you're expecting.

## DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL<sup>1</sup>

An unfortunate time in one's life. A moment of defeat. A moment of all consuming despair. I hate you God. I hate you dollar. I hate you car and road and house and not mine. A moment of I do not know how to go on. A moment of when did it become like this? A moment of it has always been like this. And when Saint John of the cross ventured into those graceful, beckoning woods, onto that winding, impossible road, what did he find? God. Not mine. Trickster? Can one be swindled by a poem? I was, in a way. Hadn't it been the bird's call? The smell of sun baked jasmine? Hadn't it been the back and forth of my friend the sea? I suppose he snared me there: with the *Seeing nought myself, / Without other light or guide / Save that which in my heart was burning.*

<sup>2</sup>Because my heart was burning. Pathetic fire lit by the Capitalism. By the Oppression. By the Hierarchy. All those things that bring about the bombs and the oil spills. He caught hold of my ankle there: *lost to all things and myself.*<sup>3</sup> And there: *amid the lilies.* <sup>4</sup>But God? Could he save me? Trickster indeed, how he saved all my people before me from fire with fire. Leave it to the Spanish to pacify unrest with some other kind of smothering. All that:

*As His hair floated in the breeze*

*That from the turret blew,*

*He struck me on the neck*

*With His gentle hand,*

*And all sensation left me.*<sup>5</sup>

Him. I don't like Him. Floating off somewhere above us. Or that's how they tell it. Way up where the likes of me can not touch Him. Where the vines can not reach Him. He struck me. Why did he strike me? It hurt when he struck me. He's not the gentle thing they make him out to be. I think of it differently.

<sup>1</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Soul," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157984/the-dark-night-of-the-soul>

<sup>2</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Soul", lines 13-15

<sup>3</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Soul", line 38

<sup>4</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Soul", line 39

<sup>5</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Soul", lines 31-35



## Premonition

In the pale blue quiet of morning  
The eye of my soul opens its olivey lid  
And peers down the mountainside  
Catching sight of a lone traveler

Dress I can't quite place in land or time  
All the same he is confused  
Though I am sure of what he seeks  
An answer or a master a kernel of counterfeit power  
To belong to something else

I knew that once  
    A kink in the neck  
        Gleaming blade at the crook  
            The possibility of turning back flitting away like windswept ashes  
                To be reborn all of the sudden  
                    On some mossy mountain side

He,  
Not the first wanderer to stray a touch far  
The first though,  
To believe in flying  
Jumping and hopping and such

Just when I think he'll break his neck  
When I'm sure I'll sleep again soon  
He sprouts a pair of black wings  
And dives *up*

Lands  
On my ledge  
Perches on the white stone  
Of my balcony  
And it seems he has a staring problem

I start from my bed  
And shift to grab the broom  
Stepping towards  
I whack him  
All the way  
    down  
        the mountainside

Below  
A plume of feathers and a night dark eye  
Peering up at me  
Not how I thought such a morning would go  
An evil smile plays at his lips  
Pleased with himself, surely, to have broken my broom

We stay that way, he and I  
    Me gripping the wood  
        Dumbstruck fool  
            Him laughing  
                We stay that way for a very long time

## Dark Night of the Mystic

*Whatever they were looking for  
Violent as it might have been  
Or as in love  
I did not have  
Whatever there was  
All swallowed by waves*

\* \* \*

I wash up, onto the shore  
Drowned by love or power  
I can not remember which

From the modest hill on which I've landed  
Salt scorched and blistered  
I see it

The breeze rustles through the trees  
Bringing me the smell of oranges  
On shaking elbows, hungry  
I crawl

A blue hue glows  
Deep within the forest  
I hear it

Humming

I move to stand, walk *towards*  
When I fall to earth  
A discarded fish  
The path reaches deep into starlit country, devoured by growth and thorns  
A bird calls out

I choke on what I can not say

But I look up  
The moon smiles down  
Gentle and sure  
As the blue hue *glows*

Into my salty eyes

On calloused palms,

I *crawl*

Thorns bloom into lush roses

As I *drag* my body through dirt

They tried to make me a fool  
Or a monster

Maybe I was something like that

But a blue hue glows  
And hums  
Lighting the path

To what I must become

Just A Star

The citrus trees sprout proud tonight  
On the cliffs across the shore  
As I tiptoe sandy feet

Dreaming up  
Sprout wings and soar



Branches sing epiphanies  
As clever winds kiss earth  
Green leaves flutter, white petals fly

A bruising heart squirms



I close my eyes and wish

*Just maybe*

Though I should get back to the house

I don't know why,

I don't know why

I

o  
p  
e  
n

u  
p

m  
y



The stars float down and taste like tart

The knife cuts through the lemon



Oh to be that bursting zest



A star that tastes like heaven ✨



## WE THINK OF IT DIFFERENTLY

I think of it differently. I see that Dark Night. I see it for what it really is. Not so much the terrible, the frightening, the torture. Moreso the what comes after. The long stretch of starting and stopping and starting again. The moments, yes, of I do not know how to go on. But eventually going on. The Dark Night. The transformation. Turning back to Him is to be not transformed at all. Because God...he had always set it up differently. Or they had always set it up differently. Lata Mani wrote that that western, catholic, white friend of theirs asserted *a sharp divergence between humans and the rest of nature*.<sup>1</sup> Me nature. I don't think so. We are one in the same. Menature. Mestiza. I need the flower to live. The flower needs me. That is the true mystic revelation.

I read once that sweetgrass grows stronger when it has a loving harvester than no harvester at all. Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote:

*Are you implying that the grass that was unharvested had its feelings hurt by being ignored?...Laurie admitted that the scientific literature held no explanations for the relationship between basketmakers and sweetgrass since such questions were not generally deemed worthy of scientific attention.*<sup>2</sup>

Not generally deemed worthy of scientific attention. Not generally deemed worthy. Ever. But it was true. Whether white science could prove it or not. So therefore they don't know everything. We think of things differently. The mind of the mystic reaches out and in, beyond and behind. In directions inconceivable. Bending and slithering. We listen. I listen. To ancestors and cousins. I take my notes from the indigenous teachers. I find my way back to myself. I hold your hand and you come along. To be the mystic is to put your faith here. In the soil and sweetgrass.

There are other words for this kind of thing. *Mestiza Consciousness*.<sup>3</sup> Innate to me but that does not mean intangible to those who are not me, who do not look like me. Innate

<sup>1</sup> Lata Mani, *Myriad Intimacies* (New York, NY: Duke University Press, 2022), 50

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 163

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 99

to me but not impossible to learn. The goal here is to share. Gloria Anzaldúa wrote the *Mestiza Consciousness*. How it

*shift[s] out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends toward a single goal (a western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.*<sup>4</sup>

Sounds like a mystic to me. Mystic. Mestiza. Because what a mystic really does is understand. Understand something others might not. There, between the wind and sky. There, in the echo of the wind chime. In the space between one eye and the other. Break out of God and his striking palm. Glide into the sweetgrass fields. Forget all the Capitalism. The Oppression. The Hierarchy. Take this gift. Let me drop it from my palm to yours. The carved statue of a nameless shape. The mystic thinks of things differently than most.

She seems to pop up in the minds of women on the fringes. Living on the outskirts of a stuffy little town. This woman. This mystic woman. Swathed in blue. The transformative color. They say blue is the rarest in nature. But the sky is vast. So is the sea. She knows what it is to suffer and be truly changed. Audre Lorde thought of her too. *I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion.*<sup>15</sup> A fusion of what? Take a step back and read it all again. From the beginning. I love that Catholic poem. God revering as it may be. I change it. I imbue it with the harvester, with the mestiza. I take from it. I give to it. What is all of this? TRANSFORMATION. What's it good for? TRANSFORMATION.

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101

<sup>5</sup> Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volume E: 1945-Present, 9th Edition*, ed. by Robert S. Levine (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 385.



## Epiphany

Wind swims across the night sky  
    Touching and kissing wild stars  
        Ablaze with white fire and proud shine  
Far too concerned with their own magic

When down below  
    Under black water  
        He catches sight  
Of a stray celestial

He plunges  
    Through flames and clouds  
        Lounges along the inky ripples  
And lifts his head

*Trapped you seem to be*  
    *Beneath the current of the sea*  
        *Would you like me*  
*To get you out?*

For she does not shine  
    But rather gleams  
        Low and quiet

*I'm quite fine*, she says  
    In a short sort of way  
        Moving with the waves  
Peering down at fish  
    *Why don't you fly back to your party*

Nettled, he takes the hint  
    But does not swim so far  
        As the star may wish  
Swirling about and watching

*Contrarian thing*

*Stern and reserved*

*Shifting in a way...*

*Quite unlike exuberant flames*

*A steely spill of water*

*Below*

*In the silence and slosh*

*A hushed voice from far off*

*Wind sways his thick body*

*To a new kind of music*

*Clever clever*

“ODYSSEUS HAS JUST BECOME THE FIRST US-MADE SPACECRAFT  
TO TOUCH DOWN ON THE MOON IN OVER 50 YEARS”

Odysseus,

Get d

o

w

n from there. Don't you remember what happened to that fool I c a r u s ?  
Imprudent business, falling in love with the cosmos. Far older and wiser than any  
of us. Eyes of the world that never shut. Come *back*. Enough playing at war hero  
or vain diplomat. I miss you. And really, if you  
need to conquer something there are plenty of halfwits beating down the door  
and burning up the land.  
*Odysseus*, Jump down from there. Like a shooting star, plunge and tell me you  
touched nothing and learned everything. Tell me you are ready to love your people  
and let the silver ship drown in the g l i t t e r i n g a b y s s .

Vines of ivy *twine* and *twist*

Around a decaying bench

And crumbling limestone

Funny they should creep so far

Into a house of no God now

✱

They dance beneath the violet light

A stubborn plight gives in

Choked by lush green hands

The sick forced out

By leaves or itself

✱

snaking this way and that

reaching for the core of earth

grinding gold flaked domes down to dust

to soil

resurrection of

the true King of this land

no single man at all

✱

Curling with delight

As life-song renews its hum

Dreaming up the world to come

This time only love

And weed out all the metal minded hypocrites

✱

Ivy,

Patient and divine,

Overtakes all in the end

Plotting slow

Against limestone

And a gold flaked

bench

## This Raven Is Mine

Eavesdropping  
On cosmological whispers  
Gossiping  
Their sagacity back to me

Lovingly

Flying up  
Swooping down  
Something here  
Yet something there  
Charming wilderness

I'm not afraid

Mind *reaching*  
behind/beyond  
Shrapnel horror  
And nagging ambition  
Beak cooing tales  
Of violence

Of transformation

The Raven  
Perched on my shoulder  
*Pecking* at my ear

## MY FRIENDS IN IMAGINATION

Now that you see, it's everywhere.

Edgar Allen had it all wrong. The raven<sup>6</sup>. It had been an invitation. *Darkness there and nothing more*<sup>7</sup>. Darkness there to go explore. Perhaps he couldn't catch the twinkle in his eye. The teasing in his *Nevermore*<sup>8</sup>. For when that bird spoke to me there was no *thing of evil*<sup>9</sup>. *Prophet*<sup>10</sup>? Maybe. I jumped on his feathery back. And he showed me we were one and the same. Unafraid. Unafraid. Edgar Allen was a fool to have cowered. A *sharp divergence between humans and nature*. Yes, that was his sort of thing. I would have told him: follow the animal. Learn all it has to teach you. Toss your *fearing*<sup>11</sup> out to sea.

Una Marson felled a winged ant<sup>12</sup>. And it showed her they were one and the same. *Has not life's hard caress / forced from me glad wings*<sup>13</sup>. A *sharp divergence between humans and nature*. A loving heart buffs it out. They'd like us to think they are so different. Una Marson and Winged Ant. But she knows, the ant knows, I know what it is to have my wings shorn from me. That's the kind of thing that drives you towards the deep blue woods. The love is what carries you through. The *Now I repent in grief*<sup>14</sup>. The *And now I will feel your woe*<sup>15</sup>. The *Forgive my erring hands*<sup>16</sup>. Its not too late for us. Apologize to the animal. Learn all it has to teach you.

Robert Lowell once spied on a skunk<sup>17</sup>. Her children in line. Not unlike dear John and not unlike myself. *One dark night*,<sup>18</sup> drunk on the pain of a mansion by the sea. Bleached

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, "The Raven," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven>

<sup>7</sup> Poe, "The Raven", line 24

<sup>8</sup> Poe, "The Raven", line 48

<sup>9</sup> Poe, "The Raven", line 85

<sup>10</sup> Poe, "The Raven", line 85

<sup>11</sup> Poe, "The Raven", line 25

<sup>12</sup> Una Marson, "Winged Ants". In *Towards the Stars* (Bickley, Kent: University of London Press, 1945), 13-14

<sup>13</sup> Marson, "Winged Ants", lines 26-27

<sup>14</sup> Marson, "Winged Ants", line 22

<sup>15</sup> Marson, "Winged Ants", line 25

<sup>16</sup> Marson, "Winged Ants", line 32

<sup>17</sup> Robert Lowell, "Skunk Hour," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47694/skunk-hour>

<sup>18</sup> Lowell, "Skunk Hour", line 25

out by the dried up tones of a tourist town. But the skunk knew something. Cooled something in him. *In the moonlight*<sup>19</sup> with *moonstruck eyes*<sup>20</sup> the skunk shows him how to *breathe the rich air*<sup>21</sup>. I understand this better than most. A *sharp divergence between humans and nature*. Observe the animal. Learn all it has to teach you. Let it transform you. This moment of all moments. Write a poem about it. That love will get us all through.

<sup>19</sup> Lowell, "Skunk Hour", line 38

<sup>20</sup> Lowell, "Skunk Hour", line 40

<sup>21</sup> Lowell, "Skunk Hour", line 44

## What I Witnessed While Dangling My Feet Over The Cliffside

✧

Above the ocean  
Flies the raven  
Ink-colored friends

✧

Stars glide coolly along his wings  
Moon gleams smoothly over her waves



✧

In their own ways  
They know the world well

✧

Old wind songs

✧

And the whisperings of fish

✧

The raven lands on the shore  
Beside a stray pine branch

✧

The ocean laps to meet old roots  
In the soil and the sand

✧

With cedar boats and bows asleep  
Night makes true of them both

✱

He blinks stoically  
As ravens are wont to do

✱

She floats and crushes  
Full of stars herself  
Winking and grinning

✧

The raven spreads his wings

✧

The sea rolls back the tide

✧

Fog-colored friends

✧

This is an ancient story  
I think you'll find

## By the Side of a Plump Black Pig

Stumbling through the woods  
Following the pink glow of inca lilies  
When Just around the bend  
A soft chuckling  
What  
At this blue hour  
Could be so funny?

Through softening leaves  
I poke my head  
And find a fellow soul  
Black as the sky  
Eyes like a giggling abyss

Where I come from  
They call you the filthiest of beasts  
Lame and unworthy of gentleness  
Or dignity  
For what?  
Because you eat what we feed you?  
Because you trust us so?

Snorting  
Making a circle in her bed of earth  
I peer into those wet, round eyes  
I count the winks of starlight in them

I follow  
Make a circle in my bed of earth  
Lay my weary head to rest  
By the side of plump black pig  
Her body, bristled and warm,  
Rises slowly

Bathed in the pink shadow of inca lilies

I love her

I sleep

## Lemons And Raspberries

*He had black eyes  
A strong nose  
And he spoke to me strangely  
Was what I told the bushel of jasmine*

*And in turn, she whispered to me  
In a voice like moon silk  
Of the night sky  
So incandescently blue  
And stars like ocean fire,  
What do you think they taste like?*

*Looking up at the jasmine's vast lover  
Stubborn and beautiful  
A great mess of ink*

*Quite like lemon I believe*

*Yes, she sighed  
Her petals and stems twisting in the breeze  
Like lemons  
And raspberries*

## A BRIEF REFLECTION ON LOVE

I come to wrestle with Him. Or him? I must admit, I'm no pure fortress either. Love had been there from the beginning:

*As His hair floated in the breeze  
That from the turret blew,  
He struck me on the neck  
With His gentle hand,  
And all sensation left me<sup>22</sup>*

Saint John, the way you speak of Him and his brutal, gentle hand. I would call you lovers. But really, what is a lover if not God or the night sky? I hate to understand you. I love to. Have I turned Him into him? My feathery snarky glider of the heavens. No, I don't think so. He is not Him in the way he floats down and softly treads over the moss. In the way he hints at TRANSFORMATION. The way he eggs me on. The vines hold him and so he is beholden to them. Maybe I can't quite write Him out of my head. But I transform him, don't I? I always liked the real love stories. Since when were they different from liberation?

<sup>22</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Soul", lines 31-35



*What Is A Lover? No Other Than God Or The Night Sky*

As v a s t and holy as the  
night sky Shimmering and dark He dares Following me  
in daylight

Leaping

and

*slithering*

Behind shelves, behind trees Refracting through the window  
Kneeling at my feet Brave, wise thing With no beginning and  
no end Mirthful, Sweet, Heady, And smelling of jasmine

When the sun sails away When the air cools and violets He  
winnows to my window sill With news of older triumphs Words  
steeped in passion tea Love whispers of different schemes  
Those glinting star eyes Beg me to take a

sip

He swoops me up In a mess of black and feathers Shit eating grin Soft,  
leading hands

And up,

Up,

*Up,*

Up I am f l y i n g Touching whorls of magic In an ocean over  
ground Dreams I'd never imagined He s i g h s with joy to  
reveal himself And I sigh with joy At the shimmering dark Who's  
known me in sleep With my face turned Who can count the freckles  
on my back Like I can the stars Who knows me better, How I can  
never Know myself

## Denouement

He sleeps soundly in sheets of white  
And candlelight, behind me  
As I hunch and write  
Over my desk

Facing a window  
Where the moon gleams  
Deep blue  
And rolling sea  
I hear him breathe  
As I cope, the only way I know how,  
With a sleepless night

*This and that*

*A flip, a flap*

*Something like:*

*A bruise,*

*A jasmine flower,*

*Or a fallen star—*

A body moves  
A lovely body moves  
The crinkle of warm, waiting white sheets  
The soft pad of scheming feet  
A familiar chin resting atop my head  
And you know I can't write with you watching

☾★☾★☾★

He kissed my temple  
Murmuring low  
Something about better ways to exhaust oneself  
Though,  
I don't quite believe him

He pulled me up from the chair  
To herd me back towards the land  
Of real, human rest

I looked back towards the sea  
And counted to three  
Before I passed out  
On her side of the bed

## Demonstrating The Incomprehensibility of Death: Vladimir Nabokov's "Ultima Thule" as Gnostic Fantasy

SOPHIA WITT



Detail from Swedish cartographer Olaus Magnus' map of the sea (1539) featuring "Tile," or Thule. Library of Congress (LOC) 2021668418.

## Introduction: Nabokov and the Hereafter

Vladimir Nabokov's "Ultima Thule," a short story published in 1973 originally composed in Russian as a chapter in a larger work, serves as a precursor to and summary of Nabokov's "principal theme" of "the hereafter" (Pifer 76). The story takes shape as a letter to narrator Sineusov's deceased wife, concerned explicitly with the exploration of the hereafter and its communication with the *here*. Sineusov grapples with a desperate desire to communicate with his wife and simultaneous skepticism of religious thought, seeking insight and alleviation, without entirely abandoning his skepticism, in Adam Falter, a tutor of his youth who has recently undergone, by "find[ing] the right combination [of ideas] and explod[ing]," a nervous break, revelation, or discovery of "the title of things" (Nabokov 514; 516). Falter's revelation, verifiable by the reader, is

that he and his world of limited consciousness exist as the fictional creations of an author, Nabokov, who exists in an otherworld of relatively infinite consciousness.

Nabokov's consideration of death, knowledge, and consciousness in "Ultima Thule" builds upon Gnosticism, a broad classification of religious and spiritual thought originating in the 2nd century centering the belief that "matter is evil; the disembodied spirit alone is divine" (Lasch 28). According to historian Christopher Lasch, Gnostic salvation "lies in the long-buried memory of our own origin as sparks from the divine flame," or in the attainment of Gnostic insight, knowledge reserved for the spiritual elite (Lasch 28). In Gnostic thought, bodily existence, or being, "is the very antithesis of God" because "being means contingency, time, death, destruction" (Lasch 32). Consciousness and knowledge are tethered to and thus limited by the facticity of bodily existence in the realm of physical being. Thus, when divine knowledge, the long-buried memory of humanity's origin, is acquired by or revealed to some spiritual elite, bodily existence becomes unnecessary, even contradictory. The enlightened being ends, on an individual level, the "battle between good and evil, spirit and matter" in a "return to the primordial perfection of non-being" by dying (Lasch 33). Falter's metatextual discovery of the world of the author, enacted by a chance combination of ideas and followed by five minutes of gut-wrenching screams, is Gnostic in nature: he discovers the long-buried memory of his origin and understands that his world is one of inferior, limited consciousness. When Falter reveals this Gnostic secret to Dr. Bonomini, his eccentric psychiatrist, the doctor immediately suffers a heart attack and dies, presumably ascending to this otherworld of higher consciousness. And yet, unlike the doctor's, Falter's bodily existence paradoxically survives the revelation that should dissipate it.

To investigate this Gnostic anomaly, I explore Nabokov's various conceptualizations of death and consciousness both inside and outside of "Ultima Thule." Ultima Thule, as a term, has two definitions representing two somewhat contradictory perspectives on mortality: death as a transition point and death as a limit. These perspectives, manifested in opposing facets of "Ultima Thule," seemingly posit the possibility of complete Gnostic insight, but ultimately demonstrate the unforgiving incomprehensibility of mortality in human consciousness. From this demonstration of death's incomprehensibility in "Ultima Thule," I argue the human resistance to or incomprehensibility of death to be insurmountable in the search for meaning. Further, I argue that the representation of this search for meaning in creative work in itself precludes the possibility of desireless, and thus plausible, postulation.

### **Falter and the Gnostic Metaphor**

Nabokov's Gnostic metaphor in "Ultima Thule" takes the following form: Falter and Sineusov's fictional world acts as a microcosm of our own reality, with metatextual insight—the knowledge of one's own status as fictional character—ostensibly acting as Nabokov's propositional stand-in for Gnostic insight. Falter's revelation and, more importantly, his survival of this revelation present him as "a candidate for omniscience," an anomalous resident of two contradictory worlds (Nabokov 516). Even when Falter unintentionally divulges his secret "amidst all the piffle and prate" of his winding parley with Sineusov, Sineusov's limiting "curvature of thought," characteristic of his fictional world, prevents him from identifying this divulgence and thus achieving his greatest desire of reconnecting with his wife and learning the fate of her consciousness (Nabokov 522). Falter and Sineusov form a parabalistic dichotomy between the epitome of enlightenment and ignorance, infinite and limited consciousness. In this dichotomy, Nabokov seemingly posits the possibility of Gnostic insight in our own reality to which we are all ignorant, but ultimately demonstrates that the incomprehensibility of death is utterly insurmountable, even, or perhaps especially, in death's representation in art.

Sineusov's first line to his wife asks her whether she remembers a certain lunch before her death, "assuming, of course, that memory can live without its headdress" (Nabokov 500). The idea of memory and spirit existing without its headdress—the physical body—is central to Gnostic mythology. From the story's opening, Nabokov places a Gnostic framework, one that Sineusov mentions passively, ignorant of the gravity that his words hold. Sineusov assumes the certain coexistence of bodily existence and memory in his physical world, questioning only whether the spirit can exist without the body after death. This curiosity is a satirical reversal of Gnostic thought, whose simplest principle holds that the spirit can exist unbound *only* in the absence of the body. Sineusov demonstrates in this opening a backward conceptualization of matter and spirit that eventually punctuates his role as the fool at the story's conclusion.

Sineusov proceeds to relay the story of Falter's revelation as heard from a relative of Falter. Sineusov imagines a cluster of unrelated ideas swirling through Falter's mind upon his return to a hotel from a "hygienic evening" at a bordello when a sudden, fateful coincidence of these ideas triggers "the flash, the unearthly lightning, as catastrophic as a sweepstakes win, monstrously fortuitous...that struck him that night in the hotel" (Nabokov 506). Half an hour after his return, Falter breaks into a wildly unsettling, long-lasting scream, "the expression of an unfathomable sensation, whose very unknowability imparted to the exultation bursting from Falter's room something that aroused in the hearers a panical desire to put an immediate stop to it" (Nabokov 506). Following the cessation of his exultation and ignoring the attention and curiosities of the crowd that his vocal emissions have amassed, Falter urinates copiously on the hotel stairs and then immediately returns to his room and falls asleep.

Having tired of persuading himself that Falter "is a half-wit or a *kvak*" (a "Russianized" version of "quack" previously used by Sineusov's wife), Sineusov perceives Falter as a person who, "because he survived the bomb of truth that exploded in him...became a god!" (Nabokov 500). This exclamation also operates in opposition to Gnostic thought: because the essence of Falter's revelation is the evil of matter, Falter's bodily survival of his revelation counteracts, rather than triggers, his spiritual ascension. Falter circumvents the sole pathway to infinite consciousness—he exists as a contradiction. While the Gnostic discovery that he lives in a world of limited consciousness, his spirit bound by the confines of bodily existence, should trigger death, as it does in Bonomini, Falter remains attached to his bodily frame. Although he is considerably physically weakened, looking "as if his skeleton [has] been removed," Falter's survival of his discovery represents an incongruence in the story's Gnostic logic (Nabokov 507).

Sineusov describes Falter before his revelation as remarkably tethered to the facticity of bodily existence: "the caromlike coordination of bodily movements," the "precision and power of his 'volitional substance'" struck Sineusov as extraordinary (Nabokov 500; 504). Falter "was always in possession of all his faculties...he did not aim high, and knew his limitations exactly"; he was a "not quite ordinary, but superficial man" (Nabokov 505; 506). Falter's physical prominence and atypical practicality of pursuit represent an unusual commitment to the limitations of matter, the antithesis to the Gnostic pursuit of salvation. According to Sineusov, Falter's "whole strong cast...explains why he survived the shock [of revelation]: the original figure was large enough to withstand the subtraction" (Nabokov 500–501). Rather than being "strong enough to withstand the subtraction," Falter's survival truly indicates the stubbornness of his tethers to physicality; they are strong enough to limit him from fully escaping thought's curvature into a realm of higher consciousness.

Sineusov does issue a more accurate description of Falter than "a god," though, as standing "*outside* our world, in the true reality" (Nabokov 500). Through authorial favoritism, Nabokov

positions Falter as an anomaly; he straddles this point of transition or translation, existing simultaneously in a world and its contradictory otherworld. Nabokov permits Falter to *know* that being is “the very antithesis of God” and simultaneously to *be*. Falter’s semi-omniscience proposes an extratextual reality in which some authorial favorite can break free of the curvature of human thought central to bodily existence without actually terminating bodily existence. One can answer the call of the unknown, the meaning of death and thus of life, without first having to traipse into the unknown, to live an entire life unsure of what it means and what awaits at its conclusion. This propositional reality, though, is at odds with the Gnostic school of thought it is built upon: one cannot simultaneously *be* and *know*. This is the point where the desire to know and the fear of the unknown, running in parallel as they do in Falter’s metaphor for the uncertainty of death, try and fail to meet the Gnostic promise of salvation in the pursuit and discovery of knowledge. At this discontinuity, “Ultima Thule” reveals itself as a fantasy, one simultaneously Gnostic and at odds with Gnosticism’s basic principles, rather than a microcosmic metaphor for a possible reality.

Gnosticism is an inherently nostalgic school of thought because of its emphasis on the divinity in the origins of humanity. Therefore, Gnosticism is built to an extent on discontent with modernity and its emphasis on the faculties of bodily existence; the desire to “redesign the world” is a component of Gnosticism (Lasch 31). This desire is, of course, reflected also in the act of storytelling, particularly Nabokov’s storytelling, in which he frequently employs “the ‘Ultima Thule’ theme” coined by D. Barton Johnson, a prominent scholar of Nabokov and Professor Emeritus of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This theme is one of “death and the hereafter”—the unknown—and involves the existence of two or more worlds, one of which is the objectively “real” world of the author (Johnson 544; 555). In the secondary, fictional world, “authorial favorites...sense certain patterns woven into the texture of their world that hint at the existence of an external controlling presence” (Johnson 555).

The desire to redesign the world answers the call of the unknown so foundational to human nature. In a discussion of the geographical and anthropological significance of Ultima Thule, anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup asserts the thrill and importance of mapping the unknown—whether in a traditional, geographical sense, or a sense “socially and historically defined” (789). The Arctic, labeled by the ancients as ultima Thule, held a distinct allure: “If exploring central Africa could be seen as an act of penetrating the world, arctic exploration implied an act of stretching the limits of the world” (Hastrup 789). The prospect of expanding the limits of the world not only represents an excitement, but also an anxious desire to know, to investigate one’s own abyss. In this way, Nabokov’s “Ultima Thule” can be seen as his attempt to map his ultima Thule, the daunting mystery of mortality. However, Nabokov’s attempt at mapping the unknown is wrought with bias: because the desire to find meaning in life and thus in death is so essential to human nature, Nabokov fantasizes an impossible, contradictory world that answers the desire for meaning and assuages the fear of the unknown.

## **Ultima Thule**

The significance of “Ultima Thule” as a title is central to understanding the story’s principal theme of the hereafter and Nabokov’s exploration of it. The primary definition that Collins provides for ultima Thule, identified as its Latin meaning, is “the highest degree attainable.” Its second definition, as used in American English, is “the farthest point; the limit to any journey” (Collins). These definitions, while nearly synonymous semantically, are contradictory in connotation: the Latin definition imbues a sense of accomplishment, while the modern American English definition imposes a limit—a point of no further travel. Because “Ultima Thule” is centered around death and otherworld, in the story, these contradictory definitions pose both death as a limit—the



end of life and consciousness—and death as a transition point between the limited consciousness of the world and the infinite consciousness of an otherworld.

The concept of ultima Thule as a limit to human conscious knowledge is grounded in the term's historical significance. Discovered by Pytheas in the 4th century BCE, Thule was believed by the ancients to be the Northernmost point, acting as a limit to the physical world (Garlinghouse). As Hastrup describes, the concept of Thule as a limit to the known world had a “distinct flavour,” attracting an intense desire for exploration and discovery (789). Similarly, death, as consciousness' edge, attracts exploration and postulation of a distinct, fervent flavor. The exact location of Thule is debated in modern times because Pytheas' *On the Ocean*, “an account of one of classical antiquity's most significant voyages of discovery,” likely burnt with the Library of Alexandria (Garlinghouse). The uncertainty surrounding Thule's location, which has been argued to be Iceland, Norway, Scotland, and others, exemplifies the limit to knowledge. The information is known to exist and yet cannot be accessed. The inaccessibility of one verifiable conception of afterlife similarly defines Nabokov's exploration of his metaphorical Thule.

Nabokov toys with the concept of ultima Thule as a limit to knowledge in the unknown origins—one potential being Iceland, also a potential location of Thule—of the “well-known writer” for whose epic poem, *Ultima Thule*, Sineusov illustrates (Nabokov 510). The element of uncertainty and the limit to knowledge underlies the narrative as well, especially in Falter's assertion that he has revealed his secret “in only two or three words” at some point in his winding parley with Sineusov (Nabokov 522). These two or three words are a reference to a joke Sineusov's wife makes in her final days about the Scandinavian poet commissioning Sineusov's art, in which she asserts her favorite things in life to be “verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency” (Nabokov 510). When explaining to Sineusov the limits of deductive reasoning, Falter mentions that “one can believe in the poetry of a wildflower or the power of money,” subtly demonstrating in his knowledge of a private moment between Sineusov and his wife his candidacy for omniscience (Nabokov 515). Falter also hints toward the world as fiction in his diction, frequently referring to his world in literary terms and urging Sineusov to “skip the preface” if he wishes to understand life and death (Nabokov 521). By disclosing that his secret to the universe exists within Sineusov's reach knowing that he will be unable to identify where it exists or what it is, Falter demonstrates on Sineusov the limit of human consciousness in the unenlightened world—the impossibility of escaping the cyclical, limiting curvature of human thought.

Sineusov cannot escape the curvature of thought because he is neither dead nor an authorial favorite. Sineusov ends his interrogation of Falter by lamenting that it is useless to ask anything else, “say, about the limits of the universe, or the origins of life,” as Falter has twice proved “the impossibility of an answer” (Nabokov 521). This statement ironizes Sineusov's foolishness, as the “essence of things” that Falter has learned most directly offers insight into the limits of the universe and the origins of life. Ultimately, Sineusov concludes that his pursuits have brought him no closer to his wife and that his “transitory bodily frame is perhaps the only guarantee of [his] wife's ideal existence” in his memory; he must “rely on [his] own ellipsis...” (Nabokov 522). The ellipsis is a literary limit, an omission: it indicates something that exists but cannot be accessed. Sineusov's commitment to preserving his bodily existence is the very thing distancing him from his wife according to Gnostic thought. His inability to break the ouroboros of thought, because he is neither dead nor an authorial favorite, exemplifies Falter's assertion that “logical development inexorably becomes an envelopment” (Nabokov 513). Sineusov's name itself resembles the Latin *sinus*, meaning curve, establishing Sineusov as the epitome of the ill-fated curvature of logic (Johnson 551). Nabokov, through Sineusov, seemingly posits the idea that there is an author-figure



of our own reality, the knowledge of whom is kept from us by the limiting curvature of thought that reflects “the curvature of the earth,” our tethers to the physical world.

Paradoxically, the disclosure of “Falter’s Medusa,” or the content of his secret, to Dr. Bonomini also brings Bonomini to this limit of human consciousness—in the form of death. Dr. Bonomini, an Italian doctor studying the “dynamics of the psyche,” seeks to demonstrate that “all psychic disorders could be explained by subliminal memories of calamities that befell the patient’s forebears” (Nabokov 508). Upon hearing of Falter’s case, the doctor is determined to find which distant ancestor’s trauma has engendered Falter’s madness. When Falter’s family has insufficient information about their ancestral history, Dr. Bonomini locks himself in a room with Falter, managing to extract from him “an exhaustive reply about the cause of his nocturnal howls” (Nabokov 509). Upon hearing Falter’s secret, the doctor immediately suffers heart failure and dies, becoming “the prey of Falter’s Medusa” (Nabokov 509). From the perspective of Sineusov’s narration, Dr. Bonomini has been brought to the limit of consciousness, the point of no further travel, by the discovery of Falter’s secret. From a Gnostic perspective, however, Dr. Bonomini’s death does not indicate an immobilization or a full cessation of consciousness, but rather a transition from limited to infinite consciousness caused by the acquisition of the divine knowledge of humanity’s origins. “Ultima Thule” transforms death’s limit to human consciousness into a portal to higher consciousness, marking a transition from the term *ultima Thule*’s American English definition of a limit to its Latin definition of an achievement (Nabokov 509). *Ultima Thule* as a limit represents not death as a cessation of consciousness, but the limited nature of consciousness in the physical world *before* death. This limited nature of consciousness is the very quality that forces Sineusov to erroneously imagine death—his wife’s and Dr. Bonomini’s—as a definitive end to consciousness; he is “unable to conceive death otherwise than in the image of [his] own gravestone” (Nabokov 520).

The term *ultima Thule* also holds literary significance as a liminal space, marking a transition to the highest degree of consciousness. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “Dream-Land” (1844), an “ultimate dim Thule” lies “Out of SPACE— Out of TIME.” This concept of *ultima Thule* represents a point of transition—or translation—from world to otherworld. Jennifer Sears articulates D. Barton Johnson’s “Ultima Thule theme” as “death as a ‘transition point’ between limited and infinite consciousness” (Sears 89). Sineusov’s alternate definition of death as an “involuntary translation” reflects the same continuity between world and otherworld but simultaneously reflects his limited human consciousness—his wife is translated into obscurity because he cannot comprehend an existence beyond death and thus cannot mediate between worlds as Falter can (Nabokov 501). The idea of death as a transition to infinite consciousness reflects the Latin definition of *ultima Thule* as “the highest degree attainable” and Falter’s knowledge, verifiable by the reader, that an otherworld exists.

Falter represents the idea of an authorial favorite whom Nabokov instills with gnostic insight—the knowledge of the title of things. Falter, as a name, is derived from the “Middle High German *Valter*, the term for a self-closing gate, placed between a village and the adjacent fields” and hence denoted someone “in charge of the gate’s operation” (Hanks). Nabokov anoints Falter as gatekeeper, dictating who passes from world to otherworld by learning his secret. Thus, “Falter’s Medusa” is inaptly named by Sineusov and reflective of his limited human consciousness; Falter’s secret, although death-inducing, does not enforce an immobilization, but rather a transition (Nabokov 509). Death is the channel through which Sineusov can achieve the contact with his wife he so desires, but, falling victim to the *ultima Thule* and its gatekeeper, he resolves to safeguard his

life because he believes his “transitory bodily frame” to be “the only guarantee of [his wife’s] ideal existence” (Nabokov 522).

The reader, existing in Nabokov’s reality, knows Falter’s revelation—that he is a character of Nabokov’s creation—to be the truth and can consequently identify Sineusov’s folly. The dichotomy between Falter and Sineusov, the enlightened and the ignorant, seemingly posits a parallel possibility of our reality in which some Falter-like authorial favorite can overcome the curvature of thought that entraps us, answering the ultimate call of the unknown without abandoning the realm of the known. But this dichotomy ignores the threads of Gnosticism in the text. Nabokov positions *three* central characters in three different positions of the dynamic between world and otherworld, limited and infinite consciousness. Sineusov epitomizes the ignorance and curvature of thought inherent to bodily existence in the world, acting as a sort of authorial jester. Dr. Bonomini, having realized the long-buried memory of humanity’s origins, exists entirely in the enlightened otherworld of the reader and Nabokov. But Falter’s continued existence in the physical world violates all comparisons to Gnostic forms of enlightenment: his survival of the revelation, his position as the gatekeeper between world and otherworld, rather reflects a fantasy of absolute knowledge that can exist only in fiction.

### **Conflicting Conceptualizations of Reality**

Andrew Ferguson’s “Mirror World, Minus World” examines the readerly—or in his comparison between reading and playing video games, “playerly”—experience of reading, and necessarily rereading, Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*. *Pale Fire*, as a more fleshed-out text than “Ultima Thule,” draws a more exact resemblance to the structure of a videogame, with the cross-referencing of its notes and index acting as warps and shortcuts. However, Ferguson’s metaphor sheds light on the role of the reader in Nabokov’s works, as works that “foreground, even fetishize the process of rereading, with readers expected to continually revise their interpretations in light of the new information doled out by the author,” more generally (Ferguson 2). Ferguson asserts that the “playerly” mode the reader inhabits in reading *Pale Fire* requires the process of “patching”: in each rereading, elements of the original narrative collapse and new ones emerge, in some sense patching over the entire narrative, reconciling new information with former interpretation. *Pale Fire*’s cross-referential nature, encouraging each reading experience to differ not only in interpretation but in the volume and order of material consumed, emphasizes the ability to extract from a text an entirely different understanding upon each read. According to Ferguson, every act of reading and writing displays not an objective meaning, but a cross-section of a cultivation of readings and misreadings, writings and miswritings, of past, present, and future. Thus, an objective reality or truth, at least in the realm of artistic interpretation, is extractable not from the veracity of a particular interpretation or artistic intention, but in an infinite, and thus practically inaccessible, superimposition of these cross-sections. This concept suggests that beyond the bias implanted in art by the artist, the existence of an ultimate truth in art is further undermined by the inconsistency and subjectivity of the reader’s interpretation.

In a 1962 interview, Nabokov defines reality and the process of acquainting oneself with it as “the ‘gradual accumulation of information and...specialization’” (Duval-Smith). Nabokov denies a fixed notion of reality or truth emerging from a particular moment of realization—a lone, static cross-section—and instead emphasizes the gradient nature of reality, in keeping with Ferguson’s proposal of the reality of artistic interpretation and its inability to exist in any static, definable way. If “Ultima Thule” is to be understood as a proposition or parable, it proposes explosive revelation as the method of acquaintance with reality and truth. Falter does not accrue information and specialize this knowledge gradually to discover the “essence of things,” rather, his revelation

presents itself as an explosive synthesis of unrelated ideas (Nabokov 513). The reason for this incongruence, I argue, lies in the corrupting influence of desire and fear. While the mystery of death and afterlife is certainly solved in the experience of death, upon the acquisition of new information, the feelings accompanying this ultima Thule—the desire for continued and enhanced consciousness and the fear of the black inane—are urgent. They hold in their quest for answers the entire meaning, or lack thereof, of the game, to extend Ferguson’s metaphor extratextually. “Ultima Thule” is a fantasy of a sudden reconciliation of these glaring limits to knowledge; Falter’s revelation represents a philosophical *deus ex machina*, a moment when the world and its nagging uncertainties suddenly become legible.

This idea of a true reality existing only in an infinite superimposition of shades of “relative reality,” as, according to Falter, “you humans possess no other,” is particularly pertinent to worldly conceptualizations of otherworld. Religious, spiritual, and areligious conceptualizations of afterlife, or the lack thereof, depend on belief. Speculation before death regarding posthumous existence is inherently impossible to verify before death—unless by some external “reader”—and for that very reason is so readily made and passionately asserted; it represents the greatest call of the unknown, the ultima Thule upon which rests the meaning of existence. Thus, the prospect of existing safely outside of the grasp of this crippling incomprehensibility, of knowing without first sacrificing oneself to the unknown, defines the human desire to speculate and believe in these speculations. Gnosticism in particular, being a religious ideology entirely centered around the acquisition or restoration of some great knowledge, demonstrates the call of the unknown, the call to know. In the words of Falter, after experiencing his revelation and screaming with a disconcerting intensity for five minutes straight: “One would like some light” (Nabokov 507).

Nabokov’s “Ultima Thule,” under the guise of philosophical proposition, represents such a speculation and the impossibility of its verification. In Ferguson’s discussion of the various literary “glitches” contributing to the manifold network of authorship, he identifies “movement through a seemingly solid wall” as “one of the most desirable glitches to trigger, as it holds out the promise of shortcuts or access to otherwise unreachable territory” (13). This aspect of the playerly mode lends itself to a striking comparison between the concept of ultima Thule as death and this “seemingly solid wall.” Ultima Thule’s multiplicity of meaning implies that it functions both as a limit—a wall—and a point of transition—a *seemingly* solid wall or gate. Falter’s existence at this limit/transition point can then be understood as a glitch, and, further, one of the most desirable glitches to trigger. The privilege of acting as gatekeeper, to simultaneously have access to both sides of the seemingly solid wall, to teeter between world and otherworld, is the impossible position of omniscience; it answers the call of the unknown, assuages the crippling incomprehensibility of death without first requiring the abandonment of all that is known. This is where Nabokov’s fantasy lies: by creating Falter in a world otherwise indistinguishable from our own, he posits the parallel existence of a Falter-like authorial favorite in our world who can simultaneously *be* and *know*.

In proposing a microcosmic model of our world in which a person can exist inside of this seemingly solid wall, Nabokov succumbs to the very curvature of thought against which he warns. Falter repeatedly evades Sineusov’s questions regarding the existence of an afterlife or a God, insisting that Sineusov’s deductions and postulations are mere reflections of his desires. He asserts that “an ideally rational progression of thought will finally bring you back to the point of departure where you return aware of the simplicity of genius, with a delightful sensation that you have embraced truth, while actually you have merely embraced your own self” (Nabokov 513). Falter’s incongruence with Gnostic principles demonstrates that Nabokov has fallen victim to logic’s earthly curvature, submitting to the defining, panical human desire to *know*. Seemingly

attempting the logical reasoning of a possible reality in which death is comprehensible in life, Nabokov instead embraces himself—his desires and fears regarding the uncertainty of death.

## Conclusion

While Falter represents an authorial favorite, Sineusov represents a sort of authorial jester, a caricature of humans' limited consciousness and incomprehensibility of death. Sineusov's ill fate is the condition of the human mind in our reality, Nabokov's included. In Nabokov's literary universe, it is possible to surpass this curvature—to escape the ouroboros of the physical world's thought without leaving the physical world behind—through the right combination of ideas. However, following Nabokov's view of reality as a gradual accumulation and the Gnostic trajectory that "Ultima Thule" otherwise subscribes to, Falter's case represents a discontinuity in both the method and the result of an ultimate truth's discovery. This incongruity exposes "Ultima Thule" as a projection of the desire for continued consciousness and the fear of the unknown rather than a proposal of a hidden reality. Therefore, ultima Thule as the limit to or envelopment of human thought defines the human frustration with death, the inability to "conceive death otherwise than in the image of [one's] own gravestone" (Nabokov 520). Nabokov's authorial favorites then receive gnostic insight not in a microcosmic, metatextual mimicry of Nabokov's conception of reality, but in a fantasy of a reality headed by a verifiable author that assuages the ultimate, glaring limit to human knowledge—the incomprehensibility of death and what comes after it. Rather than positing the possibility of knowing the destiny of humans after death, "Ultima Thule" further enforces the fact that we cannot know. Thus, Nabokov creates a fantasy in which there need not exist a limit to the journey; there is a gatekeeper who can simultaneously *be* and *know*.

By nature, the representation in art of continued consciousness after death is predicated on the artist's particular concern for the concept; it is wrapped up in the desire for "a glimmer of one's identity beyond the grave," the fear that "it all end[s] in ideal darkness," and the fear that it is impossible to silence the whine of the unknown without first plunging into it, leaving behind the comfortable faculties of bodily existence (Nabokov 519). Therefore, logical fallacies such as Nabokov's in "Ultima Thule" are characteristic of death's representation in art. These representations are intrinsically the manifestations of fantasy because they are entirely built upon desire and belief, sewn from the crippling fear of the unknown. Falter exists as a man who can both *be* and *know* because Nabokov knows he cannot surmount this ultima Thule in his earthly existence. Falter is the paradoxical manifestation of the human desire for omniscience, for an extratextual *deus ex machina*, an author who will permit knowledge and being to exist simultaneously.

The understanding of death in reality, and thus in the representation of reality in art, holds an ultimate, glaring limit: one must rely on belief. This belief is enacted and influenced by "strong desire or strong fear" and is sometimes disguised as knowledge, as in Nabokov's fantasy of Falter (Nabokov 519). However, this understanding necessarily retains its status as belief because life in the physical world precludes certain knowledge about death and what comes after it. Falter represents Nabokov's rebellion against this essential principle in that he can *know* of what comes after being without first ceasing to *be*. The world of "Ultima Thule," then, becomes one of fantasy in which Nabokov can wink at the reader between the lines of Sineusov's prattlings, one in which we are in on an all-important pun at Sineusov's expense. Nabokov channels the crippling uncertainty of life after death into the omnipotent, omniscient position which we all share concerning life after *book*. Nabokov's creation, like Falter's revelation, represents a false escape from the limiting curvature of human thought; in fact, these pseudo-revelations demonstrate the compounding,

almost spiraling nature of the curvature—every logical development, every escape, is inevitably an envelopment.

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# Biopolitics of *Dracula*: A Critical Analysis of R.M. Renfield

CHRISTIAN HALL

At the beginning of the London-based narrative in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, one of the heroines, Lucy Westenra, contemplates her potential suitors in correspondence with Mina Harker. She writes about Carfax asylum's Dr. Seward, "I can fancy what a wonderful power he must have over his patients" (Stoker 47). This one throwaway line, and specifically the "wonderful power" Lucy describes, resonates with Michel Foucault's idea of power described in his 1976 volume *The History of Sexuality*. Indeed, the whole of *Dracula* as a text lends itself to Foucault's theoretical trajectory, being steeped in the Victorian rhetoric of deviance, decadence, and monstrosity. As the novel goes on, Stoker builds this "wonderful power" into a full-blown Foucauldian relationship between Dr. Seward and his insane patient Renfield. Dr. Seward's pathologization of Renfield's perverse psychology closely fits the model of Foucault's described historical constructions of deviance, especially those of institutional psychiatry. Through this frame, one can see the ideologies of Victorian cultural hegemony creep into Stoker's text via Renfield's subplot.

Despite being in the periphery, Renfield plays an important role in the novel, acting as *Dracula*'s blood-lusting acolyte and enabling his monstrous contamination of London. Indeed, Renfield deserves his own critical analysis, especially since he occupies the similar antagonistic role of the deviant, othered monster. But beyond a Foucauldian research subject, Renfield embodies another aberrant figure well known by contemporary Western culture. Between his perverse criminal behavior and questionable pathologization, Stoker's depiction of the Victorian criminal madman obscurely resembles the modern cultural construction of the psychopath. Growing up witnessing the Hollywoodization of the psychopathic killer in horror movies, I wish to explore how *Dracula*, prominently situated within the Western cultural matrix, fosters a similar cultural construction of the mentally unstable, violent individual. Proceeding with this ambition, in addition to a discursive construction of perverse identity, I conceptualize Renfield as a prototypical psychopath, thus making the argument that Victorian cultural epistemes not only influence but pervade contemporary psychiatric discourses.

The "wonderful power" Lucy ascribes to Dr. Seward manifests itself in his confinement, surveillance, and discursive classification of Renfield. Through Dr. Seward's diary entries, Stoker carefully presents his exercising of power through ideologically conditioned discourse so his actions can be understood, justified, and applauded by Victorian language. Stoker reciprocally contrives the perverse elements of Renfield's character, like his life-eating mania and violent outbursts, to pave the way for Dr. Seward to label him a threat to society. Similar to how Victorian hegemonic forces employ institutional psychiatry to construct deviant others, Stoker uses Dr. Seward to construct a deviant out of Renfield, trapping him into discourse and making a monster

out of his mental illness. In Foucauldian fashion, Renfield thus becomes an object of knowledge and subject of power, manufactured by Stoker as a transgressive deviant and classified by Dr. Seward as a medical case of psychotic perversity. This latter part is especially important for Dr. Seward's function: Stoker endorses institutional psychiatry not only for its protection of society but also for its pursuit of knowledge about abnormal psychology. Once more, this dangerous, deceptive, and perverse identity that *Dracula* produces, I argue, resembles the twentieth century construction of the psychopath. Pulled between psychiatric, criminological, and cultural discourses, the psychopath occupies a similar mythic status as the Victorian Gothic madman. Despite differences in the historical epistemes, Victorian notions of deviance and constructions of othered identities have borne influence in many aspects of Western culture, especially American institutional psychiatry. My argument seeks to highlight the biopolitics of *Dracula* and trace the beginnings of the psychopathic figure in Stoker's fabrication of Renfield.

### **Foucauldian Power and Technologies of Monstrosity**

In volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault outlined what became one of the most influential understandings of power in contemporary theory. The choices we make, the meanings we create, in short, everything we allow and forbid, according to Foucault, are all dictated by power. It's important to note that he speaks of power in its invisible pre-manifestations, in other words, the will behind its material embodiments. He takes a bottom-up approach, understanding power "in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations" (Foucault 92). Power is immanent and pervasive, existing in the very knowledge we accept and proliferate in language. Unlike a system of repression, rather than purging its oppositions completely, he "link[s] an intensification of the interventions of power to a multiplication of discourses" (30). In other words, power operates not by reduction but by a proliferation of language that controls subjects at an individual level. This discursive form of power that flows through knowledge ties into his concept of biopower, which he clarifies as a type of power exercised in the regulation of anatomical bodies. Such power ceded its control of death to take charge of life, "distributing the living in the domain of value and utility" (144) and focusing its effects on the distributions from the norm. Biopower ensures that those who transgress against hegemonic social norms are made into objects of knowledge and subjects of power.

The techniques of biopower are primarily manifested in the sociomedical institutions whose discourses lay the most claim to anatomical subjects. With the example of sex, while previously a nameless urge never fully consolidated into language, Victorian bourgeois power immanent in the economics, pedagogy, medicine, and justice of the time implemented a "wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what it said about it" (34). What this form of discursive biopower ultimately said was that (homo)sexuality was "less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature," no longer a "temporary aberration" but a "hermaphrodisism of the soul" (43). To clarify, Victorian discourses constructed categories of sex and labeled them as natural perversities, placing them in ideological opposition with society, subjecting them to a perpetual outcast state, and, in turn, reinforcing their heteronormative hegemony. While Foucault is mainly concerned with the biopolitical construction of deviant sex in *The History of Sexuality*, in my analysis, I will investigate the biopolitical construction of deviant psychology.

Foucault mostly writes about the social sciences, but his theoretical trajectory has become canonical in literary criticism. Borrowing from *The History of Sexuality*, Jack Halberstam offers a rereading of the Gothic element in *Dracula* as a versatile technology, one which "rather than simply

scapegoating, constructs a monster out of the traits which ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and capital want to disavow" (Halberstam 345-346). He uses the term "technology" not in the mechanical sense but in a more theoretical context. It signifies the function of Gothic horror that produces monsters through historically specific characteristics. For example, Halberstam examines *Dracula* as a culturally produced object and identifies the composite aspects of otherness depicted in his character:

The otherness that *Dracula* embodies is not timeless or universal, not the opposite of some commonly understood meaning of "the human"; the others *Dracula* has absorbed and who live on in him take on the historically specific contours of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They are the other side of a national identity that in the 1890s coincided with a hegemonic ideal of bourgeois Victorian womanhood. (335)

While Foucault does not mention the novel as one of the major strategies of power-knowledge, Halberstam argues that it represents a privileged field in the web of cultural discourse. He claims the novel is "the discursive arena" (334) that transforms metaphors of otherness into perverse identities. Hence, *Dracula*'s monstrous technology operates with the epistolary mode of the text, where the main compilers see him as "a threat which must be diffused by discourse" (336). Indeed, *Dracula* is one of the major machinic texts that has constructed and reinforced racial, sexual, class-bound, and, as I will argue, psychological otherness.

The objective of my paper is twofold: first, to conduct a critical analysis of the relationship between Dr. Seward and Renfield, highlighting Renfield's biopolitical and discursive construction; second, to illustrate Stoker's depiction of Renfield as a psychological Gothic technology that anticipates the modern psychopath. Borrowing from Halberstam's rereading of *Dracula* and Foucault's theory of power, I will show how *Dracula* serves as a fictitious supplement to institutional psychiatry and its construction of the psychopath, carrying forth equal discursive power and perpetually reinforcing Victorian epistemes of deviance.

### **The Doctor and his Deviant**

Given *Dracula*'s literary significance and cultural impact, the "novel, indeed, is the discursive arena" (Halberstam 334) in which fictitious discourses reinforce the psychiatric empire, and literary constructions become clinical realities. Stoker's text outlines itself in the mixture of fantasy and realism, which are demarcated most apparently in Dr. Seward's diary entries. Between his phonographic recording format, his usage of psychiatric terms, and his attempts to diagnose and objectify the mysteries of his mechanized, occult world, echoing Halberstam, Dr. Seward presents himself as one of the text's major technologies, the means by which the Gothic is translated into scientific knowledge.

Dr. Seward's very first contribution to the text introduces Renfield as an object of mystery and sets up the overarching theme of science's pursuit of knowledge. Dr. Seward's interest in Renfield establishes the first mention of his abnormality and the justification for the studying of his condition: "He is so quaint in his ideas, and so unlike the normal lunatic, that I have determined to understand him as well as I can. Today I seemed to get nearer than ever before to the heart of his mystery" (Stoker 52). Curious about Renfield's strangeness, Dr. Seward questions him more fully than ever before, hoping to become "master of the facts of his hallucination" (52). In this first diary entry, Renfield's condition is connected to existent psychiatry being described as hallucination, which Dr. Seward tasks himself to master the facts of. The final passage of the entry provides Dr. Seward's full description of Renfield:

R.M. Renfield, *ætat.* 59 – Sanguine temperament; great physical strength; morbidly excitable;



periods of gloom ending in some fixed idea which I cannot make out [...] A possibly dangerous man, probably dangerous if unselfish. In selfish men caution is as secure an armor for their foes as for themselves. (52)

Renfield's imminent strength and sense of danger are initially planted here, along with his cautious side that later plays into his deception when concealing his insanity. Interestingly, Dr. Seward uses pseudo-scientific terminology when describing Renfield's profile. In her 2006 book *The Most Dread Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction*, Valerie Pedlar notes that "The reference to a 'sanguine temperament' [...] recalls the ancient humours-based theory of personality, which usefully introduces the motif of blood, and this is combined with more contemporary ideas of mood and the notion of manic-depression" (Pedlar 137). The term foreshadows Renfield's Gothic obsession with blood and life-consumption and furthermore sets up Dr. Seward as the knower and prescriber of the supernatural. As Pedlar points out, Dr. Seward's study of Renfield's madness "becomes a crucial arena for the interplay of the two modes of interpretation and understanding" (137); it acts as the Gothic machine by which superstitions are translated into Victorian positivist understanding. In the oscillation between fantasy and realism, Stoker distinguishes Dr. Seward as the rational recorder of knowledge, one who can understand all phenomena, the mysteries of Renfield or Dracula, and transform these metaphors of otherness into historical identities.

While Dr. Seward's first diary entry only instigates Renfield's aberrance and possible dangerousness, his second entry completes Renfield's discursive construction as a mentally perverse threat to society. Dr. Seward observes Renfield's scheme of collecting and consuming a hierarchy of life forms, from flies to spiders to sparrows and so on. When he requests a kitten, then pushes for a full-grown cat, Dr. Seward rejects him and notices a change in his demeanor: "His face fell, and I could see a warning of danger in it, for there was a sudden fierce, sidelong look which meant killing. The man is an undeveloped homicidal maniac" (Stoker 60). From this rapid deduction, Dr. Seward hypothesizes Renfield's belief in life absorption and soon realizes the danger of it. Moreover, Renfield is henceforth categorized as a homicidal maniac, justifying his containment and surveillance as a research subject. Soon after these events, Dr. Seward completes his discursive construction of Renfield: "I shall have to invent a new classification for him, and call him a zoophagous (life-eating) maniac" (60). The design of Renfield's caricatured perversity perfectly frames Dr. Seward's warranted confinement and classification of him. Stoker's fabrication of Renfield also links his psychotic perversity to Dracula's Gothic monstrosity. Renfield's habit of "life-eating" echoes Dracula's over-consumption, seeing as they both don't engage in consuming out of necessity for survival but for their own deviant purposes. This indulgent perversity also relates to the fear generated by the psychopath: the fear of the psychopathic killer who preys on the weak without any clear motive or rational purpose but rather for their own perverse pleasures.

By classifying Renfield as a "zoophagous...maniac," Dr. Seward subjugates Renfield into scientific discourse, marking him as a new kind of deviant. This step in Dr. Seward's methodology is where the Victorians speak the loudest through Stoker's text, clearly echoing the methodology employed in their repression of sex, as described by Foucault in *The History*: "As if in order to gain mastery over [sex] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language" (Foucault 17). Dr. Seward's incitement to discourse stands in for Victorian psychiatry's exercising of power; they share the mutual objective to discursively become "master of the facts" (Stoker 52). By appealing to science and objectifying deviance, Dr. Seward and the Victorians are able to reinforce their cultural hegemony by labeling those who transgress against social norms as natural

perversities needing confinement, surveillance, and rationalization. Reading the zoophagous label, Valerie Pedlar points out that the “term was not part of nineteenth-century nosology, but is borrowed from natural science, and the transference underlines the degree to which Renfield is seen as an animal, a specimen for the scientist to observe and catalogue, a not unusual attitude in Victorian medicine” (Pedlar 138). The usage of the term further elicits the aim to master the facts of deviant identities, to apprehend otherness through their own ideologically conditioned language. Furthermore, the Victorian rationalization of othered identities is extended and solidified into established knowledge. Dr. Seward revels in his findings and state:

Had I even the secret of one such mind – did I hold the key to the fancy of even one lunatic – I might advance my own branch of science to a pitch compared with which Burdon-Sanderson’s physiology or Ferrier’s brain knowledge would be as nothing. (Stoker 60)

His projection of one mind – one discursively constructed nonetheless – extrapolated into a branch of science echoes Halberstam’s “Technologies” and the novel’s cultural projection of othered identities. It reflects the machinic function of the Gothic in the text as a whole, condensing an aggregate of otherness, feeding it to readers, and casting it into cultural discourse. Stoker’s inclusion of several historical figures of nineteenth-century brain science – “Burdon-Sanderson” and “Ferrier” – further reinforces his projection of Gothic identities into existent, historical knowledge. Dr. Seward acts as the motor of Stoker’s machinic text, transforming Gothic metaphors of otherness into deviant identities. He is the means by which fictitious discourse supplements the methodology, ethos, and power of the psychiatric empire.

### **Perpetual Spirals of Power and Pleasure**

The biopolitics of *Dracula* displayed thus far have only covered Dr. Seward’s role as a Victorian actor, reading Stoker’s fictitious discourse in conversation with Victorian cultural discourses. Borrowing Foucauldian theory has revealed the relationship of complicity, whereby power reinforces itself through its biopolitical manifestations. However, there is more intimacy in this complicity than appearances show. In *The History*, Foucault describes an energy of pleasure that motivates power:

An impetus was given to power through its very exercise [...] The pleasure that comes of exercising the power, that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasures that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement: parents and children, adults and adolescents, educators and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century. These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual *spirals of power and pleasure*. (Foucault 44, 45)

As Renfield’s subplot develops, Dr. Seward’s pursuit of knowledge begins to go beyond the practical purposes of advancing his own branch of science. In Foucauldian fashion, he transforms his study of Renfield into a mode for exercising power and deriving pleasure. Dr. Seward’s diary entries reflect this stimulation in his pursuit of Renfield’s mystery: “The case of Renfield grows more interesting the more I get to understand the man” (Stoker 58); “How these madmen give themselves away!” (85); even Van Helsing joins in, “His case in your diary interested me much [...] I should much like to see him and especially when his mind is disturbed” (202). His most notable

phrasing is when he describes Renfield as “my own pet lunatic” (Stoker 194). This term parallels the power dynamics established by his zoophagous label, playing into Renfield’s animalistic, pet-like role and Dr. Seward as the master. Furthermore, it elicits a feeling of intimacy in their relationship and suggests the factor of pleasure in their power dynamics.

The most blatant evidence of Dr. Seward’s power-pleasure scheme comes when he experiments with Renfield’s quiet spells at night. After a week of constant paroxysms of rage and even an escape, Dr. Seward hatches the idea to test Renfield’s newfound composure: “Happy thought! We shall tonight play sane wits against mad ones. He escaped before without our help; tonight he shall escape with it. We shall give him a chance, and have the men ready to follow in case they are required” (90). Dr. Seward’s figurative pursuit of Renfield transcends into literal pursuit, showing the multiple levels of his biopolitical encirclement. His diction evokes a sense of play and pleasure, phrasing it as a game between sane and mad wits. This moment adds depth to their Foucauldian relationship of complicity, unveiling the cat-and-mouse dynamic in their role as doctor and patient. When Renfield doesn’t immediately bolt, Dr. Seward states, “Our bird when he found the cage open would not fly, so all our subtle arrangements went for nought” (90). This remark, continuing the animal metaphor, reveals his disappointment when his scheme doesn’t pay off. Once Renfield does make his escape, Dr. Seward exclaims, “Another night adventure!” (91). The repeated exclamation marks in this section betray the otherwise formal tone of his previous diary entries. He’s become enthralled in his scientific pursuit that he now arranges his experiments to derive maximum pleasure. Moreover, the only developments in Renfield’s case that now excite Dr. Seward have nothing to do with curing him. Dr. Seward’s “adventure” with Renfield does not suggest an end, only perpetual spirals of power and pleasure. The exercising of power becomes invaded by pleasure and, in turn, takes it on as a new impetus. Renfield is left as a permanent technology, in the plot, serving as the vampire’s appendage and the doctor’s plaything, and in the text, functioning as a construction of perverse psychology.

### **Renfield and the Psychopath**

While Renfield’s character is steeped in Victorian epistemes of deviance, his treatment by Dr. Seward and his role in Stoker’s text place him in close connection with the psychological deviant of the twentieth century: the psychopathic killer. The monstrous figure of the psychopath has historically been shrouded by myths. Thus, to demythologize, I will not borrow from any medical, legal, or philosophical understanding of psychopathy but instead turn to one from a critical and discursive standpoint. In 2009, Cary Federman, Dave Holmes, and Jean Daniel Jacob published a critical analysis of the legalistic and positivistic understandings of psychopathy within the discourses of Western psychiatry and criminology. Their analysis, accounting for the historical notions of deviance, attempts to deconstruct and critique the medical and legal constructions of the psychopathic figure as “an empty vessel, a characterization of behaviors without stable symptoms, a disease without a cause, and a sociomedical and linguistic construction that pays its respect to the governing powers of the politics of science” (Federman et al. 39-40). Drawing from Foucault, they argue that the psychopath is “a reality created by certain discursive contexts based on shifting behavioral classifications that try to meet criminological theories of deviance and dangerousness” (38). Due to the murky definitions propagated by ill-defined discourses, primarily those of Hervey Cleckley (1903-1984) and Robert Hare (b. 1934), the psychopath exists in a state of limbo: “it is this empty space, between nonestablished mental illness and the necessity of preserving free will and responsibility, so that choice implicates the criminal not the society at large, that the psychopath occupies” (43). Hence, this mythic figure of deviance, half-criminal, half-patient, untied to historical and environmental factors, is viewed as a dangerous medical entity in

need of a cure, a true “case study in biopolitics,” as they note (39). They go on to highlight the hypocritical nature of the discursive, classificatory scheme that motive-hunts for what it simultaneously deems a motiveless malignity:

That this cocktail of behaviors exists without preconditions or contexts, with unknown organic and environmental causes, subtracts more than adds to scientific knowledge. Without a diseased brain, the psychopath is a legal entity more than a clinical one, a physical danger to society more than a medical problem in need of attention. And yet, despite its definitional ambiguity, the term remains in vogue in the psychiatric domain [...] Despite its lack of success in locating the source of violence and of aberrant behavior, the psychiatric profession continued its search for psychopathy's location (47, 49-50).

Ultimately, their deconstruction of psychopathy reveals a lack of scientific certitude, a reliance on criminology, and an appeal to cultural critiques, all rooted in a discursive apparatus that expands the psychiatric empire, exerts power over marginalized individuals, stigmatizes mental illness, and fosters a mythic image of the psychopath in the Western cultural matrix.

It's important to note that my discussion from here on deals with Renfield's psychopathy; that is to say, it hangs on my categorization of Renfield as a psychopath. Upon this development, I ran into a similar concern as Halberstam when he discovered that “rather than revealing a hidden agenda in Stoker's novel, [he] had unwittingly essentialized Jewishness,” (Halberstam 333); in my case, risking further “essentializing” of psychopathy by simply diagnosing Renfield. However, it became clear that my analysis doesn't engage so much with Renfield's condition as it does with Stoker's characterization and Dr. Seward's classification of it. As Halberstam points out: “The novel presents a body of work to which, it is important to note, only certain characters contribute [...] Renfield, of course, has been classified as insane and his subjective existence is always represented by Dr. Seward” (336). All textual evidence of Renfield's condition, already conditioned by the Gothic rhetoric, is further filtered through Dr. Seward's fictitious discourses. I am not grounding my argument with Renfield as an accurate representation of real-life psychopathy – and how could I, given the aforementioned deconstruction of the historically ill-defined concept? The psychopath's condition has no definitive source, no etiology; it is a discursive construction, a product “of a technical-knowledge system that is capable of characterizing anyone who deviates from the norm as dangerous to persons and to society” (Federman et al. 37). Solely focusing on Stoker's, and beyond that, the Victorian conception of psychotic perversity, then, my discussion considers that there is no certitude with which one can deem Renfield an accurate case of a real mental illness. The choice of a psychopath reading is to see how the character Renfield metaphorically stands for the psychologically othered people of Stoker's time, to analyze how Victorian epistemes of deviance take the mentally ill person and construct out of them the psychopathic killer.

While initially representing the Victorian stereotype of the raving madman, Stoker labors to portray Renfield as no ordinary lunatic and, throughout the novel, molds him into a psychiatric conundrum resembling the modern psychopath. Drawing on contemporary notions of psychopathic behavior, the clearest parallel in symptoms would be Renfield's sudden bouts of logical speech – to the point where the main cast questions his eerily abnormal rationality. One notable account of Renfield's ability to reason comes later in the novel when Mina Harker pays him a visit in his cell. His sophisticated eloquence and rationality when speaking with her immediately catches Dr. Seward off guard: “Here was my own pet lunatic – the most pronounced of his type that I had ever met with – talking elemental philosophy, and with the manner of a polished gentleman” (Stoker 194). Earlier in the novel, Dr. Seward regards Renfield's ability to reason: “How well the man reasoned! Lunatics always do within their own scope” (61). However, he isn't surprised at this early

example like he is with Mina's instance and only sees it as the "method in his madness" (59). It's only when Renfield cosplays the ideal, socially normative citizen that Dr. Seward is caught off guard. Not rationality alone, but rationality in "the manner of a polished gentleman" (194) becomes the marker that indicates Renfield's deception and hidden other side.

Stoker goes further by having Renfield take himself as an example to convince them of his sanity: "Why, I myself am an instance of a man who had a strange belief. Indeed, it was no wonder that my friends were alarmed, and insisted on my being put under control" (194). In this moment, Renfield prefigures the behaviors in Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity*<sup>1</sup> with his deceptive rationality and deliberate concealment of his mental disorder. He thoroughly describes his own mental and behavioral tendencies in a manner that raises doubt in the reader. Instead of being a medical breakthrough, unequivocal evidence of a cured patient, Stoker frames this moment as an instance of deceptive rationality under Dracula's malign influence, which Dr. Seward suspects, knowing that earlier Renfield had swallowed all his flies and spiders before Mina came in. Several scenes like this characterize Renfield as a psychiatric conundrum similar to the psychopath, someone capable of temporarily suppressing his insanity and eloquently deceiving the sane. Another notable moment is Renfield's final appeal to sanity in front of the main cast, which fools nearly everyone but Dr. Seward. Jonathan Harker states, "If that man wasn't attempting a bluff, he is about the sanest lunatic I ever saw" (206). In almost every instance, regardless of Renfield's subjectivity, Stoker validates the reader's doubt and underscores the duplicity of Renfield's character. This habitual anxiety of deception is further applied to Renfield's second most apparent comparability: the psychopathic sense of dangerousness.

Stoker's text, deeply informed by Victorian ideologies of gender, deploys gendered constructions to further typify his deviant characters, significantly with Renfield and his violent nature. Comparing the Victorian and twentieth century contexts, the cultural epistemes that construct their versions of the insane have a notable gendered distinction. Elaine Showalter observes in her article "Victorian Women and Insanity" the privileged role of institutional Victorian psychiatry. She highlights the phenomenon of pathologized femininity: "that the domestication of insanity, its assimilation by the Victorian institution, coincides with the period in which the predominance of women among the insane becomes a statistically verifiable phenomenon" (Showalter 149). Comparing this to twentieth century psychiatric discourses, interestingly, "the psychopath is almost always male" (Federman et al. 48). Stoker's literary construction of insanity already differs from the predominant Victorian construct of feminine insanity by aligning with the male-dominant, twentieth century myth of the dangerous psychopath. He is further codifying gendered constructs by organizing them into brackets of deviance, as seen with Lucy Westenra's feeble constitution and latent sexual perversity, and here with Renfield's disturbed and violent nature.

Stoker's habitual placement of doubt in Renfield's deceptive rationality continues further with the episode of his periodical paroxysms of violent behavior. While understood by the reader as part of Dracula's influence, they puzzle Dr. Seward and leave him unsuspecting and vulnerable. Following Renfield's first escape and encounter with Dracula, Dr. Seward notes that "For the first week after his attack he was perpetually violent. Then one night, just as the moon rose, he grew quiet" (Stoker 90). This change in behavior begins the cat-and-mouse game, which suggests that Renfield's duplicity plays a role in Dr. Seward's intrigue. Satisfied with his newfound calmness, Dr. Seward orders to relieve him from his straight-waistcoat, which the attendants do with hesitation, arousing Renfield's humor in their distrust: "They think I could hurt you! Fancy me hurting you! The fools!" (90). Dr. Seward feels soothed to know Renfield wouldn't hurt him, but again, suspects

the alternative: “Has he to gain from me some good so stupendous that my well-being is needful to him?” (90). Stoker consistently places doubt in Renfield and even validates it by turning this scene into a moment of ironic foreshadowing with Renfield’s subsequent violent attack in Dr. Seward’s study. Not even a full month after this episode, Renfield randomly bursts into Dr. Seward’s study, makes straight for him with a knife, and slices him in the wrist. As the blood dripped onto the floor, Dr. Seward was sickened at the sight before him: “He was lying on his belly on the floor licking up like a dog, the blood which had fallen from my wounded wrist” (118). Dr. Seward’s diction reflects his abject reaction, continuing to deploy figurative animalistic language to regard his “pet maniac.” Here, Renfield embodies the psychopathic killer of Hollywood slashers, not simply enacting violence but perverse violence that stems from his psychotic condition of obsessive life consumption; he shouts as he is pulled away by the attendants, “The blood is the life! the blood is the life!” (118). This behavior mimics the motiveless, irrational perversity of the psychopath and further plays into his monstrous bond with Dracula and his Gothic technology. Halberstam identifies the following connection: “In Stoker’s novel, vampirism and its psychotic form of zoophagy both make a pathology out of the threats posed to rationality by excessive consumption and its relation to particular social and sexual habits” (Halberstam 342). Stoker’s Gothic technology literally produces a monstrous figure in the same manner as Hollywood movies. Both construct a perverse psychological identity that stigmatizes the mentally ill as deceptive and dangerous creatures. Stoker’s machinic text succeeds in constructing a deviant identity out of psychotic conditions, the motor being Dr. Seward’s discursive construction of Renfield. Connecting Renfield and the psychopath reveals their similar biopolitical constructions. They are both deviant objects of opposition made into socially aberrant identities to expand the power and authority of cultural hegemony.

### **A Retrospective Diagnosis of Renfield**

As a biopolitical construction, a figure of psychotic perversity, and a target of academic analysis, Renfield’s unfortunate outcome is perpetual objectification. On one hand, he is made into an object of scientific knowledge, pathologized into discourse and constructed against Victorian ideology. On the other, he is made into an object of academic knowledge by critics, scrutinized, dissected, and displayed as an object of analysis. Curious about Renfield’s presence in 21st-century scholarship, I came across an article that blends these modes of understanding in a slightly problematic way. The 2010 article is called “All in the Family: A Retrospective Diagnosis of R.M. Renfield in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*” by Dr. Elizabeth Winter, a private practicing psychiatrist and part-time faculty at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. She underscores the significant contributions of German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926) in the field of mental illnesses and his classification criteria of dementia praecox. She also foregrounds Sir William Thornley Stoker’s, Bram Stoker’s brother, contributions to *Dracula*, with his medical expertise and personal experience with mental illness via his wife Emily. Winter argues that Renfield, influenced by Thornley, who likely drew from Kraepelin’s descriptive case studies, is “a startlingly lifelike portrayal of psychiatric disease” (Winter) – that disease being dementia praecox as described by Kraepelin. While it’s fairly common for critics to draw on medical knowledge to analyze characters in fiction, the problem comes when they treat such characters as clinical realities. It’s not always quite as simple as Freud’s Oedipus complex, especially not when dealing with literature conditioned by such historical contexts as *Dracula*. I have thus far labored to demonstrate all the baggage that comes with Renfield, so it should be clear why reading him as a “lifelike portrayal” can be dangerous.

The medical context Winter provides does acknowledge the disordered and unscientific

state of nineteenth century psychiatry. She mentions how “the terminology of the time is largely idiosyncratic and lacking validity or inter-rater reliability” despite the ambitious, persistent attempts to classify and diagnose the mental phenomena of the so-called insane (Winter). She also points out the British psychiatrist naysayers who, unsurprisingly, disputed the medical terminology used in Kraepelin’s research. While Kraepelin’s exhaustive studies have had a significant influence on the research of psychotic illness, reading Stoker’s literary depiction of Renfield as a reflection of his findings on dementia praecox, regardless of its validity, does not add much to our understanding of the text and, if anything, detracts from other more argumentative scholarship like Halberstam’s “Technologies of Monstrosity.” A retrospective diagnosis, in order to ground its focus on the connection to psychiatric discourses, inevitably overlooks the ideological fabrication of Renfield’s character. Winter argues that Renfield’s perverse habit of consuming life, the rational acuteness of his belief, and his commitment to enacting violence for the sake of blood all provide evidence of dementia praecox. She even questions the reality of his subservience to the Master: “Interestingly, at no point in the narrative does the reader find objective evidence that Dracula is communicating with Renfield, supporting the idea that Renfield’s beliefs are part of his illness” (Winter). These interpretative choices, for the sake of a purely positivist analysis, gloss over his purposefully perverse construction and his metaphoric position as the deviant other: “Even with the violence of Renfield’s escape attempt, his behavior and mentation have not declined yet to the point of absurdity” (Winter). Calculating the degree of his psychotic behavior in order to place him in a medical check box detracts from critical analysis and inadvertently reinforces his discursive construction.

Winter’s final argument regards Renfield’s convincing rationality towards the end of the novel. She argues that in his speech lies further evidence of Kraepelin’s qualities of dementia praecox:

Renfield’s recollection of historic trivia, including the annexation of Texas into the Union in 1845 and the Monroe doctrine of 1823 is remarkably intact, as is expected in dementia praecox. At some point, he was a member of the Windham House Club, a social club for privileged gentlemen. (Winter)

What goes unnoticed in this interpretation is how Renfield’s bouts of reason appeal to socially normative conduct. Stoker has Renfield cosplay the Victorian bourgeois, polished gentlemen to increase the parallel of his otherness with accepted identities and to further demarcate the pathological from the normal, which, as I argue, also invokes the psychopathic mask of sanity. Renfield’s only removal from the role of Gothic perversity positions him as a Victorian emblem glorifying bourgeois conduct. Several other instances later in the novel feature this same rhetoric, such as when Renfield affirms Dr. Seward’s label of his psychotic perversity when he believes that he will soon take on a higher lifeform through Dracula’s power: You must get a new patient doctor, if you wish to study zoophagy!” (Stoker 223) In this moment of Renfield’s unexpected logical clarity, Stoker has the reader believe that Dr. Seward’s discursive classification was right all along, reinforcing his role as the scientific transcriber of Gothic monstrosity. Later, when Renfield explains to Van Helsing and Dr. Seward his knowledge of Dracula’s plot and his attempt to protect Mina, he states, “I had heard that madmen have unnatural strength; and as I knew I was a madman – at times anyhow – I resolved to use my power” (233). Again, Renfield’s only moments of non-deceptive lucidity reinforce the stereotypical characteristics of his deviant construction. While Winter can read “the apparent lucidity and suspension of symptomatology in Renfield’s speech [as] a predictable part of the illness course” (Winter), it is less investigative and compelling than exposing the ideological undertones of Stoker’s rhetoric.

This retrospective diagnosis coincides with the same line of thinking opposed by the V21 Collective, an open platform of Victorian scholars seeking to reinvigorate Victorian studies through more argumentative, speculative, and deconstructive modes of understanding. Winter's analysis falls prey to the same symptoms of positivist historicism: "a fetishization of the archival; an aspiration to definitively map the DNA of the period; an attempt to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; an endless accumulation of mere information" (V21 Collective). At its best, it recognizes that the characters of Dr. Seward and Renfield are indeed situated in the Victorian psychiatric context, whether or not one believes it presents an "excellent characterization of mental illness" (Winter). At its worst, it treats Renfield and all his baggage as a clinical reality, reinforces the fictitious discursive scheme, reactivates the Gothic technology in the twenty-first century, and keeps in vogue the mythic image of the dangerous, psychotic deviant.

## Conclusion

The general scope of my project aligns with the aforementioned Manifesto of the V21 Collective. Following its ten theses, I analyze the phenomena of the Victorian Gothic not by an epistemological show-and-tell but through an intellectually supple synthesis. This project assists the V21 Collective's campaign to reject the parochial and antiquarian historicizing of this complex period and to critically speculate the Victorian traces pervading our current moment. They rightly state, "We *are* Victorian, inhabiting, advancing, and resisting the world they made" (V21 Collective). By advancing this thesis, I hope to catalyze this sentiment and aid the movement toward a more ambitious, argumentative, and pertinent field of Victorian studies.

Dracula is immersed in the racial, sexual, gendered, class-bound, and psychological ideologies of the Victorian era. Stoker weaves these into a Gothic rhetoric that acts as a monstrous technology, producing deviant identities through metaphors of otherness. Investigating this text deeper borrowing Halberstam's insights and Foucauldian theory, Dr. Seward and Renfield present themselves as two major actors in Stoker's drama. Critically analyzing their characters reveals the biopolitics of institutional psychiatry, the power apparatus of Victorian cultural hegemony that discursively constructs its social oppositions. Renfield, as a figure of psychotic perversity, fits the mold of a similar biopolitical construction, the mythic figure of the psychopath. Both Renfield and the psychopath, with their perverse nature and violent behavior, are used by power to categorize deviant others and to further the gap between the normal and pathological. This interpretation does not simply observe related phenomena but argues that the cultural construction of the psychopath finds its roots within the nineteenth century and that Victorian epistemes of deviance continue to pervade contemporary culture.

The various manifestations, forms, and channels that power has taken throughout Dracula ended up not being as wonderful as Lucy described. But within her context, that affective gesture is the only statement most can make. Lucy represents most of us, the general public, innocently uninformed, removed yet complicit, conditioned to only awe at the power that upholds our cultural hegemony. But it is ultimately up to us to circumvent the order of things. Insofar as we inhabit the world conditioned by the Victorians, the key to our edification demands revitalizing and mobilizing the humanities and deconstructing their cultural traces. Conjuring the spirit of the Gothic, we must reconstruct the voices of the past and observe how they continue to haunt the present.

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## City Person

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### Artist Statement

When I first broached the idea of writing a cozy mystery set in the big city, my advisor had commented, “That’s really interesting, considering how most cozy mysteries are set in the suburbs or the countryside.” And they are—unsolved murders set against backdrops of idyllic countrysides and close-knit small towns, where everybody knows everybody. But why can’t the city also be cozy, a place of community? Why are coziness and community reserved only for the cookie-cutter house in the suburbs with an HOA-approved lawn and a white picket fence? There is this misconception, this belief unconsciously shared by most people, that intimacy, closeness, togetherness, are feelings reserved for suburbia. The suburbs are supposedly for family, for permanence, for settling down in a gated community with a husband or wife, two kids and a Golden Retriever.

I argue that the opposite is true. Suburbia sees us distant from another, physically and emotionally. Houses are deliberately spaced apart and painted the same coat of white beige, leaving no room for individuality or color. Everything is muted, minimalist, and perfectly proportioned. With backyards, we see less shared, community spaces, like parks and playgrounds. With the rise of car-centric infrastructure that discourages walking and public transport, suburbanites are content to pass each other by, like Longfellow’s ships in the night, which “pass and speak one another, / Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence” (Longfellow).

With the ending of my story, I sought to subvert the usual cozy mystery structure. In typical cozy mysteries, the structure follows a protagonist that leaves a crowded urban space for a small, close-knit suburb. The innate wholesomeness, warmth and coziness of the town is then disturbed by a crime—often an unsolved murder the protagonist investigates. Once the murder is solved, the initial coziness of the town is restored, and the protagonist is free to return to the fast pace of the city: the suburbs are deemed safe yet again, while the city remains cold, harsh, and unforgiving. However, I wanted my readers to come away with the opposite conclusion: what if the ending of my story established the city as homey and warm, while the suburbs symbolized the dangerous, unpredictable, and unknown?

There is a force, a proximity to the city that the suburbs lack. In downtown San Francisco, there is no walking to Chinatown without passing under looming skyscrapers, their shade and height a constant reminder of the wealthy living in its penthouses, looking down at passersby below. In upstate New York, there is no getting on the Metro without being confronted with the inevitable unhoused person, softly begging with a coin cup or babbling madness or passed out in a puddle of their own piss. You are locked in, in this subway car, in this confined space with other people that look different and act different and are different from you, and you have no other choice but to grit your teeth and *deal with it*. And this is something the suburbs, in its very design,

fundamentally lacks. The shock, tolerance, and eventual radicalization that occurs when someone is forced to coexist with other human beings is left out of suburbia entirely. And this lack of interaction with other people who share our space with us leaves us disconnected, isolated, and alienated.

Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* establish key characteristics of American suburban life in the 1990s. Ng's Shaker Heights, Ohio has "rules, many rules, about what you could and could not do" (9), leading me to consider the constraints that suburbia puts on its inhabitants. What do these many rules teach citizens, and what happens when they're not followed? Vuong's depiction of Hartford, Connecticut points to the "suicidally pristine lawns" of suburban houses (87). The word "suicidal" took me to the idea of self-harm; how do the suburbs enforce a standard of perfection that hurts the self?

When examining American suburbia, the close relationship between late-stage capitalism and suburban development cannot be ignored. As American urban sociologist Mark Gottdiener explains, Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* explores this theme thoroughly: "The production of space under capitalism involves the fragmentation and homogenization of space...Small wonder new suburbs all look the same" (132). Lefebvre goes on to outline what he calls the "right to the city"—the need for inclusivity, accessibility, and democracy in urban spaces, because, as Gottdiener explains, "to change life means to change space as well" (133). Deep societal issues, like racism, patriarchy, and class disparity, require a radical change in the way citizens live. If we remain isolated, obedient, and conveniently separated from one another in America's suburbs, how can we even begin to think of radical, leftist solutions to these problems?

Throughout my story, I approach this question of radicalization in a less politically overt manner. I believe that, often what can be most mobilizing and radicalizing, is the experience of interacting with people that are vastly different from you—people with different religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, economic status, and different amounts of systemic power in a late capitalist society. Thus, I do not make specific leftist policies a focus of my mystery. Rather, radicalization to me means the pulling up of roots from one place to another. Distance, separation, and isolation are the killing forces of leftist politics and ideas in the United States, and the only way to overcome these obstacles is to *move*, to escape the suburban bubble and interact with other people, even those you might not want to be around at first, like the immigrant, the police, the unhoused. Only through mutual intimacy and care for one another can we begin to ground our political views in an ideology that focuses on community, sharing resources, and looking out for one another rather than a rugged individualism, demanding we see each other as enemies competing for the same prize.

Young Eleanor Finch has only ever known boredom and isolation growing up in picture-perfect Silver Butte, Arizona. That is, until a mystery lands in her lap that she can't resist solving—the supposed death of her own estranged mother, Margot, who fled Arizona for New York when Eleanor was just a child. When Eleanor receives a packet of strange letters, written in her mother's signature cursive and addressed to her, Eleanor knows where she has to go.

With the help of her hippie half-sister, an overweight subway rat, a dirty cop or two, and the friendly unhoused man who knows the city like the back of his hand, Eleanor begins to retrace the steps of the elusive Margot Finch through New York City—the coffee shops she sat in, the Metro lines she rode, and the people's lives she touched. In the process, Eleanor is confronted with her own prejudices about urban life and the messy intimacy of the city and finds herself once again chasing after the one person she once called home.

## City Person

Eleanor's mother is dead. Or so the letter says.

It was delivered on a Monday morning in August, postmarked with a tacky *I HEART NEW YORK* stamp and no return address. The AC had been whirring, ninety degrees in Silver Butte and only eight in the morning. Eleanor remembers licking the sweat off her upper lip as she padded over to the front door.

José smiled his usual smile, handed her the usual bills, told his usual joke. "Chilly day today señorita, ¿no?"

Eleanor offered him a grave nod. "Absolutely freezing, José."

He chuckled and flicked the brim of his Postal Service hat once, like he always did, and strolled back to the mail truck. The canyons sprawled out behind him, their reddish orange a stark contrast to the artificial colors of Silver Butte: the blinding white houses, the green planted grass, the pitch-black street. Each house had its own quadrant—a perfectly spaced section where there was no messiness, no overlap, no bleeding outside the lines. Everyone and everything stayed in their section, and that was that. Tidy. Neat. Eleanor liked it that way.

Today's stack of mail felt heavier than normal. She flicked quickly through it, pausing at the bundle of yellowed, curling envelopes squished between a Progressive ad and her monthly credit card bill. Her name and address were scrawled on the top letter, in a handwriting she hadn't seen for years: *To Eleanor Finch. 2247 Fieldfare Drive, Silver Butte, AZ 85583.* Marring the handwriting was a large red DECEASED stamp, the ink so fresh Eleanor swore she felt its wet dampness through the page.

A tingling made its way up her spine, gathering at the base of her neck in a tangled hairball of anxiety. Eleanor opened her mouth to call out to José. She looked up. He was already long gone. The hand that held the letters shook, her mother's cursive staring up at her from the page.

The last time she had seen her, Eleanor had been sprawled on the living room floor, six years old and crayon nubs flying as she worked intensely at a coloring book. Her mother had dropped a featherlight kiss on her forehead and danced out the door, gushing about finally giving being an artist in the big city a try.

"Be back in a few weeks, Ellie! Be good!" she had thrown out, like an afterthought. Eleanor was too young, the significance of the goodbye lost on her. She can't remember if she had even turned to watch her leave, walking out of the house. Eleanor had fantasized of it often since, how her mom would look walking back through the front door, idyllic Silver Butte steady and unchanged as always peeking in behind her. How her mother would glance around curiously, plop her suitcase down and push her sunglasses onto her head, red curls springing free.

"So, what'd I miss?" She would ask, fun and carefree. Eleanor would be in the living room like she was when she left, still sprawled barefoot on the floor, still coloring the same page with her bitten crayons. Turns out the art scene in Manhattan had been boring, and her paintings didn't sell, so she had turned right around and come back home. It would be as if time had never passed at all.

"Nothing, Mom. Nothing much at all."

Her mother couldn't be dead. It simply wasn't possible. Eleanor still had things to say to her, loose ends to tie up. Besides, who would have sent the letters, if not Margot Finch? The DECEASED stamp didn't make sense. Eleanor would have...felt a drastic shift in the universe, seen things slipping and sliding out of place. If her mom was dead, she would *know*. Wouldn't she?

Yet Eleanor felt nothing, other than the crick in her neck from sleeping with one too many pillows last night.

The sting of the envelope against her finger brought her back. Blood welled up from the tiny papercut. She sucked on it, the tangy iron bursting on her tongue.

Hovering in the doorway, Eleanor slowly scanned the neighborhood. True crime podcasts had taught her well, and she couldn't remember a time where she didn't check the locks on all the doors before bed, do a full sweep of her surroundings to identify possible threats. She wasn't paranoid, per say. Just...a cautious person. After all, the world was a scary place for young women, even in Silver Butte. You never knew when the next Ted Bundy would pick up the knife, so to speak. Eleanor just liked to be prepared. It was the smart thing to do, that was all.

But there was nothing strange. Nothing even the slightest out of the ordinary. The cacti all stood in their spots; the minivans all parked in their driveways. The air was still, only the high-pitched ringing noise that happens when it's deadly hot out. Even the tumbleweeds were statues with no summer breeze to roll them along. Eleanor shot a final suspicious glance at the neighborhood before locking the door and retreating to her bedroom. She had a stack of letters to read, work to do...and an elusive Margot Finch to find.

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There are city people out there, Eleanor is sure. Women with matching workout sets that hop on a Peloton every morning, bright-eyed and white-teethed and pedaling with purpose. Businessmen yelling into earphone-headsets and finance bros running around in black puffer vests. Frazzled lawyers hauling briefcases onto the subway, bobbing and weaving through the crowds to get to work on time in the morning. Sharp and smart. Shiny shoes clicking on the sidewalk. *Quick*. They must exist, at least hypothetically. Eleanor knows this.

And yet they've always existed like how a faraway place exists, like something you know is real, but you don't think you'll ever touch. Remote, like Mars in the night sky. Eleanor believes in its existence, knows it's the fourth planet in the solar system, has two moons (Phobos and Deimos, respectively), and a reddish tint when she squints long enough at the October sky. But she's never physically put her feet down the surface, never grazed the red rock with the tips of her fingers, never taken up space there and *experienced* it for herself.

This is her chance. New York. The letters. Finding her mother. Eleanor won't waste it.

It wasn't a hard decision. Her community college diploma had started gathering dust from the little use she made of it. Quitting her job at the warehouse had been a no-brainer. She had never been extremely passionate about selling wrenches and bags of manure to men that insisted they knew better anyways (yet always asked for her help regardless).

Eleanor's father had seemed equally unphased, supportive yet distant in his own way. He barely blinked when she came to him with her corkboard and pins, with pages torn out of phone books and public records borrowed from the library. It hadn't taken her long to dig up the necessary details—an old school report card here, some Facebook stalking there, and Eleanor had her. Daisy Finch was single, a self-declared cat lady and astrology enthusiast, and Eleanor's half-sister.

A stilted phone call later, in which Eleanor had to thoroughly convince Daisy that no, she was not a scammer, and yes, she was her long-lost sister, but no, she was not allergic to cat hair

(specifically the Ragamuffin breed), and it was arranged. Daisy was between roommates, so Eleanor could stay for the next week, until the end of August. Daisy squealed with excitement. Eleanor's stomach flooded with nerves. A week. She had a week to find her.

"I'm leaving. Tomorrow," Eleanor clipped, tossing the one-way plane ticket to JFK Airport on the stained coffee table. Her dad was still in his blue work coveralls, graying hair ruffled, and heavy eyes glued to the flickering television. His metal name tag glinted in the darkness of the living room: *James Finch, Finch Sprays Pest Control Head Exterminator*.

"What was that, Ellie?" He mumbled through a handful of Pringles.

"I said, I'm leaving. I'm going to New York to see Daisy."

"Oh, that'll be nice." Another stack of Pringles went into his mouth, crumbs flying onto the recliner and shaggy carpet. Who ate Pringles in stacks like that? It was clearly a one-at-a-time sort of snack. "You haven't seen her in a while."

*Try my entire life, she thought. And whose fault was that?*

Instead, she mumbled a "Yeah, I haven't," trying to keep the obvious annoyance from creeping into her voice. Her dad turned back to the TV, conversation apparently over. House Hunters must have been especially riveting tonight. Eleanor swallowed the silent dismissal and marched to her bedroom in search of her sparkly pink suitcase, the one she hadn't needed since before her mother left.

She packed up what was left of her life (so, admittedly, not much) and flew out the next day, pulse thrumming as she stepped onto the plane. It wasn't the city that excited her so much. If anything, she was dreading that part—the dirty streets, the pushy crowds, the loudness and too-muchness of New York that she had heard so much about from her father. To Eleanor, it was all a panic attack waiting to happen.

It wasn't even the prospect of seeing her sister for the first time in, what was it now? Ten years? Fifteen? God, Eleanor had actually lost count. Did that...say something bad about her? What kind of person forgot that sort of thing? The exact number didn't matter anyways—Daisy and Eleanor were practically strangers. Growing up in separate cities on opposite sides of the country will do that to siblings.

It was this...this puzzle. This itch at the back of her brain that had been bothering her since José handed her the letter stack on Monday morning. The pieces arranged and then rearranged themselves constantly, trying to slot themselves together in some way that made sense. Why the letters? Who had sent them, and why now? Why had her mother never reached out, after all this time? And, most importantly, where was she? Had she cut and run again, maybe to a different country this time? Is this how Eleanor spends the rest of her life, chasing after her mother in circles, always coming close but never quite reaching her?

52B sits above a combination hair and nail salon on the shoddier side of Brooklyn, aptly named Katya's Klawz and Kutz. The acetone tang of nail polish remover oozes from the walls, even with the apartment being five floors up.

Eleanor had asked Katya where the elevator was. Katya had kindly informed her, in thick and curt Russian, that Eleanor "had better fucking like taking the stairs," before jabbing a red nail towards the stairwell and disappearing in a cloud of Tresemmé. With a mumbled thank you, Eleanor turned and went, dragging herself up.

Huffing, she takes a deep breath. The door is wooden, all blue peeling paint and brass doorknob glinting under the white hallway lights. Black Sharpie had been scrawled onto the door, transforming 52B into an aptly named 5' 2" *Bitches*. Eleanor puts the information away, the filing cabinet in her brain slamming open and the blank manila folder titled Daisy falling out. 5' 2". Eleanor quietly tucks this fact into the folder.

Suddenly, she feels hungry, *greedy*, for any information, no matter how boring or mundane, about this mystery person who shares her blood. Do her eyes match Eleanor's, the same curious shade of brown? Does she pick at her fingernails like Eleanor does when she's nervous or spiraling or can't get her mind to settle at night? Does she ever wonder about Eleanor, the way Eleanor wonders about her? She swallows her nerves down, or at least makes an effort at appearing like a normal person that's holding it together, and knocks.

Her sister stands in the doorway, eyes a vibrant green. Daisy's milky skin is a stark contrast to Eleanor's own muted brown, and Eleanor is briefly reminded of their different fathers. A bandana/scarf creation is wrapped around her head, tying back a mane of unruly red curls. Freckles dot her face like constellations. Daisy is Margot, twenty years younger. The same coloring, the same curling smile, half-mocking and half-genuine. Eleanor blinks in surprise and opens her mouth, and realizes she has no idea what to say.

Daisy is a city person, a faraway planet, a Mars in the sky, sparkly eyeshadow glittery in the dim orange lighting of her living room. Eleanor briefly wonders where she hides her Peloton in this shoebox apartment.

Eleanor shifts from one foot to the other. She doesn't know how to do this, the emotional part, the long-lost sister reconciliation scene. She had imagined it a thousand times, and then some. There would be hesitant smiles, tight hugs. Tears would well up in Eleanor's eye, and she would blink them away before Daisy could see, but they would've been there, and Eleanor would've *felt something*. Bubbling happiness. Shocked disbelief. Bitter regret at not having more time together as kids.

Instead, she's here, shuffling awkwardly under the bright white lights of the hallway. Bereft and wanting, with no way to put her feelings into words. So, of course, the only thing that falls out of her eloquent mouth is, "You don't look 5' 2".

It takes Daisy two milliseconds to recover. She shakes her head, as if to make sure she's not seeing something that isn't there, and winks (or Eleanor thinks she tries to, it looks more like a pained blink than anything).

"That's because I'm not. Well, the last time I got measured, the doctor said I was more of a 5' 3" and a half, but we thought it would be too much of a hassle to change the sign, so I like to round down when people ask." Daisy's voice is high-pitched and girly, but smooth as a singer's. There's a gap between her front teeth, if you look close enough. Eleanor thinks it suits her.

Eleanor's lips twitch, a small smile. "We?"

"Oh, me and my cat! You'll meet Gemini later. Don't worry, you'll love her," Daisy gushes. "Come in, let me show you the place. What's your sign, by the way?"

Eleanor blinks, not entirely sure what to say. Daisy plows on, unbothered.

"No, let me guess! I'm getting either Virgo or Libra." Those green eyes squint at her, playful and assessing. "Definitely Virgo."

Daisy's hand encircles her wrist, and Eleanor is dragged across the threshold, the city lights glinting at her through Daisy's singular apartment window. *It's so high up, I could see Arizona from here*, Eleanor thinks.

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"Keep your eyes closed," Daisy reminds, her voice light and lilting. Incense floods Eleanor's nose. She tries not to gag on the smell. Somewhere in the apartment's depths, Gemini purrs happily. "This will help me read your aura more clearly."

Eleanor quirks an eyebrow. They were about two minutes into the grand tour of Daisy's studio apartment, when Daisy had sensed the drastic misalignment of Eleanor's chakras and promptly called for an emergency spiritual cleansing. Lights were dimmed, candles artfully arranged, and oil diffusers plugged in before she had even begun to process what was going on. Eleanor finds all the spiritual gimmicks a bit ridiculous, but Daisy's excited expression stops her from saying so.

Now, Daisy sits cross-legged on the woven carpet, assorted rocks and various healing paraphernalia scattered on the coffee table. Eleanor has long given up any form of resistance. Daisy seems to know what she's doing.

Her sister lights another bundle of twigs (Sage? Spiritual sticks? Lumber harvested from the elms of Central Park?) on fire. The flame leaps dangerously close to the low ceiling, and a stray spark falls onto Daisy's patchwork skirt, glowing orange for a few seconds before dying out. An annoyed *meow* sounds from the sofa, where Gemini's fuzzy black figure sits. Eleanor mentally applauds herself for saying nothing about the very real possibility of 52B going up in smoke.

"White sage, for purification," Daisy hums, starting up some sort of breathing ritual. Eleanor, unsure of the exact protocol, tries to match her breaths to Daisy's. Her eyes slide shut, and the tension starts to seep from her shoulders in slow, rolling waves. Worries about her finding her mother gradually slip away. Eleanor may not be a religious person, but she can see why Daisy likes this. The stillness and quiet. Just being where you are and not always jumping ahead to the next thing. The burning desire to solve, to piece together, to *know*, that roars constantly in the background of her brain, seems to...settle. And Eleanor just is.

Daisy sets the burning sticks down in what Eleanor presumes is a burning stick holder. She's given up on finding the right names for these things. The few times Eleanor had been shuffled into Silver Butte's Seventh Day Adventist Church for Christmas mass had only taught her so much. The rocks and crystals on the table clink together as Daisy carefully picks out a second object.

"Moonstone, for inner growth," she explains. Eleanor jumps when the cold stone touches her forehead, and Daisy begins drawing small circles with it. "Sorry, probably should've warned you about that. I'm just activating your crown chakra. It's to connect you to your highest self." Eleanor nods, as if these are words she understands.

After a few moments of this, Daisy retires the moonstone, declaring Eleanor's highest self sufficiently reached. With her crown chakra activated, she settles on a final stone: citrine, for good luck to close out the healing session.

"Because who doesn't need more of that?" Daisy giggles as she begins waving the crystal around wildly in practiced formations. Eleanor smiles, a half one, but real. Does she find Daisy a bit



silly, with her healing crystals and lavender incense and cat named after objectively the worst zodiac sign? Yes. But she's here, eyes glinting in the orange lamps and making Eleanor feel lighter than she's felt in years.

Finding Margot had seemed so daunting, so impossible, when Eleanor first drafted up her plan on her childhood desk. But maybe she can do this after all.

She knows she has to tell Daisy soon why she's really here. That there's more to this impromptu trip than simply wanting to reconnect with her younger sister. She deserves to know, at the very least, about the possibility that their mother might be dead. Tomorrow, she'll spread the letters out on Daisy's tiny dining/coffee table, trace through them with her from beginning to end. But not now, not yet.

"That's it!" Daisy finishes her ritual and tosses the crystal down with a clatter. "You're all lucked out, I'm afraid."

*There's no such thing*, Eleanor thinks. She's alone, in a big city she doesn't understand, with a raging hippie for a sister and nothing but a handful of tattered envelopes to help her track down a woman that has been off-grid MIA for almost twenty years. For all she knows, her mom doesn't even live in the same country anymore. The golden citrine stone mocks her, as if daring her not to believe in it. *Luck*, Eleanor thinks, *is definitely something I'll need*.

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After her first two days in New York, Eleanor can't help but notice that she's made a subway friend...of sorts. Daisy has work during the day, as a bank teller, of all things, so Eleanor is mostly left to her own devices. So far, her daily routine has consisted of lingering around The Shot, a coffee shop one block over from Katya's, until the bearded, flannel-wearing barista asks her to either buy another drink or leave. Her response so far had been to just order another chai and get comfortable, but today, Eleanor knew he was right. After all, what kind of detective sat around in dark corners in coffee shops, just waiting for the right names and places to fall into her lap? It was time she stopped being so afraid of the unknown. Sure, New Yorkers had a reputation for being rude and snappy but talking to a few strangers wouldn't kill her.

Eleanor gulps down her tea, throws a crumpled five in the tip jar while ignoring Bearded Flannel's glare, and takes off for 18th Street, where the glow of the Metro sign had caught her eye the day before. Then, she had hurried quickly past, dismissing the idea entirely. She could barely find The Shot without getting lost in Brooklyn's interconnected blocks and boroughs. It was like a hedge maze, and one she was hopeless at navigating.

She's sitting on the M, feet swinging as the train pulls out of the station. Her canvas tote, borrowed from Daisy and tastefully splattered in paint, rides beside her. She wonders if Daisy is also a painter, like her mother was. *Is*. Like her mother *is*. *She's not dead*, Eleanor repeats. *She's not*.

The first letter was short and hopeful, her mother's neat cursive swirling out onto the page:

*Dear Ellie,*

*Just got into New York, and it's both exactly and nothing like I was expecting. I can't believe I'm really here, taking up space with this city and these people. Spent the past week doing the*

*touristy things, of course, but my favorite was taking the M to Williamsburg in Brooklyn. There are so many city lights at night, it's like you don't even notice that you can't see the stars.*

*Love you,*

*Mom*

Her mother had been young and lovestruck with the city. Eleanor can see her: Margot Finch with red hair curling and doe brown eyes, mouth gaping in awe as she wound her way through the tourists in Times Square, past the brownstones in Park Slope, into the designer stores of Soho. A man carrying a leather briefcase would bump into her during rush hour traffic, accidentally knock her glasses off her face and then bend down to pick them up. He would say something simple, all business and straight to the point, "Here, you dropped these."

"Sorry, I'm so clumsy!" Her mother would laugh, pushing tortoiseshell frames up her crooked nose. "Still getting used to the city and all that."

He would see his chance, take it. "I could show you around, if you'd like?" And Margot would be utterly charmed and take Leather Briefcase's hand and follow him down Fifth Avenue and off into the sunset. They would have a whirlwind New York romance—a flat on the Upper East Side, summer picnics in Central Park, Coney Island ice cream melting down intertwined hands. Margot is still out there, in love, carefree, *alive*. Eleanor knows she is.

The illusion breaks. Every time Eleanor imagines her mother happy and free, she remembers the loneliness that came after she left. Her dad's distance. The quiet of the house. Her friends drifting away, one by one, until she didn't have any left. And Eleanor doesn't get it, how she can love and resent one person so much. How she can travel across the country and give up on everything else in her life to look for someone that might not even want to be found, least of all by her.

Her eyes mist up, but she blinks away the tears before they can fully form. She hasn't cried since she read the first letter, and she wasn't going to start now, on the M during peak hour, pressed between an elderly woman with a small white dog in her purse and two balding businessmen arguing over whatever the DOW Jones was. She feels a tugging and looks down, catching only a glimpse of the overweight rat as it runs down the subway aisle with her precious letter held tightly in its mouth. Eleanor is up and out of her seat in a second.

"Hey, get back here!" The tote smacks one of the DOW Jones men squarely in the face. She cringes and keeps running, but the rat is determined. It goes straight for the door at the opposite end of the train. Eleanor picks up the pace, arms pumping.

The rat reaches the door that lets passengers step between trains. It waits, almost expecting the door to slide open, then plops down stubbornly on the floor. Eleanor skids to a halt, narrowly avoiding stepping on its tail, and crouches down to its level. Now that she looks at it, the rat is actually kind of...large. Like in an unnaturally big, could-give-Gemini-a-run-for-her-money kind of way. *It's kind of cute, I guess.*

"No, bad rat. You can't have these." Eleanor snatches the letter from its teeth, and stuffs it deep into her tote, then stops for a second. Has she entirely lost it, talking to a rat in a crowded subway car as if it can talk back? She shoots a quick glance around. None of the passengers seem particularly moved by her display. Must be a New York thing. "Maybe there's something else for you to eat in here."

Her fingers brush against something crinkly, then pause. "Here we go." She pulls a week, month, maybe year-old bag of popcorn out from the recesses of Daisy's bag. "This should be something you'll like." The rat squeaks happily and begins nibbling away at the popcorn piece Eleanor dropped on the floor close to him. She mentally dubs him Popcorn. Eleanor's never had a pet before. It feels nice.

"Ah, he's always a hungry one," a rough voice chimes in. It's a homeless man, middle-aged and sprawled out on the floor by the seats that fold up for wheelchair users. His brown hair is chin-length and matted, and his thin body sags under the weight of the layered jackets he's wearing. Eleanor smiles politely, close-lipped and timid. She hopes he'll leave her alone after that. It's what she's always done when she's crossed paths with the homeless in Silver Butte: keep your head down, don't make eye contact, and don't speak to them. Eleanor can hear her dad's words ringing in her head: "Don't even bother trying to talk to those people, Ellie. Even the nice ones. It'll only cause more trouble."

Shockingly, Popcorn the rat does not share this preconceived notion, and leaps onto the man's outstretched hand. Under the subway lights, the lines on his face are severe and deep, like carved granite, but his blue eyes shine. Popcorn noses around his fingers, finished with his snack and looking for more to eat. The man grins knowingly, like they're old friends. One of his teeth is gold, on the bottom right. It twinkles like a star in the underground.

"Still hungry, are ya?" Eleanor swears Popcorn nods at him. The man makes a sympathetic noise and begins rifling through one of his many shopping bags. "Here, let me get you something good."

"Um, I'm gonna..." Eleanor waves her hand in the direction of where she ran from, backing away slowly. Despite his friendliness, she still feels uncomfortable making conversation.

"Leaving us already?" Eleanor's eyes widen. She assumed most homeless people just wanted to be left alone, but he blinks at her expectantly from the subway floor, Popcorn nestled securely in his palm.

"I-I can't see the map from here," she explains. "My stop's coming up soon and I need to keep track, so I don't get off at the wrong one again."

Eleanor hates admitting that she can't do things. It leaves her open and raw. As if she's standing up on a subway seat and announcing to everyone in the train, *I am a tourist! I am not from here! I am 25 and don't know how to do something as simple as ride the Metro without getting lost!*

"Well, you can just sit here with me then. I know each and ev'ry stop this train takes. Been riding them for years now. I'm Willie." His Brooklyn accent isn't thick, but Eleanor picks up on it anyway in the gruff up-and-down of his voice. She likes it.

"Eleanor Finch."

"Well, Miss Eleanor, where you trying to go?"

"Williamsburg," she answers.

"That'll be Marcy Avenue. I'll let you know when we're there." Eleanor nods her thanks, and the two fall into that sort of cordial, awkward silence that makes Eleanor's skin itch when it goes on for too long. Thankfully, Willie saves them. "So, what are you doing here in the great state of New York, Miss Eleanor? Getting some vacation in?"

"Yeah, you could say that. I'm actually...looking for someone."

"Anyone I happen to know?" And Eleanor doesn't know why, but she tells him.

"Her name's Margot. Finch," Eleanor sniffs. "She's actually my...mother."

"Yeah, I knew her," Willie nods, brows furrowing in concentration. Eleanor's head whips up to look him straight in the eye, her braids smacking her chin. *What were the odds?* "Redhead, used to ride this line a lot. Don't see her around as much anymore."

Eleanor swallows down the knot of dread at Willie's implication. *She's not dead*, she reminds herself, grabbing the empty notebook she brought along for writing down clues. *Willie, M Train*, she prints. "D-did you ever talk to her?"

"Oh, all the time. She was quite the chatty lady. Always had something to say."

Eleanor can't resist. "Like what?" *Did she ever mention Daisy? Me?*

"Always hauling some painting around and talking about this gallery showing or the next," Willie shudders. Eleanor can't imagine how he can be cold under all those jackets. "I never understood the art thing too much, but it seemed to make her happy." Eleanor smiled. So, she had done it after all. Sold her paintings, made a name for herself. Her father never knew, and if he did, he certainly didn't tell Eleanor about it.

"Did you ever get to see one? A painting? Or did she ever mention the name of a specific gallery?" Her mind starts to whirl, thinking about all the possible leads from this conversation alone. She couldn't believe her luck. Maybe, if she gets the name of one of Margot's paintings, or even a description of what one looks like, then she could find out where she works, where she lives. Eleanor could be knocking on her door this time tomorrow, Daisy by her side, a hair's breadth away from being a family again.

"Oh sure. I remember this one—" The screech of the train cuts Willie off as the M pulls into the next stop. The doors slide open and two NYPD officers step on. Willie tenses up immediately and his blue eyes shift to the floor. Popcorn scatters, racing back to wherever he came from. Eleanor is sad to see him go. The train starts up again as the pair of officers stalk towards Eleanor and Willie.

"Drew, I'm really not in the mood today," Willie barks, crossing his arms over his chest like a child being told off.

"Good thing the law doesn't care what sort of mood you're in. You know the drill, bud," the female officer says, pulling a pair of handcuffs from her belt. Her blonde ponytail is slicked back and tight, her posture ramrod straight. She must be mid-30s.

"Hey, woah, is that really necessary?" Eleanor isn't one to argue with the police, but getting handcuffs out for riding the subway seems a little excessive.

"Loitering on the MTA for over a day is illegal in the state of New York," the male cop chimes in. He taps one polished boot on the floor, *tap, tap*. "This is the third time we've seen you since yesterday, Willie. Maybe pick a different train every once in a while, hmm?" His smirk is condescending, *mean*. Eleanor hates him on sight.

"C'mon, Darryl, you don't gotta be like that."

"Unfortunately, we do 'gotta be like that,'" the woman, Drew, retorts. The man, Darryl, grabs Willie by the shoulder and forcefully pulls him to his feet. Eleanor jumps to her feet, too. To do what, she's not exactly sure of yet, but she can't help feeling weirdly defensive over her first real New York friend. Willie had been the most help she's had since she got here.

“Hey, he was just about to get off,” Eleanor reasons. Darryl barely hears her, snatching the cuffs out of Drew’s limp hand with a cruel gleam in his eye. The train stops at the next station. Eleanor collects Willie’s shopping bags and grabs his hand, pulling him towards the open door. “See? We’re going now.”

Darryl moves to protest, but Drew stops him. She must be his superior or just as scary as she seems because Darryl listens without complaint. Either way, Eleanor is glad for it.

“You stay out of trouble, okay Willie?” Drew calls out as the doors begin to close. She’s shaking her head, but her expression is caught somewhere between worried and fond. Eleanor thinks it’s nice that even people as different as Drew and Willie can look out for each other here.

“Always do,” he calls back, waving his hand in goodbye. They walk towards the exit together and pass the station plaque. *Marcy Ave*, it reads.

Willie laughs. “Well, would you look at that? Didn’t need my help after all.”

—

Eleanor trudges back to Katya’s, beat after a day spent wandering through Williamsburg. She didn’t push the topic of her mom again, and Willie had gone on his own way after they left the Metro station. Eleanor regrets not protesting more, or at least asking for his last name. Who knows if she’ll ever see him again? The one concrete lead she had, and she let him get away. Katya picks up on her bad mood, only offering a sweet air kiss and a “*Privyet, Milashka*” when Eleanor walks by the salon. She air kisses back, but her heart isn’t in it.

As she unlocks the door to the apartment, she hears rustling coming from inside, like someone frantically digging through papers. The alarm bells in Eleanor’s mind start ringing. She steps in, and Daisy stands before her, lingering awkwardly in the middle of the studio. Eleanor’s gaze darts to the nightstand by the sofa, which had served as her impromptu bed for the last few nights. The nightstand in which Eleanor had carefully hidden the other letters. The bottom drawer hangs slightly open. Daisy smiles hesitantly. *Or nervously?* Eleanor’s mind supplies.

She brings it up over dinner that night: Ramen for Daisy, microwave mac and cheese for Eleanor. Daisy isn’t much of a cook, Eleanor has noticed.

“Do you ever...think about her? Mom, I mean,” Eleanor starts, subtle as ever. She pushes her mac around with a spoon. It makes an unattractive squishy noise.

“I—no. Not for a while now. When I moved to the city last year, I tried tracking her down, but nothing ever came up. After a while, I just stopped trying,” Daisy says, slow and measured. She stares down at her Ramen. It’s the longest Eleanor has ever seen her go without making eye contact. “Do...you? Think of her?”

“No,” she looks directly at Daisy as she answers. Daisy still won’t meet her eyes and it unnerves her. The rest of the dinner is quiet, stilted. Eleanor offers to do the dishes, and for once, Daisy lets her.

Eleanor turns the conversation over in her head as she scrubs at a cheese-stained bowl. Gemini twines sweetly between her legs, purring contently. Eleanor sends the occasional glance over her shoulder at Daisy’s closed bedroom door. Admittedly, she had written Daisy off as harmless, silly, frivolous. But maybe she knows more than she lets on. Daisy and Margot had lived

in the same city, after all, albeit not long. Was it really possible that they never met, that they never once crossed paths? Or was it possible Daisy was hiding Margot from her? Would she really be so selfish?

Eleanor was a bit fuzzy on the specifics, but she had always gotten the impression that her mother was just as absent from Daisy's childhood as she was from her own. Wouldn't she be ecstatic about the idea of finding Mom too? Unless that wasn't the case? Would her mother really have chosen one daughter over the other? Eleanor sets the dishes on the drying mat and banishes the thought from her mind.

Before she goes to bed, Eleanor opens the bottom drawer of the nightstand, extra slowly to ensure it won't creak. Gemini's glowing yellow eyes meet her from across the living room. She sits, curled up on the windowsill next to a potted fern, black tail swishing. Eleanor looks away. Who knows? Maybe the cat isn't trustworthy either.

And there they are—the other letters in their neat pile, all the corners lining up perfectly. Except for the bottom letter, which sits skewed just a fraction to the right. Eleanor takes a long look before pushing the letter back in line with the others and closing the drawer.

When she wakes up the next morning, Daisy is already at work. Eleanor is grateful, unsure of how to act around her sister now that she knows she's lying to her. She rolls over on the sofa, making a grab for the bottom drawer and yanking it open. She sticks her hand in, blindly reaching for the letters, only to close her fingers around nothing. Her eyes widen, and she nearly falls off the sofa.

Eleanor peers into the drawer to confirm, but she already knows what she'll see.

The letters are gone.

—

After a morning which involved Eleanor frantically ripping open every drawer and cabinet in the apartment in search of the letters, having a brief anxiety attack, and consulting Daisy's healing crystals for guidance, she found herself here. Bearded Flannel Barista was thoroughly unimpressed. Eleanor could understand. She wasn't impressed either. It was her fourth day in New York—three to go—and she felt like she hadn't made any progress whatsoever. Gallivanting around the city with subway rats and Willie was fun and all, but she was barely any closer to finding Margot than when she started this whole trip. In the true crime podcasts she listened to, the unraveling of the mystery was always satisfying, a clear thread unspooling from beginning to end. *This isn't satisfying*, Eleanor thinks. *It's frustrating. And I'm running out of time.*

Eleanor is sinking into her favorite worn leather sofa at The Shot, steaming chai in hand, when she sees them: Willie and Drew, laughing and chatting over takeout black coffees like old friends. Which, as far as Eleanor knew, they very well could be. Willie tells a joke and Drew laughs, her hand falling on his shoulder. Eleanor cocks her head at the familiarity between them. She closes her notebook, where she had been doodling miniature sketches of Popcorn, and stumbles over to their table, knocking some arms and legs in the process. She still hasn't gotten used to how crowded everything is here. Every space is shared, even a tiny coffee table. Like it or not, nobody in the café sits alone.

"Good to see you again, Miss Eleanor," Willie's golden tooth flashes.

"You too, Willie. I...didn't think I'd see you again," Eleanor's eyes flit over to Drew. "You, too. Drew, was it? I'm Eleanor Finch."

"Yeah, Assistant Chief of Police, NYPD. Sorry about all that on the M, the other day," Drew cringes and her cheeks redden with embarrassment. "Daryll's new and he can get a bit too, erm, excited about certain aspects of the job." Eleanor waves it off.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Willie says with an eye roll. Eleanor can't imagine what his life must be like. Getting arrested just for existing in public spaces and sharing train cars with the old money East Siders. Being surrounded by skyscrapers owned by billionaires while pushing a stolen shopping cart through Central Park, begging tourists for spare change.

"Hey, Willie was telling me earlier about your quest, so to speak," Drew pipes up. "You ever need anything, just let me know, okay?" Eleanor's initial reaction is to just wave her off and go it alone. The police weren't exactly her enemy, but they weren't her friends either. Then again, she's been going it alone for the past few days and look at how far that's gotten her. Come to think, having a police officer on her side could be extremely useful. Drew had something Eleanor didn't—access to records. Oh, why not? Eleanor thought for once.

"Actually, there might be something."

—

Time of death: 2:07AM, Brush & Easel Art Gallery. Cause of death: Unknown. The date listed is two days before the day Eleanor received the letters in Silver Butte. Someone else had sent them. It wasn't Margot who had done it.

The certificate shakes in Eleanor's hand, and she tosses it onto Drew's desk, not trusting herself not to shred it up in a fit of rage. This floor of the NYPD station is quiet. It's only Eleanor and Drew, standing stock-still in Drew's penthouse office.

*Unknown. Unknown?!* Eleanor mentally raged. *I finally get confirmation of something and it's still an unknown?* Her mind was racing, grief and sorrow and denial all swirling together into an ugly brown ball, like mixing paint colors you weren't supposed to mix. Drew awkwardly patted Eleanor's shoulder in a there-there gesture. Eleanor swatted her hand away.

"I, I don't understand," Eleanor chokes out. She will not cry. She refuses.

"Oh, sweetie. Sometimes coroners have a hard time pinpointing an exact cause of death. Especially when they arrive on the scene a few hours after the crime." Eleanor picks up on the implication in Drew's words.

"You were there?"

"I was the first one on the scene," Drew sighs. "It wasn't pretty. Margot had had a showing earlier that night at the Brush & Easel. It was brilliant, her stuff always was. The last guests had filtered out around midnight, latest 1:00AM. She must've been alone, packing up the studio and—oh here, let me get you a chair." Eleanor looks down. She was white knuckling the table and her knees were shaking.

She snaps. "I don't want a damn chair. I want to know what happened." Drew's baby blues widen. She takes a deep breath, as if steeling herself for what came next.

“Paint. It was paint,” Drew looks out the windows of her office and closes the blinds. Eleanor’s palms sweat. “I wish I could tell you all the details, but even I don’t know for sure. Hell, most of the station doesn’t know. She slipped, or—or got spooked or something, and stumbled backwards into a can of paint. The big, aluminum kind. Hit her head on the way down and...when I got there, it was everywhere. This god-awful shade of crimson red. You know, at first, I thought it was blood splattered everywhere. But it was just paint.” Eleanor shakes her head once, then again. It just doesn’t make sense. She was bracing herself for a killing, a murder, suicide, even...but paint? A silly accident? Just one stumble and that was it? It was too—too simple. Too random.

“I don’t believe you,” she grits out. Eleanor snatches the death certificate off Drew’s desk and marches for the door.

“Ellie, I know it might be hard to hear, but—”

It’s the nickname that does her in. Because whenever she hears Ellie, all Eleanor can think of is her mom, and how it was one of the last words she said to her.

She runs out of the office and onto the bustling street before Drew can react. She keeps going, shoving her way through the mass of New Yorkers, kicking and elbowing a little too hard, eyes blurring and ears ringing. *It can’t be true. She’s alive, alive, alive. She’s somewhere here, in this crowd. I just need to find her.*

Eleanor makes it to Katya’s Klawz and Kutz before she breaks. Because it is true. Her mother is dead, for seemingly no reason at all. And no amount of waiting patiently or pseudo-detective work or obsessing over the past will bring her back.

She can just make out Katya in a haze of fuzzy Cheetah print and bleach blonde extensions. Katya’s worried Russian sounds muffled, but it doesn’t matter what she’s saying because her vision is tilting, blurry, underwater, as Eleanor sits herself down on the disgusting Brooklyn sidewalk and sobs for the first time in years.

—

“Did you know?”

“Eleanor, what hap—”

“I said,” Eleanor’s eyes narrow. She tosses the death certificate onto the coffee table, the citrine and moonstone and incense from their first night together arranged in a neat row in the middle. Eleanor can’t look at it. “Did. You. Know.”

Daisy, for once in her life, looks at a loss for words. She picks up the record, reads the name at the top, and scans through the short file as if she had already read it before. As if she had the very words on the page memorized. Finally, she whispers, “Are you alright?”

“What do you think?” Eleanor shoots back. Her throat feels raw with tears. She had just found Daisy, and now she was losing her all over again. “I know I haven’t been honest with you about why I came here, but you—you knew. This whole time. And you didn’t say anything! Just watched me run in circles for days.”

“Eleanor, I didn’t mean—”

“What did you do with my letters, Daisy?” A tear springs loose and Eleanor smears it away. Daisy gets up and walks to her room without another word. The slam of the bedroom door echoes



through the apartment. And just like that, Eleanor is *furious*. She stalks down the hall after her. "Hey, you don't get to just walk away from all this!"

"They're here," Daisy breathes, opening the door again and nearly slamming Eleanor in the face with it. "They're all here." The letters fall from Daisy's hands into Eleanor's. Except, they're not just Eleanor's letters, addressed from her mother to her. There are other envelopes, light blue one's she hasn't seen before, each one kept in pristine condition. Eleanor can just barely make out the To Daisy scrawled on the front of each one. It's that same loopy cursive. The same handwriting she's spent hours and days reading, over and over, tracing and retracing.

"Can I?" Eleanor's already opening the first letter. Daisy nods.

They pore over her words for hours. Gemini joins, running her furry cheek along the sharp edges of the paper. For the first time, Eleanor's not searching for a hidden clue or a secret sign. She lets Margot's words wash over her, inhales the love and heartache and excitement that leap off every page, and breathes them out. Daisy snakes her hand across the coffee table towards Eleanor. She opens her palm. Looks up expectantly, green eyes shiny and forgiving.

Eleanor meets Daisy halfway. Their hands meet and it feels like what their childhood could've been. Like sweltering summers in the backyard, chasing tumbleweeds and biking together through Silver Butte. Like puzzles on the kitchen table and cartwheels in the street at sunset, once the asphalt's cooled down. Except it's not real and Eleanor did all those things alone. But they have each other now. Maybe it's time to loosen her grip on the past, to shake herself out of the trance of nostalgia.

"Why'd you do it? Take the letters?" Eleanor's voice is hoarse.

Daisy runs a hand through her curls. "I wasn't sure of all the details, but I could tell you wanted to find her, see her again. I've been there too, Eleanor. And all this...the investigating, the obsessing over the past...it doesn't help. I thought, without the letters, that you'd give it up. Have a chance at moving on." Eleanor opens her mouth to argue, then closes it. What's done is done. No amount of arguing will change the past.

But Eleanor can't resist. "Did you really never run into her in the city? Not even once?"

"Not even once," Daisy's smile is sad and droopy at the edges. It doesn't suit her. "Crazy how that works, right? Like it's such a small place, but there's so many people that everyone blends together after a while. Sometimes I wonder if I bumped into her on the street and never knew." Eleanor's heart aches at the thought. She always knew her mother was thousands of miles away, far removed from the universe of Silver Butte. Bumping into her on the street back home had never even occurred to Eleanor. But to have lived here, in her mother's proximity like Daisy had, and always wonder...Eleanor doesn't envy that. Gemini plops down in the middle of the table, right on top of the letters, and meows.

The girls laugh as the sounds of the city fall in through the window, taxis honking and pigeons cooing and people moving in and out of each other's lives.

—

Eleanor stays until the week is up. Then she's petting Gemini goodbye and dragging her pink suitcase down all five flights of stairs again. Daisy snorts as the wheels hit each step on the way down.

They're all waiting for her on the street. Katya and Willie, Drew and Daisy. Eleanor doesn't even know how Daisy assembled them all, waiting for her in a neat little row, but she did. *My people*, Eleanor thinks. Her first real friends, all made here in the city, a place she once thought so cold and unforgiving. Willie opens his palm, and Popcorn's there too, his chubby paws rubbing together and nose sniffing curiously, probably looking for something to eat. Tears spring to Eleanor's eyes, and she doesn't move to wipe them away. She feels changed, deeply.

"We'll miss you, Ellie," Daisy says, holding Eleanor's hands in hers. Her expression is back to normal, that teasing-yet-genuine combination that Eleanor fell so easily into her first night in New York. "So much."

"I'll miss you all too." Eleanor hates emotions that can't be neatly boxed up, but she gets the words out anyways. It's worth the crack in her voice, the knot in her throat.

Drew steps up to her and puts a hand on her shoulder but doesn't offer more. Her hair is loose for once, blonde and flowing down her back. She looks pretty, more open like this.

"I know siblings can be...hard." She shoots a glance over her shoulder at Willie, and something slots in place. The blue eyes, the easy ribbing, twin coffee orders and an arm slung around a shoulder in a busy coffee shop. *Oh. Of course.* "But staying in touch, having a relationship with them. It's worth the trouble." Drew isn't a hugging type of person. Eleanor hugs her anyway.

Willie is himself—sweet and quick to the point. "Sorry your search didn't turn out so good, Miss Eleanor Finch." He stuck his hand out, a perfect professional despite his tattered clothes and matted hair. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

Eleanor shakes his hand, squeezes it tight. "You too, Mr. Willie of the M Train."

"Come visit me again sometime," he says with a devilish smile. "Now that you know my address and all."

"I'll see what I can do."

"*Da svidania, Milashka*," Katya adds, air-kissing Eleanor's cheeks. Her hair is blown out today, red lipstick sharp enough to kill, but her eyes are the same, protective and kind. "You come back to the shop one day. I will do your hair, nails, everything. Very nice just for you."

Eleanor gives Popcorn goodbye pets. Daisy hails a cab for her and stuffs her in the back, putting Eleanor's suitcase in the trunk and doing her seatbelt up for her like a mother would a child's. Her green eyes shimmer, even in the din of the cab. It's not a city person thing. It's just Daisy. "You'll come back, won't you?"

It's the easiest question of Eleanor's life. "Yeah, I'll come back."

"So, there's nothing to worry about then," Daisy declares, pulling the taxi door shut and banging her hand on the roof of the car twice. It's a goodbye, a see you later. Eleanor looks back as the car pulls away, taking in Brooklyn one last time.

It's impossible to live in the city without becoming radicalized. It's a moving thing—an organism, fleshy and alive and pumping trains through subway tunnels like blood through veins. Eleanor feels it, raw like skinned knees on the concrete of the street she grew up on, tangled up like her headphones after a night of binging true crime until her eyes run red. It's under her skin, in her bones, deeper down than she ever thought possible.

It's a rare sunny day in New York. The sky is a bright blue, the high-rises shiny and resplendent in the morning sun. Eleanor rolls down the window, lets the harsh wind nip at her face.

She'll miss it when she's back in Silver Butte, surrounded by rows of identical houses, parked minivans and perfectly manicured lawns again. For now, Eleanor pictures Gemini watching her car pull away from her perch on the windowsill, content to watch the ebb and flow of New York and its people.

—

The sun sets on Silver Butte, and Eleanor dumps her suitcase down on the hardwood floor. Sweat drips down her forehead, and she's only been back for a total of five minutes. "Dad, I'm back!" she calls out into the dark house. She sees the television flickering, but the volume's too low to make out the specific show. The Pringles can lies on its side by the recliner, clearly sad about being abandoned by its owner. She creeps through the house, but it's silent save for the chirping cicadas outside. Dad works weird hours, home some days and gone the next, so Eleanor thinks nothing of it.

She sets Daisy's canvas tote down on the kitchen counter, the artsy one she insisted Eleanor take home with her. The letters fall out of the bag, and she rolls her eyes. *So much trouble over a few scraps of paper.* Eleanor doesn't think she'll be reading them for a while, so she gathers them up and peeks into her dad's bedroom, figuring she'll just leave them on his desk for him. He deserves to know, after all, if he doesn't already.

They had both handled Margot's leaving in different ways. Eleanor was pouty and sullen, always demanding that her mother be the one to do her braids or help her color, even after she left. Her dad was the opposite; he swallowed his pride and went on as if nothing happened. He kept up appearances with the neighbors. Always had a cheery smile and a wave when he took the trash cans to the curb on Sunday. *Reading Margot's words could be good for him,* Eleanor reasoned. *Give him closure.*

She opened the door to his room with a crack and peered in. Eleanor could hardly remember the last time she'd been in here. *God, what a mess.* There were clothes scattered everywhere—in heaps on the floor, hung over chairs, tossed on the bed. What she assumed were work papers and documents poured out of boxes and onto the dusty ground. Eleanor carefully picked her way through, creating a makeshift path for herself by kicking clothes and trash aside. Who knew her father even owned so many things? She sets the letters down gingerly and turns to go, stumbling when something glinting in the closet blinds her.

The setting sun pours in through the curtains, reflecting off something metal and shiny hidden in the recesses of her dad's closet. The doors are open, tools and dirty jeans and Eleanor's elementary school report cards spilling out of its depths. Eleanor clambers over the mess, shielding her eyes from the glare.

Once she's close enough, she makes out what it is. An aluminum paint can, the large kind you order in bulk from the hardware store she used to work at. Eleanor's hand shakes, coming up to cover her open mouth. There, peeling, but still perfectly legible in the dying daylight, the label reads: *TCS09, Crimson Red.*

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## 5/20 Postering Supplement

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024, students in our program had an opportunity to display their works-in-progress to an audience of faculty, graduate students, peers, and community members. It was a wonderful event, and these closing pages of *Emergence* highlight those projects which are still ongoing, and not published in full here. These projects deserve to be documented as a testament to these scholars' hard work and participation in the program.

### **Athena Cruz-Albrecht**, "An Exploration of Being: Understanding the Role of Dogs in the Anthroposphere and Animal-Human Rights"

Cruz-Albrecht's poster project asked its audience, "In what way does the role of the canine as a companion species in [Paul Auster's] *Timbuktu* shift within the sphere of unhoused people, and how does this shift reimagine basic human rights as a cross-species issue that can call for a social and political revolution towards intraspecies and interspecies harmony?...How could a [creative] text that obscures the division between human literary perspective and canine literary perspective assist in assessing the anthroposphere and arguing for the protection of basic rights as foundational for the coevolution of companions and posterity alike?" Cruz-Albrecht's theoretical interlocutors include Donna Haraway and Suzanne Simard.

### **Bryanna Harrell**, "Hollywood's Walk of War: A Critique of the the United States Military-Industrial Complex in Transformers"

As Harrell explains in her poster's introduction, "From World War I to the War on Terror, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) has funded and co-scripted a multitude of entertainment media [...] The *Transformers* movie is a byproduct of this Hollywood-DoD propaganda partnership. With colossal success, Hollywood and the DoD have been able to color and shape the public opinion of the military, and war through filmmaking. Specifically, the DoD and Hollywood have utilized collaborative efforts to manufacture films like the *Transformers* movie that propagandize the military-industrial complex and increase DoD's political and social power." Her interdisciplinary bibliography includes cinema scholar Lutz Koepnick's monograph on Michael Bay, as well as articles from the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* and *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*.

### **Aliana Hermann-Campana**, "Fire, Subversive Desire, and the Influence of Colonial Hierarchies on Sexual Relationships in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*"

Beginning with an evocative quotation from *Jane Eyre*, "Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth," Hermann-Campana explains: "Sex and negotiations of power in relationships are both a subject of analysis and a mode through which to analyze intersections of power. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a post-colonial investigation of Bertha/Antoinette in *Jane Eyre* expands the hierarchies of power within which the characters function, adding race and colonial hierarchies to explorations of class and gender. Sexual language and metaphors throughout both novels place these power hierarchies within the literal and metaphorical sexual power negotiations between characters." Hermann-Campana's research builds on that of comparative literature scholar Trevor Hope's post-colonial research into these novels, as well as theory and history from Michel Foucault, Anne McClintock, and many others, and she hopes to continue exploring this topic in her senior thesis.

### **Shannon Jackson, “Can’t Murder Liberation: A Short Story”**

Jackson’s speculative fiction short story, whose title is inspired by the words of assassinated Black Panther Fred Hampton, follows a group of revolutionaries called the Jaguars who are seeking liberation for the subjugated “Marked” people. As Jackson explains in her synopsis: “Ofta is a hotbed of tension between the Marked—people with dappled skin and the chance to develop a magical gift—and the Unmarked. Deemed imperfect, lower-class citizens by the Unmarked for centuries, the Marked of Ofta have begun to take to the streets.” This creative story was inspired and informed by Jackson’s research into the Black Panther Party, which she performed by reading histories and member autobiographies, as well as texts which the Panthers used in their own political education programming (e.g. Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*) and a UCSB library special collection containing “flyers, party membership applications, newspaper and magazine clippings, buttons, and handbills.”

### **Nailah A. Rauf, “Good Grief: The Power in Black Mothers Naming and Claiming Death, Dying, Memory, and Mourning in 20th Century Black American Literature”**

Rauf uses primary texts by Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*), Zora Neale Hurston (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), and Ann Petry (*The Street*) to argue that “[a]lthough Black mothers are often at the center of depictions of death, their grief is often ignored—by others and by themselves. Grief of this magnitude can be, and often has been, inherited. Through the intervention of Black female novelists, this intergenerational trauma is disrupted. The novel allows this past to be both acknowledged and honored. However, these texts are more than tales of sorrow or grief; they tell a hopeful future for Black mothers, one where they can finally grieve.” Rauf’s secondary research includes works of philosophy, such as Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, as well as a range of articles and books in trauma studies and near-death studies (e.g. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ *On Death and Dying*).

### **Kels Scott-Otis, “From New York to Dublin: Modern Masculinity, Burgeoning Bourgeoisie”**

Scott-Otis’s poster and project explore themes of class and gender in both James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Scott-Otis writes: “Modern metropolises led to social transformation, including new expressions of gender. The concurrent rise of capitalism meant masculinity and romance were increasingly shaped by consumerism. New phenomena necessitated a new form of language [with] modernism.” The differing class positions of Jay Gatsby and Leopold Bloom in particular opened up new opportunities for Scott-Otis to explore some key areas of primary and secondary research interest, which include: the “new womanly man”; “heterosexual gender roles”; “consumerism, advertisement, commodification, [and] materialism”; as well as modernist aesthetics/preoccupations like “solipsism,” “irony,” “stream of consciousness,” and “ennui.”

### **Kae Stewart, “Fangs, Fae, and Feminism: The evolution of female protagonists in YA fantasy from *Twilight* to today”**

Stewart uses a wide range of primary and secondary sources on Young Adult (YA) genre fiction to argue that: “[t]he YA fantasy genre is an important tool for presenting teenagers with inspiring role models and allowing young women to explore themes of transcendence and empowerment. In creating inspiring narratives for young female readers, YA fantasy novels should shift their focus from using a “strong female character” to escape *Twilight*’s failings, to creating realistic and relatable characters with the ability to gain strength and maturity through experience.” Some of the primary texts Stewart compares to Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga include Sarah J. Maas’s wildly popular *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince*.

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