Watermark

Volume 14, 2020

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Department of English
California State University, Long Beach

Watermark is an annual, scholarly journal published by graduate students in the Department of English at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). We are dedicated to publishing original, critical essays concerned with theory, literature of all genres and periods, as well as essays representing current issues within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. As this journal is intended to provide a forum for emerging voices, only student work is published.

All of the CSULB graduate students who have had a hand in forming and/or continuing *Watermark's* tradition should feel proud. The contributing domestic and international graduate students should, moreover, also feel proud. With this being said, the next edition of *Watermark* will be underway in November 2020, and it intends to positively expand upon its predecessors.

All submissions must include a 250 word abstract and cover page that consists of the writer's name, phone number, email address, essay title, and short biography (no more than 2 sentences). All submissions should be no less than 6 pages, typed in current MLA format with standard 12-point font, and cannot contain the writer's name. As such, all submission materials must be sent as separate Word documents. Please direct all submission materials and/or questions to csulbwatermark@gmail.com.

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A Note from *Watermark's* Executive Editor

When I assumed the role of *Watermark*'s Executive Editor, I did not anticipate such a fascinating and turbulent journey. I say this because, as I write this now, my fellow staffers, contributors, and artists face a global pandemic which has indefinitely halted the lives of many, many individuals around the world. While the production of this edition preceded the pandemic, it has been inevitably altered by it—but not negatively. Rather, *Watermark* has been positively altered by it: the words, artwork, and ideas within these pages have been tirelessly rendered by determined and talented writers, artists, and staff members. I am honored to have witnessed such resiliency and conviction on behalf of all involved. Moreover, I am indebted to those who continue to read, submit to, and support *Watermark*. Without the aforementioned, this edition would not have been printed, digitized, and entered into discourse. Thank you.

Like previous editions of *Watermark*, this edition intends to build upon its predecessors; however, it achieves this intent differently. Instead of devising a theme and accepting work in accordance with that theme, the staffers and I granted our contributors and artists with untamed freedom of expression—despite any variant forms it took. Initially, this decision provided us with a plethora of content to shape. We confronted writings of gender, language, the sublime, violence, and ecology. Although such writings seemed to exist separately, upon closer examination, we found that they actually exist within an intersection: gender is constructed by language, the sublime is associated with violence, and ecology is the underlying connection which facilitates such overlapping dialogues. Thus, in spite of this edition's lack of 'thematic unity,' the forthcoming pages exhibit the inherent diversity of intersectionality, which constitutes its own truth—its own thematic unity.

Brooke D. Campbell, *Executive Editor,* 2020

"let her be born:" Rituals and Invocations in ntozake shange's[1] *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*

Alyiah Gonzales

The historical silencing of Black womxn's[2] voices and experiences across cultural practices, literary traditions, and societal constructs provides little, if any, room for the Black girl to exist, leaving in her place the perpetual womxnhood of being both Black and female. Transitioning out of the historically male-centered 1960s civil rights moment in the United States, ntzoke shange's chorepoem*, for colored girls who have considered suicide*, commits to "unearthing the mislaid, forgotten, &/or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls, & union leaders of our pasts" in order to remind generations of Black womxn of their voice, strength, and impact within many fraught histories (shange x). Through ladies identifiable only by the color they wear, *for colored girls* interrogates how the mutually reinforcing patriarchal and racist systems participate in the erasure of Black womxn's individual existences beyond societal constructions of Black womxn, particularly the caricatures of the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Mammy, to discover what we must give birth to in order to affirm the existence and humanity of the Black girl. Through repetition and dance, each of the ladies' stories within the choreopoem become an invocation which breaks the literal and metaphorical silencing of Black womxn within these compounding oppressive systems, demonstrating how Black womxn's healing and upliftment is inextricably tied to their ability to voice their experiences. This resounding emphasis on the importance of breaking the silence surrounding Black womxn's struggles with mental health necessitates a celebration of Black womxn's love for one another in order to achieve love for themselves, transforming voice into a mechanism of healing, one that validates and affirms Black womxn's individual and collective narratives.

The first poem of the piece, "dark phases," condemns society's haphazard handling of the Black girl, transforming her into a vessel of unfulfilled promises in the absence of warmth and care. The Black womxn's "dark phrases of womanhood / of havin never been a girl" create a dissociative sense of identity, as if "she's half-notes

scattered / without rhythm / no tune" (shange 3, 5). As the "lady in brown" expresses the absence of girlhood for Black womxn through the analogy of broken music and rhythmless tunes, the poem alludes to the presence of music within the Black community's tradition of catharsis and healing. While the rhythm and lyrics of the weary blues and jazz serve as mechanisms to process racial fatigue and experiences in Blackness, the Black girl's song being "half-notes scattered / without rhythm / no tune" suggests that she has yet to receive an ode to her own nuanced experiences, which then reflects a failure in the Black art tradition to consider the "dark phases" of Black womxnhood. As "dark phrases" questions the nature of Black womxn's existence—"are we ghouls? / children of horror? / the joke?"—the lady in brown pleads (4):

> somebody / anybody
> sing a black girl's song
> bring her out
> to know herself
> to know you
> but sing her rhythms
> carin / struggle / hard times
> she's been dead so long
> closed in silence so long
> she doesn't know the sound
> of her own voice
> her infinite beauty (4)

This call for "somebody / anybody" to "sing a black girl's song" reflects the damaging extent to which society relegates the voices of Black womxn into obscurity, refusing them the ability to contemplate their identities and experiences outside of society's construction of Black womxnhood. By centering Black womxn's existences and experiences, the choreopoem constructs a new social system for the womxn on stage, one that begins to undo the harm of "social systems that trivialize their experiences" and render them "invisible" (Louis 199). This introduction of Black womxn's control over their self-perception releases Black womxn's experiences from being "closed in silence" as the choreopoem dismantles the cultural ideologies implicated in Black womxn's dehumanization. *for colored girls* exposes the oppressive silence surrounding the Black girl and her experiences to emphasize the absence of available spaces for Black womxn to process complex experiences of intimacy, trauma, and sorrow. Already marginalized in society, this disregard for the experiences of Black womxn places unhealthy limitations on their ability to contemplate their experiences, which ultimately triggers them to question not only their sanity, but their humanity as well.

In order to make the Black girl whole again, "dark phases" transitions into an incantation, bringing each of the ladies in color together whose communal exchange will be the catalyst for healing. The incantation begins with the lady in brown insisting that they "sing the song of her possibilities / sing a righteous gospel / let her be born

/ let her be born / & handled warmly" (shange 5). With no space and no song yet in place for the Black girl, these womxn must come together from the fringes of society and vocalize their experiences to explore the "possibilities" of the Black girl. Through communal healing, they can prioritize the manifestation of the Black girl—her song, her vulnerability, her existence. The location of each lady "outside of" (5) her respective city during this moment reflects the "outsiders within" phenomenon prevalent amidst Black womxn, in which the "social systems that trivialize their existence" also render them functionally invisible, thus furthering their marginalization (Louis 199). In disrupting their physical marginalization by centering their positionality and voices on the literal stage, the womxn reimagine the possibilities of their narratives when their experiences are focal. Together, these womxn will voice the sorrows, joys, and tumults of their lives together to give birth to the Black girl who will be "handled warmly" and with humanity. As the ladies speak "for the colored girls who have considered suicide / but moved to the ends of their own rainbows," they supply a necessary recognition of Black womxn's struggles to navigate societal constructs which invest in their vulnerability, marginalization, and death. Within a society that defines "boundaries of sex and race discrimination" by "white women's and Black men's experiences," Black womxn "can expect little protection" amidst these compounding systems of racial and patriarchal oppression (Crenshaw 139). Demystifying this intersectional space, *for colored girls* problematizes society's silence of Black womxn's experiences, instead shifting them from the outskirts of traditional understandings of racial and patriarchal oppressions to the central framework of the text itself. As the text acknowledges "colored girls who have considered suicide," it not only vocalizes the growing mental health crisis amongst Black girls as they struggle within intersecting paradigms of racist and sexist expectations, it also provides a community-driven solution. The ladies themselves are the "colored girls" who "moved to the ends of their own rainbows," and now stand together to therapize and ritualize new possibilities for healing for the next generation of young Black girls. The repetition of phrases—"let her be born,"—geographical location of the womxn, and joint singing of Black nursery rhymes initiates *for colored girls*' incantation as the text endeavors to reimagine the possibilities for Black girlhood through a communal and highly spiritual journey (5).

Through its depiction of budding sexuality and first-time experience, "graduation nite" emphasizes the possibilities of community and comfort made available to Black womxn when they can discuss their sexual experiences with transparency and curiosity. "graduation nite" depicts the lady in yellow's exciting first time, in which she enters "graduation nite" as "the only virgin in the crowd" and decides that part of her celebration must include sexual intimacy (shange 7). Although the text presents the lady in yellow enjoying her experience as she responds to the lady in blue's judgmental question, "you gave it up in a buick?" with "yeah, and honey, it was wonderful," the nuances of this narrative remain complicated and questionable. While this poem celebrates the lady in yellow's agency in her sexual encounters, its meditation on what the lady in yellow "hadda" do and how "graduation nite had to be hot" subtly counters the initial narrative of complete agency, suggesting that society's expectations

on what it means for Black womxn to be "grown" subconsciously coerces them into sexual relationships, possible before they are truly ready (9). Furthering the possibility of coercion, the depiction of the lady in yellow being so "drunk" she "cdnt figure out / whose hand waz on [her] thigh" suggests that even if "it didn't matter" to her, she is not necessarily fully conscious in her decision making process (8). The looming societal expectation over Black womxn to be "exceptionally sensual" Jezebel-esque caricatures, yet also ashamed of their sexuality under the constraints of patriarchal ideals of womxnhood, creates seemingly inescapable internal and communal conflict, and it positions many Black womxn, like the lady in yellow, within ambivalent sexual encounters (White 29). Rather than detract from the lady in yellow's celebration of her first sexual encounter, the problematization of the societal coercion reflects the pervasiveness of societal expectations concerning Black womxn's sexuality, as even a positive moment is fraught with concerns over agency and intentionality.

Rather than immediately joining the lady in yellow's espousal of sexual pleasure and experience, the other ladies initially focus their concerns on the perceived loss of innocence. The lady in blue's seemingly derogatory question, "you gave it up in a buick?" centers the lady in yellow's experience with a sense of loss, of having given some piece of herself "up" by losing her virginity "in a buick" (shange 9). In spite of the intrusion of judgement into this space of free expression, the womxn return to their open conversations of sexuality following the lady in yellow's denial of negative experience in her decision to "[give] it up in a buick." The open dialogue between the performers functions as a radical break from the tradition of silence surrounding Black womxn's sexual explorations. Sarah Mahurin highlights this scene as "one of the only moments in the performance in which the group of women is collectively responsive to the narrative of an individual" (332). Though this dialogue, *for colored girls* recognizes a sense of shared experience amidst the womxn and further identifies a "much stronger dynamic between performer and performer—between black female body and black female body" (Mahurin 331). The poem disrupts the silence surrounding Black womxn's agency in their sexual encounters through the performers' conversation and questions the responsive discussion that transforms the undertones of "you gave it up in a buick?" from judgmental to sisterly and humorous. As this moment inspires the discussion of sexuality in the following poem, the continuation of repetition and dance further ritualizes the womxn's sharing and empowers them to continue voicing their experiences and truths. The reclamation of sexual expression allows the womxn to transform a desperate atmosphere pleading for "somebody / anybody" to "sing a black girl's song" to one of community engagement that encourages vulnerability and free expression. With heightened societal expectations of sexuality often forcing young Black girls into early confines of Black womxnhood, the text necessitates this vulnerability and collaborative interpretations of ambiguous experiences to remove sexual expectations from the foreground of Black womxnhood, thus further cultivating a more experiential and experimental Black girlhood.

The womxn's achievement of comfort and openness in "graduation nite" allows them to begin communicating the shared traumas and societal constraints that

inhibit their abilities to attain self-love and acceptance. Like "graduation nite," "latent rapists" traffics in traditionally taboo concepts of sexuality, focusing on the damages of intracommunity betrayal and gaslighting specifically associated with sexual violence. As the ladies in blue, red, and purple—who together configure the coloring of bruises and blood—describe the gaslighting tactics and false constructions of sexual assault that make it "hard to press charges against" a friend, they identify the societal pushback when Black womxn attempt to reclaim agency and demand justice (shange 17). The text highlights the victim blaming strategy of society, one that tells these womxn "if you know him / you must have wanted it" or it was "a misunderstanding," and asks if they "had … been drinkin" (17). This hasty interrogation reflects the perpetuity of intracommunity cultural practices that continue to replicate systemic violence on Black womxn's bodies and minds post-assault. The culmination of these accusatory questions and statements leads the womxn to distrust their own experiences, to believe that "a rapist is always to be a stranger / to be legitimate" (17). The emotional and physical brutality of this experience further reveals the rarity of Black girls being "handled warmly," one of *for colored girls'* initial requests in the development of the "black girl's song," which facilitates Black womxn's spiral into self-deception and destruction (shange 5).

Black womxn's inability to identify as victims and perpetual feelings of being at fault prevents them from attaining the tools to survive trauma. Within the experience of sexual assault, the internalization of self-blame creates an even greater dilemma for these womxn as they must reconcile how they not only "can now meet [rapists] in circles [they] frequent for companionship," they "cd even have em over for dinner / & get raped in [their] own houses / by invitation / a friend" (shange 20-21). The womxn painfully recognize the complete absence of secure spaces for them to safely seek out love, as their own "circles" pose a threat to their safety, with this danger even transpiring in their "own houses." Furthermore, this early recognition of perpetual danger emphasizes the vigilance of Black girls and womxn to cultivate and constantly assess their own physical and emotional safety. "latent rapists" highlights how Black womxn are not only in want of secure spaces to explore companionship, but they are also bereft of communities that enable their ability to process and survive trauma. As the womxn begin and end the scene with "sudden light change[s]" that elicit reactions to an "imaginary slap" striking all of the ladies, *for colored girls* further entrenches the womxn within a communal experience of the frequent and consistent violence society inflicts upon them, leaving them physically and emotionally vulnerable both before and after traumatic experiences (shange 16, 21). Through its interrogation of narratives which perpetuate victim blaming, "latent rapists" validates the experiences of Black womxn still processing their own survivals of sexual assault, placing multiple Black womxn in conversation with another to solicit therapeutic group healing. The existence of this dialogical scene and its candid expulsions of society's framing of sexual assault further reveals the importance of creating spaces where Black womxn can be vulnerable and share their experiences candidly without retribution. By recognizing the inherent lack of safety for Black womxn in what should be their

safest community—the Black community—these womxn's dialogue emphasizes the importance of creating and nurturing an exclusive space for Black womxn to cultivate safety, comfort, and transparency with one another.

The womxn's shared struggle to find balanced romantic relationships in which their partners do not abuse their love and compassion underscores the necessity of Black womxn finding love amidst one another. In "pyramid," the womxn's desire for companionship and later realization of their concurrent relationship with the same man elicits fraught emotional responses which inspire atypical solutions, suggesting queer/nonnormative possibilities for the womxn in their endeavors for love and compassion. The poem situates itself amongst three friends "like a pyramid" with "one laugh /one music" (shange 39). Their description further establishes a communal being amongst the three womxn, as they not only share "laughs" and "music" but sight and anticipation as well. The man that all the womxn "[see] at the same time" and the speaker "[feels] a quick thump in each one of [them]" becomes a catalyst for the womxn's disconnection and their later reconnection. Although the lady in purple tells this story, her narration creates ambivalence as to who is speaking in each situation, further emphasizing the merged identity of the three womxn as they navigate love and loss as a cohesive unit. After the womxn "split" from each other to find love, it is not until they realize the man's simultaneous deception of each of them that they begin to reconcile their relationship and engage in group healing:

> she held her head on her lap
> the lap of her sisters soakin up tears
> each understandin how much love stood between them
> how much love stood between them
> love between them
> love like sisters (42)

As one of the few poems depicting loving, intimate engagement between the womxn, "pyramid" illustrates how Black womxn should not resign themselves to heteronormative relationships with men to discover love and compassion. Instead, "pyramid" suggests that it is outside of these romantic relationships where Black womxn hold the greatest possibilities for a restorative, healing love. Mahurin's discussion of the choreopoem's recurring shift from disconnection to reconnection for the womxn further signals how their mutual desire for "more self" facilitates this sense of community, especially as they view "self" within each other as seen through the poem's earlier interconnected sense of being between the womxn (Mahurin 336). While the womxn "know" that they "need someone now" for support, love, and survival, *for colored girls* posits that "someone" is not a man, but other Black womxn who interact with an "understanin" of "how much love stood between them/ … /love like sisters." In its disruption of heteronormative expectations and prioritization of intimate, empathetic relationships between Black womxn, *for colored girls* reimagines Black womxn's pursuit for love as moving beyond the romantic, instead encouraging emotionally responsive relationships between other Black womxn.

By achieving love amongst one another, the womxn can finally recognize and assert the power of their own love. In "no more love poems #1," the lady in orange dwells on her past history of emotional suppression:

> … /so this is a requiem for myself / cuz i
> have died in a real way / not wid aqua-coffins & du-wop cadillacs /
> i used to joke abt when i waz messin round / but a real dead
> lovin is here for you now / cuz i dont know anymore / how
> to avoid my own face wet wit my tears / cuz i had convinced
> myself colored girls had no right to sorrow / & i lived
> & loved that way & kept sorrow on the curb / (43)

Previous poems expressing the difficulties and traumas of "never havin been a girl" facilitate this profound realization for the lady in orange as she confronts her sorrow and abuse, no longer able to "avoid [her] own face wet wit [her] tears" or maintain the belief that "colored girls [have] no right to sorrow" (shange 3). Through the invocation of the past, of how she "had convinced / [herself] colored girls had no right to sorrow" and once "lived / & loved that way," the poem underscores this as a moment of metamorphosis for the lady in orange's conception of love and sorrow. The poem depicts love and sorrows' previous interdependence upon one another to underscore the role of Black womxn's silence concerning depression as a tool for relationships and survival. The identification of this moment as a "requiem for [herself]" because she has "died in a real way"—but not in a way that requires a funeral of "aqua coffins & du-wop cadillacs"—suggests that the lady in orange commits a partial suicide. The poem insists that this death is necessary as it allows for Black womxn to finally be "real / no longer symmetrical and impervious to pain" (44). The text acknowledges the recurring harm from society's consistent investment in the "fundamental image" of the Black womxn as being "a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work," as well as a woman who "is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves"; she is, essentially, a "superwoman" (Wallace 107). The Black womxn, trapped "at the nexus of America's sex and race mythology," cannot escape the entrapment of one without risking perpetual ensnarement within the other (White 28). To truly escape from both racial and sexual oppression, and to successfully navigate the complexity of emotions and experiences they endure, *for colored girls* embraces symbolic death, suggesting Black womxn must kill the part of themselves that internalizes each caricature society imposes upon them—the Jezebel and the Superhero. This death is integral to gaining the capacity to hold sorrow and love at the same time as well as the ability to navigate these once oppositional forces within a community of Black womxn.

After communal reconciliations of trauma and reconstructions of love and intimacy, the womxn come together in "no more love poems #4" to re-engage their earlier demand to be "handled warmly" by the world by redefining their expectations

for how others should acknowledge and treat their love. The womxn embark on a new verbal ritual, describing all the ways in which their love is too much "to have thrown / back in their face[s]": "too delicate," "too beautiful," "too sanctified," "too magic," "too saturday nite," "too complicated," "too music" (shange 45-47). This collection of epiphanies surrounding the complexity of each womxn's love creates a frenzied sense of unity and inspires movement between the womxn, eliciting a joint chant between them all, beginning with "music" and ending with "and complicated" (47, 49). The repetition by the womxn, to and for each other, illustrates an intimate, ritualistic exchange of vows which binds them to each other and emphasizes the power of communal love between Black womxn. When their chant reaches its "climax" and "all of the ladies fall out tired, but full of life and togetherness," the poem reflects on the cathartic possibilities of this moment, as the chanting becomes a medium for the womxn to ritualize and cement their new capacities for love and self (49). By depicting a "climax" amidst the womxn, who in exhaustion, all fall down with "togetherness," the choreopoem depicts the consummation of the womxn's metaphorical marriage, which is ultimately borne out of a mutual desire to devote themselves to each other's healing and find the meaning in "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored" (45). The text's queer positioning of the womxn outside of traditional sexual binaries refutes heteronormative standards, expectations, and traditions—further signaling how heteronormative constructs continue work in service of white patriarchal values, which ultimately perpetuate harm and individual disenfranchisement for Black womxn. In doing so, *for colored girls* aligns with Barbara Smith's conception of lesbian literature, in which "strong images of women," "the refusal to be linear," and the placement of Black womxn as "central figures" who are "positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another" defines the genre and remains implicitly significant within the literature of Black womxn (23). The emphasis on intracommunity healing between Black womxn within this poem highlights the intentionality of their communication and contact with another, as well as the evolved strength of their relationships, as a means to understand the intersectionality of their experiences and transform the way they perceive themselves and navigate the world.

Through the integration of spiritual and natural imagery, the final poem in *for colored girls*, "a layin on of hands," invokes the "black girl" sought out at the beginning of the choreopoem. The lady in red is the first to be reborn and "handled warmly": she describes how she "fell into numbness" and "wanted to jump outta [her] bones /& be done wit [her]self" until "the only tree [she] cd see / took [her] up in her branches" and "held [her in the breeze" as "the sun wrapped [her] up swingin rose light everywhere" (shange 63). The feminization of the tree who took the lady in red "up in her branches" alongside the warm envelopment of "the sun" further underscores how engaging in healing and upliftment amongst other Black womxn allows for them to finally be "handled warmly." In this same moment, the lady in red is "cold," "burnin up," and finally, "a child" as she is born into a new, radically transformative tradition of self-love and internal revelation. Invoked through the community of Black womxn's recollections on society's mistreatment and erasure of their stories, the emotional and

spiritual rebirth of the lady in red signifies the manifestation of the womxn's initial invocation to let the Black girl "be born/ & handled warmly." As all of the womxn come together to chant their final revelation—"i found god in myself /& i loved her / i loved her fiercely"—they "sing first for each other, then gradually to the audience"; this illustrates both the intensity and power of Black womxn's intracommunal sharing as well as the text's desire to speak outward to an audience of Black womxn in order disrupt the silencing and harming of Black womxn's constructions of self (63, 64). The womxn transition into "a closed tight circle" before the lady in brown speaks the penultimate stanza of the poem:

> & this is for colored girls who have considered
> suicide / but are movin to the ends of their own
> rainbows (64)

This final stanza highlights the ultimate goal of *for colored girls*, which is to vocalize the experiences of Black womxn in order to emphasize intracommunal sharing and healing as necessary for Black womxn's survival in an anti-Black, sexist society. The choreopoem situates itself within a new tradition of literature and art which specifically facilitates the restoration of Black girlhood, so that the experience of "never havin been a girl" can eventually dissipate, and in its place develop new opportunities for the emotional health of Black womxn.

ntzoke shange's *for colored girls* reimagines life, love, and community for Black girls and womxn, fulfilling its incantation and demand to "let her be born"; through the final act of ladies in colors, their devotion to each other's experiences, loves, and healing solicit the birth of a new generation of Black girls. *for colored girls* sparks a necessary discourse surrounding the harmful tradition of silencing Black womxn's experiences within womxnhood through its poetic ritual of speaking experiences out loud as a mechanism of healing. Through this intense vocality, *for colored girls* fundamentally restructures our understanding of how Black womxn can facilitate their own healing and upliftment amongst one another, especially within systems that benefit from their division, pain, and vulnerability. The emphasis on Black womxn "movin to the ends of their own rainbows" through dynamic, intimate group healing reformulates the turbulence of Black womxn's experiences under racial and patriarchal oppression to create a bridge meant to be crossed together (shange 64). With consistent recognition of Black womxn's humanity, *for colored girls* imagines a world in which Black womxn create girlhood and humanity intergenerationally for one another.

Notes

1. Following ntozake shange's intentional decision to keep her name and writing in lower-case letters, any reproduction of her work or name will remain lower-cased.
2. I am replacing the e in woman with an x ("womxn") in an effort to disrupt biological norms associated with womxnhood.

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The Failure of Performative Masculinity in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*

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Ethnic American literature often depicts male characters displaying some form of compensation. Many American immigrants in these works, when faced with constant degradation by controlling forces outside of their communities, compensate for a loss of power in this area with a show of power elsewhere. One common example of this compensation is performative masculinity. Characters create a hypermasculine persona in an attempt to regain power within their communities that they lose through subjugating forces outside of the community. In Helena María Viramontes's novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them,* characters compensate in this way for a perceived loss of power as a result of outside subjugating forces and the toxic environment they cause. Members of the McBride Boys, including the ambiguous Turtle, follow hypermasculine rules and display their masculinity in order to be seen as tough and dangerous and to keep their dwindling power as a gang. However, this appearance of toughness only restricts them just like the policing force—the Quarantine Authority—that cordons off their neighborhood under the guise of controlling a rabies epidemic in dogs. Almost no attention has been paid to the men in the novel, unless one is referring to the violence they enact against the community and the women. An examination of the reasons for their compensation and of the ways in which they compensate for a loss of power reveals a nuanced critique of the gender relations of Viramontes's East Los Angeles. This examination reveals that the masculinity which certain men perform is simply a show of power, and it will never translate into anything constructive—only into a weakening of the bonds meant to hold the community together. In *Their Dogs Came with Them,* characters participate in performative masculinity as a reaction to a harsh living environment caused by controlling forces outside of their culture and community, resulting in the attainment of a masculinity that is ultimately just as destructive.

Expectations surrounding masculinity exist in every culture, and while these expectations differ from one culture to another, there are certain similarities that prove helpful in understanding why many male characters in *Their Dogs* react in the way that they do to oppression. David D. Gilmore, an anthropologist interested in societal views of masculinity, claims that "the manhood ideal is not purely psychogenetic in origin but is also a culturally imposed ideal to which men must conform whether or not they find it psychologically congenial" (4). This means that this masculinity is not inherent in the mind of men, but rather something learned through culture. While the characters in the novel may not always enjoy engaging in masculine performance, they do so because they see this behavior as culturally imposed; as a result, they may feel trapped. It is also "not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds" (Gilmore 11). This means that manhood is not given but earned, leading to a need to perform a masculinity visible to others in the hopes of gaining such a status. Most important to a discussion of masculinity in Viramontes's ethnic community is Gilmore's conclusion that the ideal manhood prescribed by a society directly correlates with the type of environment in which the society exists: "The harsher the environment and the scarcer the resources, the more manhood is stressed as inspiration and goal" (224). The harsh environment of Viramontes's novel leads these characters to see masculinity as one of the most important aspects of their lives—to show their ability, to survive and thrive.

It is clear from the outset of the novel that the community of East Los Angeles (LA) exists in a very harsh environment. Viramontes's depiction of East LA reveals a community fractured by freeways, policing forces, and the members of the community itself. Grandmother Zumaya sees her community being destroyed for the sake of freeway construction and is reminded of "how carnivorous life was, how indifferent machinery teeth could be" (146). Raelene Wyse argues that the machines "represent unnamed and unknown people who, in an act perhaps better described as cannibalistic, have chosen to 'other' a group of people by treating them as something to be consumed" (51). City officials quarantine the neighborhood due to a supposed rabies outbreak in stray dogs, and its members are notified about this decision via maps "printed in English only" in a community where many inhabitants do not speak English (Viramontes 54). As a result, the community is forced to constantly prove their right to the Quarantine Authority in order to inhabit their own space because, as Ermila, one of the quarantined neighborhood's inhabitants, explains, "[t]he city officials demanded paper so thin and weightless, it resisted the possibility of upholding legal import to people like [Ermila], her cousin Nacho, her girlfriends and all the other neighbors with or without children who had the misfortune of living within the shaded designated areas" (63). To use Wyse's term, the machines and the quarantine "other" the inhabitants of East LA by forcing them to live in a community being consumed for the betterment of wealthier communities (which the freeways mostly serve) and by forcing them to prove their right to exist in their own community. Wyse calls this type of "othering" an "internal exile," in that it makes members of a

community feel foreign in their own land (49). Additionally, poverty results in these characters living in a community where "[l]uck was as scarce as money" and "the constant howling of a siren" leaves people wondering, "Ambulance? Fire? Police? QA?" because any number of violent occurrences could be causing the disturbance (Viramontes 235, 270)

As a result of this toxic environment, certain male characters compensate for their loss of power and dignity by creating a hypermasculine identity for themselves, which is fueled by the high expectations of masculinity prescribed by the society. For some male characters, the machismo mentality, according to which anything feminine translates into weakness, dominates their behavior, causing them to compensate with hypermasculinity. This type of "culturally imposed" ideal manhood is ingrained in males from a very young age, which is especially evident in gang member and neighborhood inhabitant, Luis Lil' Lizard, and his reaction to affection from his uncle, Tío Angel. As Luis passes through the kitchen with his mother's bag of clothespins on his way outside to build a tent with his sister, Turtle, he encounters his aunt and uncle. Tío Angel cups his face in his hands, and in that moment, "Luis felt foolish holding Ama's knuckled cotton sack of clothespins, more foolish because of the attentive affection of another man." Tío Angel then kisses Luis on the cheek, and he reacts by "pull[ing] back to reject the kiss, but not enough to prevent it" (Viramontes 159). Luis is embarrassed to be caught with an object associated with women and house chores—the clothespins—but he is even more embarrassed when Tío Angel shows him affection because he has been taught that such a thing is not masculine. The "culturally imposed" nature of this type of association is revealed when his Aunt Mercy witnesses Tío Angel's affection and comments, "You been hanging out too much with men, ése," which could be read as an accusation of queerness, creating an association between males showing affection to other males and femininity (159). The aftermath of this scene is an indication of the effect this type of manhood ideal can have on young boys. When Luis finally joins Turtle outside to build the tent, he clearly no longer wants to participate in the activity, but instead "[throws] the sack [of clothespins] on the brittle grass" and "[squats] on his haunches to smoke a frajo" (165). Turtle remembers this moment as the night she began to lose her brother: "from this night on, he would refuse to help build a tent or spend time with her because he busied himself in becoming someone else" (165). It is understood that, on this night, Luis began transforming himself into the hypermasculine notion of a man by becoming one of the Gamboa Boys, a neighborhood gang.

This "culturally imposed" ideal can be seen continuing into manhood as well through the Gamboa Boys as a whole. The Gamboa Boys, a street gang made up of "toughened unimaginable lives," uphold a type of performative masculinity that demonstrates this mentality of femininity being associated with weakness (Viramontes 226). Turtle, Luis, Big Al, Santos, and Lucho, members of the gang, all uphold a belief that to be female is to be weak. Turtle cries in front of Luis after he shaves her hair in response to their mother pulling it during a fight over Turtle's "erasure of breasts and dresses and all that was outwardly female, over her behaving like some unholy

malflora," with malflora being a derogatory term for lesbian. He responds to her tears with, "Shut up … because he had a girl for a brother and he profoundly resented it" (25). Similarly, after Turtle is sexually assaulted by the bagman of a convenience store they attempt to steal from, Luis takes it upon himself to exact revenge: "But what he had to do to the bagman later that night, he had to do himself because he had a girl for a brother" (26). Additionally, the members of the Gamboa Boys constantly insult themselves and others by using the word "pussy," further equating femininity with something negative and weak. Luis would even prefer to die in Vietnam than be seen as feminine; he thinks, "Better to return in a body bag than become a pussy" (231). This is why Turtle, who performs her masculinity more than any other character, prefers being male over female because if "female" designates weakness, Turtle recognizes "that being a woman is dangerous and that masculinity affords her some protection" (Wyse 52).

One description of Turtle by the Gamboa Boys reveals why they fear being seen as feminine. It states that the "boys knew Turtle was the only McBride Boy lacking, as in S for *Sin* huevos and Lote M knew it too" (Viramontes 229). The Lote M, the Gamboa Boys' rival gang, and the Gamboa Boys themselves focus on Turtle's status of "lacking" and see it as a weakness. Consequently, a preoccupation and fear of castration develops within them, and they in turn connect it with emasculation and humiliation. When Turtle sees the Gamboa Boys' tags in their territory covered over by Lote M tags, she sees this as "[t]earing off McBride balls" (217). She describes the names of Lote M members painted over the names of the Gamboa Boys as "[p]erforating new conquerors over old ones with a blunt hammer, the remaining tags erased, shitted on, with strokes of red runny spray paint" (218). Describing the loss of their territory through the erasure of their names is akin to a castration, to being "shitted on," and Turtle sees castration and emasculation as a humiliation and a weakening of identity. She perceives it as a weakness because it is a loss of power—and therefore linked to femininity.

Another type of castration, seen through the portrayal of the low-riders in the novel, reveals a different mode of compensation for the gang members of East LA. The low-riders driven by the members of the Gamboa Boys, namely Santos and Big Al, serve as an additional example of their performative masculinity and compensation for a lack of power over their environment. Denise Michelle Sandoval, in her study of *Low Rider Magazine*, states that low-rider culture is "part of the historical negotiation of Chicano identity in response to social oppression within the dominant society through the creation of oppositional spaces that are a part of the Mexican American experience in the United States" (182). Additionally, low-riders are meant to oppose the traditional, Anglo American "hot rodders" in that they are "lowered to the ground and meant to go slow in order to be seen and to display an expression of a particular Chicana/o identity" (Sandoval 183). Essentially, low-riders are meant to help Chicanos *perform* a certain identity—one meant to be displayed. The cars are also famous for their frequent images of women "practically naked or fully naked and usually situated in passive or overtly sexualized positions"; in setting up women as "highly sexualized

object[s] whose function [are] to appeal to the male gaze," their purpose can be read as being an extension of the male penis (Sandoval 182). Similarly, David William Foster states that "the network of communication that enmeshes men and their lowriders is essentially homosocial in the way in which it constructs bonds of masculine power between them as a posturing in the face of harsh discrimination of Anglo society" (123). Low-riders, then, are a way for Chicanos to compensate for a loss of power—which results from discrimination—by creating a performative expression of their culture and masculinity. This quite literally paints women as passive and something to be dominated, furthering the cultural idea that femininity is associated with weakness. However, it also provides a weak point where one might aim to damage such constructed masculinity.

This weak point provided by the low-rider example is exploited multiple times, first when Ermila and her friends plan revenge on Jan, Rini's mother's boyfriend, after he sexually assaults her. Though Jan is not a member of the Gamboa Boys, this scene is the most overt instance of the damaging effect of masculinity through a low-rider. The girls say that the revenge they decide on has "gotta hurt royally. A real bitchen hurt. Cut deep, you know?" (Viramontes 196). Ermila and her friends decide, in the end, to scratch the words "PUTO" and "LOTE" into the paint of Jan's beloved Chevy Coupe using acetone and steel wool (199). Jan's car is described as "[m]etallic bronze" with "orange highlights" and "wax-sheen-polished like a warrior, the sun god, priceless" (197). The colors of the car and its description as warrior-like establish it as an extension of Jan's masculinity through posturing, as previously explained. They carve those specific words into the paint, calling Jan a derogatory term for homosexual because it is an emasculating one. They make the words "cut deep" into his car, which is set up as a phallic symbol. Thus, the action is meant to metaphorically castrate him.

Two members of the Gamboa Boys also participate in low-rider culture; in one case, just as with Jan's car, this type of performative masculinity proves to be particularly susceptible to a castration of sorts. Using a method similar to the revenge that Ermila and her friends take on Jan via the phallic symbol of his car, Santos's ex-girlfriend metaphorically castrates him. His "pearl-peach Pontiac Bonneville" is described as his "pride and joy," with "gold pinstriping and chrome-gold hubcaps," "pristine leather biscuit tucks," and a "chain steering wheel," which he sits behind "with the assurance of a man who commandeered his vehicle, the pilot in charge of his aircraft, the one and only jefe of the dash and panel knobs ... [H]e sat there in a posture of staunch control" (Viramontes 266-67). The showy nature of the vehicle makes it perfect for the "posturing" of "masculine power" that Foster describes: with its bright, distinct look, it would certainly be seen by all. This car allows Santos the power that he seems to possess behind the wheel. The only imperfection on his pristine car is a cracked rear window, which Turtle discovers was done by Hilda, Santos's ex-girlfriend. According to Santos, "I crashed her heart and so she crashed my car" (267). The young girls and women of the community know the status that the low-riders hold with the men. So, when any sort of emasculation is deemed necessary as revenge, the low-

riders that the men use as a performance and extension of their masculinity are perfect targets.

Alfonso, known as "Big Al, the destroyer," is perhaps the most prominent example of performative masculinity as a form of compensation for perceived weakness (Viramontes 195). He also has a low-rider he prizes: "a hydrolic powder-blue Impala" that he customized after buying it from Salas Used Car Lot (65). Ermila, his girlfriend, uses his "gang-banging reputation" to protect her from the uncomfortable gazes of the men who work with her at the used car lot. Big Al displays his power, and therefore his masculinity, when he buys the car with cash. The reader is told that, for Salas, "it was not his role as a car-lot proprietor to ask how a nineteen-year-old man whose signature revealed he had not made it past middle school could proudly display various bills from a crowded billfold and spread them across the cashier counter like a winning power hand" (65). This event features Big Al—who lacks formal education—compensating through the assertion of dominance and display of monetary value. Big Al's behavior can be explained by Gilmore, who states that, while there is no universal ideal male, there are three traits that seem to be common among all cultures regarding ideal manhood. Terming the criterion of performance as the "Ubiquitous Male," he finds that the men who wish to obtain the status of ideal man must fulfill the rolls of Impregnator, Protector, and Provider (223). Here, Big Al attempts to prove his ability to fulfill his role as ideal male through being both a Provider and a Protector. Not only does he make enough money to pay for his own car in cash (most likely through illegal means, given his status as a gang member), which grants him, as previously discussed, power and a show of masculinity, but he also proves his ability to protect Ermila through the posturing of his gangbanger reputation; this is evident when he "gun[s] his engine whenever [she] slip[s] into the front seat" (Viramontes 65). He uses the power of his car, the "explosive" sound of the engine, as a stand-in for his masculinity—as a show-of his supposed power.

However, in attempting to display this type of performative masculinity to the community, Big Al fails as the ideal male elsewhere in his life. Firstly, he fails to be a Provider for his family. His need to be masculine prevents him from replacing his father, who left him and his mother when Big Al was little (though he was not much of a father when he was present.) Big Al follows the same path: "Near the stairs of the porch, Alfonso's mother had planted a few rosebushes. It was his father's job to care for them and then when his father left it was Alfonso's, and he just forgot to care too, and the poor bushes withered into brittle stems" (Viramontes 309). Here, the garden represents the Big Al's family, which could flourish under the proper care but now withers from neglect. By also neglecting the garden, Big Al follows his father's failure to provide because he is too focused on performing an expected masculinity; he cannot do something as feminine as cultivating a garden of flowers.

Perhaps the main reason Big Al is the novel's best example of performative masculinity—which, again, is a consequence of his compensation for a perceived lack of power—is because he expects to fail the third role of Impregnator. Later in the novel, Big Al denies his homosexual identity. However, one can see his denial of

and compensation for his sexuality earlier in his relationship with Ermila. She reveals that "[s]he had never known Alfonso fully naked except for his cock" (Viramontes 74), meaning that they always have sex fully clothed. Big Al does not have sex with Ermila because he wants to, but because he believes it to be what a real man does: the domination of a female through sex indicates power. Additionally, it becomes clear that his sex with Ermila is posturing, just like driving a low-rider, when the reader is told that, after they had sex for the first time, "[h]e drove her home, his arm over her shoulder as a token of recognition, his old lady" (74). He sees their first time not as linking them romantically but as linking them via his ownership of her. Placing his arm over her shoulder is not a sign of affection, but one of possession. He does this because of his secret relationship with fellow McBride Boy, Lucho: "Alfonso had always blamed the angel dust or the whiskey or the mota for his cocksucking because he wasn't a joto like Lucho. Alfonso even had a girlfriend he fucked in order to prove he wasn't a joto, never ever a joto like Lucho" (308). The key to Big Al's reaction is that, in his relationship with Lucho, he is always the receiver of penetration.

The importance of this relationship dynamic and Big Al's reaction to it can be explained through the way Latino/a cultures view homosexual behavior between men. According to John Dececco and Chris Girman, "the structured meaning of homosexuality in the … Mexican/Latin American sexual system confers meaning to male/male sexual practices according to sexual aims, or the acts that one wants to perform on or to another body" (65). This results in a "highly gender-stratified society in which mannerisms and modes of behavior considered active are equated with masculinity, while those stigmatized passive are identified as feminine." Subsequently, "men who deviate from the prescribed norms of behavior are given a series of labels, such as *puto*, *joto*, *mariposa*, and *maricon*, with the implied understanding that these labels are used to denote unmanly, feminized behavior" (Dececco and Girmane 67). Big Al fears his relationship with Lucho becoming known because, according to societal expectations, he is the feminized party in their relationship. The labels assigned to these individuals are ones which have been used in the novel to feminize and emasculate: like Ermila and her friends rubbing "puto" into the paint of Jan's low-rider, and Big Al denying his connection to Lucho because he is not a "joto" like him. However, he fervently forbids this label and holds onto his relationship with Ermila as a performative display of masculinity because he believes that his position in his relationship with Lucho renders him feminized. It is the societal norms in Big Al's culture, though, that make him believe this type of feminized/masculinized dichotomy. In reality, his need to constantly be seen as masculine only serves to suppress his true feelings; this is why Big Al cultivates his relationship with Ermila instead of admitting his feelings for Lucho. Furthermore, this is why, in the end, Lucho "turned his back on his family of men and walked away," which results in Big Al becoming more aggressive and denying his feelings further by committing another act to prove his manhood (Viramontes 308).

Big Al's final and most striking form of compensation is an act of self-mutilation which serves as a personal ceremony to prove his manhood. In his study of cultural

expectations of ideal manhood, Gilmore explores many societal ceremonies designed for boys to prove they are men. Such ceremonies, which can involve "bloody circumcision rites," whipping, flailing, and beating, are used to test young boys before they can be deemed ideal men (13-14). Although Big Al does not live in such an extreme society, he seems to perform his self-mutilation ceremony in order to prove his manhood; he only does this, however, because an incident leads him to fear his feelings for Lucho have become clear to the other gang members. He "exhaled through his nose, studied the smoldering red ash of [his] cigarette, and then he took the lit end and crushed it against his swollen cheek with such force his eyes welled and the cigarette extinguished" (Viramontes 310). His performance of masculinity is successful because Palo, a fellow Gamboa Boy, reacts by thinking, "Al's face was all fucked up and it demanded respect" (310). Palo sees Big Al's act of self-mutilation, the damage it causes for the sake of performance, and respects his sacrifice. Big Al's horrifying performance does not just attempt to restore his masculinity; it *demands* that his fellow gang members notice it. As Gilmore explains, ideal manhood often prescribes that "the manly man is one who performs … center stage. His role-playing is manifested in 'foregrounded' deeds, in actions that are seen by everyone and therefore have the potential to be judged collectively" (36). Big Al publicly performs his masculine act, forces his fellow gang members to observe it, and allows them to judge him—which works in his favor. However, his ceremony is only a single act to prove something that he does not truly have: an ideal manhood which allows him to be a Protector. His failure to provide for his family manifests in his front yard's lack of life. Not only does he let the rose bushes die, but he lets "nothing in their yard … grow" (309). Big Al's dead yard signifies his failure to provide an environment in which his family can grow. In the end, he fails to fulfill all roles of Provider, Impregnator, and ultimately, Protector.

A similar ceremony happens with Turtle in a rite that all the Gamboa Boys must pass before they can join. While the location of the rite changes depending on the person, Turtle's takes place in a cemetery. She runs as far as she can before the other boys catch her and beat her until she can barely stand. The beating is so severe that one eye is swollen shut, ribs are broken, and Luis has to carry her home. But because she survives, there are "slaps of congratulations on her back," and she is officially a Gamboa Boy (Viramontes 233). While this is technically a gang initiation, it serves the same purpose as ceremonies to prove one's manhood. As previously mentioned, the harsher the environment, the more that manhood is deemed important. In this harsh environment, and in others, gang initiations prove that potential members can survive the harsh environment before they are let into the group, as "manhood scripts … [are] modes of integrating men into their society, as codes of belonging in a hard, often threatening world" (Gilmore 224). And what are gangs if not a replacement for a family, a way to feel as though one belongs? In this case, the potential members must prove their toughness, their ability to contribute to the family, in order to be deemed valuable to it. Although Turtle is not biologically male, she performs masculinity and

enters a masculine world in order to protect herself, and as such, she must prove her ability to play the role of a masculine male in order to be accepted.

However, this gang initiation to prove one's manhood does not guarantee that the members have achieved ideal manhood as Gilmore defines it. He believes that the manhood ideal is important for the sustainability of a society, claiming that "[s] ociety is a delicate perpetual motion machine that depends upon the replication of its primary structures, the family in particular"; this is because "family structures are what perpetuate a culture, through socialization of children in that culture" (225). Gilmore explains that this continuity is threatened in most societies "internally by simple entropy," meaning natural threats of disorder come from different people living together, and "externally by dangers inherent in humans ... life in general" (225). In any culture, the role of ideal manhood is designed to act as a "social barrier that societies must erect against entropy, human enemies, and the forces of nature, time, and all the human weaknesses that endanger group life" (Gilmore 226). The entropy that Gilmore describes is slowly destroying the community of East LA, as was previously discussed, through the fragmentation of the society by the freeway construction and the quarantine. However, it is also caused by the internal struggle of its inhabitants. Members of the community constantly disappear or are erased by various factors. Mothers and fathers tend to disappear, threatening the perpetuation of the culture via the family structure. Turtle and Luis' father and mother leave them, and Luis leaves Turtle, although admittedly not by choice. Big Al's father disappears as well, leaving Big Al to fill a void that he is incapable of filling, demonstrated by the dead rose bushes. With these in mind, Juanita Heredia claims that Viramontes "clearly shows how the neighborhood's fragmentation, 'divided into freeways,' may also serve as a metaphor for families' separation (divided by deaths or departures) in a rapidly changing urban environment" (106). In this case, the manhood that is meant to guard against the external dangers of the society is, in many ways, the cause of the internal entropy which happens when the family structure is compromised.

The compromised family structure is demonstrated first when Luis is about to board a bus to boot camp after he is drafted into the army. He compensates for his fear, and the perceived weakness which results, by antagonizing Lucho, who, as previously established, is a fellow Gamboa Boy and therefore a surrogate family member. Luis chooses to imitate Lucho's stutter—a clear source of humiliation for him as he struggles to speak: "Worse yet, as Lucho's facial muscles struggled in moments of increasing anger, his stutter spluttered out of control, leaving him with locked fists" (Viramontes 231). In his anger, Lucho loses the ability to talk, and his locked fists indicate a need to compensate for this via brute force. The lack of control he feels can be equated with the lack of control the community feels due to the outside forces which wish to fragment men like him.

Luis fears what will happen when he goes to war in Vietnam, as is shown through his fascination with the landmines that leave one "[s]urprised to see a pinkish mist of skin and boot and testicles in front of you and surprised to see that grounded flesh had once, not more than a few seconds before, belonged to you" (Viramontes 228). This

not only illustrates his fear of castration, a common theme in the novel, but it also illustrates the awareness that he may not come back from Vietnam alive. While Luis, Turtle, and Lucho joke about the prospect of castration via landmines—with Turtle saying, "They grow back, pendejo"—it is clear that the fear of death, inherently linked to his fear of castration, frightens Luis. These jokes, specifically Lucho saying, "Ca-ca-ca-come BACK with your NUTS," prompt Luis to become distracted: "An image in his head made him quiet" (229). Despite his distraction, when he comes back to reality, he mocks Lucho's stutter, saying, "Ka-ka-ka-kant you talk better?" (230). He does this because he anticipates the kind of reaction he will get from Lucho—that of anger and a need to fight against the perceived weakness. The only thing that keeps them from fighting is Turtle getting between them; however, Luis antagonizes Lucho in order to compensate for his fear because he knows that coercing Lucho into a fight will make him feel masculine. This is evident when he resents Turtle for trying to stop the fight. He thinks, "He had forgotten he had a pussy for a brother. No matter how many asses Turtle kicked, or how bad, how really bad she was, Turtle was someone he hoped never to become" (230). He sees Turtle as weak because she is female, and he blames her femaleness for her attempt to stop a fight. This effort to goad Lucho into an altercation is another version of the manhood ceremonies that Gilmore refers to and that Big Al emulates when he extinguishes a cigarette on his face. Yet, the most significant aspect of this scene is that the fight compromises Luis' relationship with his gang members, his family, just before he leaves for Vietnam—from which he never returns.

The fractured family structure via performative masculinity becomes most clear in the final scene when Turtle is abandoned by her family, which leads to her death. Since Turtle has no other family left in the community, the McBride boys are a substitute for this structure and the protection it provides, made evident when Turtle joins in on the attack of Nacho: "her body moving to join the McBride Boys because all they had was each other" (Viramontes 321). However, it is implied that this family unit does not protect Turtle's needs. While she is intoxicated by a PCP-laced marijuana cigarette, she unknowingly volunteers to be the one to murder Nacho; Santos says, "Let her take the fall" (322). The group is willing to sacrifice one of their own for the sake of revenge, specifically revenge that must be had because Nacho has humiliated Big Al. The McBride Boys are made up of those who "wanted either to live up to their badass-nowhere status or live down some stabbing humiliation" (304). Big Al wants to do both by performing a hypermasculine version of himself and fighting back when humiliation compromises it; and in this case, Nacho locks him in a lifeguard tower and is eventually found by a Chihuahua named Pepino. Thus, the gang jumps Nacho because "[n]o other option was available, especially when one of them had been assaulted, humiliated and especially when it happened to Alfonso" (304).

The gang's rationale for this act leads to the tragic last scene, revealing the failure of Big Al and Luis' performative masculinity. Big Al's assault is tied to humiliation, meaning that the retaliation needs to happen not because a gang member was put in danger, but because the danger was humiliating—insinuating a connection between being assaulted and being weak. The fact that the Gamboa Boys think they have

no other option reveals their view of this type of humiliation: it is akin to critical wounding. Redemption through retaliation is imperative to healing the metaphorical wound. When "Turtle lunged at [Nacho] with all the dynamite rage of all the fucked-up boys stored in her rented body" and stabs him so hard with her screwdriver that she hits the wall behind him and breaks her arm, she represents the consequential damage of their society's ideal manhood (Viramontes 322). Turtle's death—after which she "found herself abandoned by the McBride Boys"—and the actions leading to it, represent how the hypermasculinity that the gang performs contributes to the downfall of the community, as well as that of the gang itself (323). In attacking Nacho, the Gamboa Boys show that they are not averse to attacking members of their own community in order to maintain their masculine performance. This is a more extreme version of Luis compromising his relationship with two of his gang members, one of whom is his blood relative, in order to compensate for a perceived weakness. Moreover, while Turtle was initially "[e]ncircled by the McBride Boys, [and] grew larger and invincible," once she finds herself alone with a fatally wounded Nacho and Tranquilina, she becomes vulnerable to the outside forces which wish to destroy the community, i.e. the Quarantine Authority (322).

Mary A. Seliger, in her article detailing the racial violence in select works of Viramontes, argues that, in the final chapter of *Their Dogs,* "the chaos and instability … underscore the asymmetric social relations that characterize a community under siege and threaten its survival" (269). While Seliger sees the policing forces in the novel at fault for the community's fragmentation, this is not the only source of instability in the characters' lives. The Gamboa Boys, with their performance of hypermasculinity focused on appearances of toughness and of retaliation against humiliation above all else, represent a type of manhood which fails the community. Their manhood, instead of being focused on acting as a "social barrier" against the many forces which might destroy the community, is focused inward on their own appearances. Gilmore states that the manhood ideal's "critical threshold represents the point at which the boy produces more than he consumes and gives more than he takes" (226). However, the males of *Their Dogs* who perform their particular version of masculinity fail as productive members of society. Luis focuses on how his fear of war and death might make him seem weak, just as Big Al perceives Nacho's successful attack on him as damaging his masculinity. Both acts result in humiliation and a fractured family unit and/or community: the former is a fractured relationship, and the latter is a fractured collective, which is evident via the death of a community member.

Previous critical work on Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them* has largely discussed the women of the novel—Turtle in particular. Scholars primairly emphasize how the East Los Angeles environment that Viramontes creates represents the physical and sexual violence historically enacted upon Latinas. However, a study of the novel's men proves useful in bringing attention to the violence inflicted upon women; in other words, a study of how the violence affects men and leads them to perpetuating it upon women. It does not justify such violence, but rather traces it back to two specific sources: policing forces outside of the community, and a culturally imposed ideal

manhood. While the policing forces pressure the men to act as "social barriers" against entropy which has become inevitable, the culturally imposed ideals, such as femininity being equated with weakness, give men unrealistic and damaging expectations to meet. As such, further study of the men in the novel could prove useful in further situating *Their Dogs* in order to battle the erasure of history that the novel so clearly depicts.

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Challenging Patriarchy and Reclaiming Autonomy Through Narrative and Sexuality in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*

Courtney Mullis

Since the 1995 publication of Cathy Caruth's seminal collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, literary scholars have devoted considerable attention to narrative representations of traumatic experience. Despite the popularity of this discourse, some critics argue that the Caruthian theory of individual trauma is limited and depoliticizes traumatic experience (Baelo-Allué 168). Novels that represent the cultural contexts of trauma rather than focusing solely on individual traumatic experiences, however, expand the possibilities of literary trauma theory. Gayl Jones' 1975 novel, *Corregidora*, avoids the limitations of individual trauma theory by representing the cultural contexts of trauma. The novel demonstrates both individual and cultural traumas through the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora. Ursa experiences cultural trauma from her foremothers, who faced the traumas of slavery, abuse, and incest. Ursa's Great Gram was a slave on a Brazilian plantation, owned by a Portuguese man named Corregidora. Corregidora sexually abused and eventually impregnated Ursa's Great Gram. The child she bears—Ursa's Gram—becomes Corregidora's next victim. Great Gram has to leave the plantation after "*she did something that made him wont* [sic] *to kill her*" (Jones 79). Corregidora then impregnates his daughter with his own grandchild. Before Ursa's Mama is born, the abolition of slavery frees Gram and she moves to Louisiana with Great Gram. Despite residing in the United States long after the abolition of slavery, Ursa deals with abuse much like the generations of women before her. Mutt—the man Ursa marries, divorces, and eventually forgives—traumatizes Ursa by subjecting her to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Throughout the novel, the preexisting cultural trauma of slavery—both in general and in specific to the sexual traumas expereinced by Ursa's foremothers—affects Ursa's own ability to express her sexuality, choose a loving romantic partner, and cope with individual trauma.

Just as individual trauma affects the consciousness of an individual person, the phenomenon of cultural trauma affects the consciousness of an entire cultural group. According to sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, a contributor to the seminal text *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective identity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). For trauma survivors, the past stains the present. In the same collection, sociologist Neal Smelser argues that in the United States “the memory of the institution of slavery appears to qualify most unequivocally as a cultural trauma” because it has produced wide and lasting impacts on the psyches and identity constructions of African Americans (36). Alexander and Smelser’s concept of cultural trauma compares to what literary scholar Stella Setka calls “traumatic rememory.” Setka defines traumatic rememory as “a form of collective memory that is haunted by historically entrenched power relations and violence” (129). Setka, Alexander, and Smelser agree that the interrelated legacies of slavery and sexual violence against African American women affect contemporary African American female consciousness.

As Setka notes, these enmeshed legacies of slavery and sexual violence affect Ursa in *Corregidora*. Ursa is marked by what Hortense Spillers calls the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (67). Spillers defines the distinction between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ as “the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67). When socialization and narrative are attached to flesh, flesh becomes body. Spillers elaborates, “These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh,” and she suggests that “this phenomenon of marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another” (67). This phenomenon appears in *Corregidora*, as female sexualities are embroiled across generations, and cultural trauma clearly affects Ursa in that it inhibits her ability to express her sexuality, exacerbates her response to individual trauma, and leads her to choose a romantic partner who abuses her. By the end of the novel, Ursa overcomes cultural trauma by asserting her sexual autonomy. The traumatic past of Ursa’s ancestors marks her flesh, and through these symbols her flesh becomes body. In addition, Ursa’s own abusive relationship creates individual trauma and mirrors the relationships between Old Man Corregidora and each of his women. The abusive relationship between Ursa and Mutt and the abusive relationships between Corregidora and his women serve as microcosms for the relationship between African American women and patriarchy. The relationship between black women and patriarchy is “an unhealthy, dysfunctional, abusive relationship” because patriarchy is “stifling, controlling, oppressive” and unconcerned with the needs, desires, and interests of African American women (Cooper 13). Ultimately, *Corregidora* demonstrates how sexual autonomy can highlight and begin to challenge the abusive relationship between black women and patriarchy.

Throughout the novel, Ursa recalls her relationship with her ex-husband, Mutt, and considers the parallels between their marriage and her ancestors' abusive relationships with men. Because of her cultural trauma, Ursa fears opening herself up to a man both emotionally and sexually. Before they marry, Ursa cannot bring herself to have sexual intercourse with Mutt. Ursa and Mutt do not have sex until their wedding night. Even then, Ursa is reluctant. She says, "I can't, Mutt" (Jones 152). Ursa asks him, "I act like a child, don't I?" (153). Her question reveals her insecurity as well as the tension between societal expectations for a married woman and the difficulty Ursa feels in letting a man close to her. Ursa's inability to express her sexuality shows that for a victim of cultural trauma, "whose mind and spirit reside within the sociopolitical institution of slavery, although slavery ended one hundred years earlier, 'ordinary' daily life is traumatic" (Horvitz 239). Despite this trauma, Ursa eventually relents, and she and Mutt have sex for the first time. Ursa nonetheless continues feeling uncomfortable being emotionally and physically vulnerable with Mutt because her foremother's stories influence "her understanding of social relations, especially between men and women" (Li 132). This influence colors Ursa's perception of all sexual relationships: she carries the scars of the sexual violence her foremothers endured, and this cultural trauma inhibits her expression of sexuality and limits her sexual autonomy.

Ursa also lacks sexual autonomy during her marriage because Mutt emotionally and physically abuses her. For example, Mutt manipulates Ursa's sexuality. Ursa states, "Whenever he wanted it and I didn't, he'd take me, because he knew that I wouldn't say, No, Mutt, or even if I had, sometimes I wonder about whether he would have taken me anyway" (Jones 156). Ursa also fails to recognize what the reader knows: when Mutt "takes" Ursa because he knows she will not verbally protest, he still commits rape. In addition to sexually abusing her, Ursa also states that Mutt takes advantage of "those times that I wanted it, and he sensed that I wanted it, that's when he would turn away from me" (156). Both Ursa's non-confrontational nature and her sexual desire make her vulnerable, and Mutt exploits that vulnerability to gain power over her. In this way, Mutt becomes the contemporary embodiment of Ursa's inherited cultural trauma.

Mutt also carries out this abuse in public, adding embarrassment to Ursa's pain and vulnerability. Mutt threatens to sell Ursa's body while she sings the Blues at Happy's Café, saying: "You think I won't. I'ma be down there tonight, and as soon as you get up on that stage, I'ma sell me a piece a ass" (Jones 159). Mutt threatens to sell Ursa on stage because he recognizes that singing the Blues gives her agency and jeopardizes his dominance. In enacting the role of the slave trader despite his own African American identity, Mutt once again assumes the role of the historical oppressor. For Ursa, this scene sparks "the psychological paralysis that occurs when the act of remembering the slave past becomes destructive" (Setka 129). Through this psychological abuse, Mutt marks Ursa with "hieroglyphics of the flesh" and denies her liberated subject position (Spillers 67). Mutt's threat to take Ursa's bodily autonomy and sell her sexuality forces Ursa to temporarily experience the trauma common to

enslaved women, including her own ancestors. Indeed, Ursa and Mutt's relationship demonstrates the "continuities between the physical enslavement of black women and modern cycles of abuse" (Li 131). Although cultural trauma psychologically affects Ursa long before this incident, Mutt's threat illustrates the concrete, corporeal dangers she still faces as a black woman. Therefore, Ursa experiences both the individual traumas of objectification and dehumanization, and the unsettling replication of cultural trauma.

Mutt's own cultural trauma as an African American man complicates his threat to sell Ursa's body. While he decides not to auction his wife, Mutt tells Ursa that his change of heart "wasn't on account of you, it was on account of my great-grandaddy ... he wouldn't have appreciated me selling you off" (Jones 160). Here, Mutt refers to his great-grandfather as a result of his experience: he worked to buy his freedom and that of his wife only to have his wife repossessed when he could not pay an unrelated debt. Although Mutt does not actually attempt to sell Ursa, her presence on a stage along with Mutt's looming threat clearly symbolizes the auction blocks at markets where enslaved people were bought and sold. Additionally, because the black female body "has historically been the site upon which violence and desire have been enacted simultaneously," Mutt's threat implies that he regards Ursa as a sexual commodity, akin to a prostitute (Setka 141). Mutt's threat demonstrates that the cultural trauma of slavery also affects him, since he is African American; but here, he invokes the traumatic past in the role of the oppressor and parallels Old Man Corregidora.

Mutt and Ursa's relationships exposes both the cultural trauma of slavery for African American descendants of enslaved peoples and the interrelated legacy of sexual violence and abuse that affects African American women. In order to feel powerful despite his cultural trauma, Mutt "strives to reduce Ursa to a sexual object ... devoid of agency" (Setka 135). After Ursa refuses to stop singing at Happy's Café, Mutt drunkenly throws her down the stairs. The fall causes her serious injury; Ursa is a little over one month pregnant and, as a result of the fall, she loses the fetus and undergoes a hysterectomy. As Ursa tries to cope with the trauma of the assault, of her miscarriage, and of the loss of her reproductive futurity, she also evokes the trauma of her foremothers. Mutt represents the persistent and recurring nature of cultural trauma, and his adoption of the role of the oppressor shows that. Thus, due to the intersection of race and gender, African American women are still affected by the cultural trauma of slavery in ways that African American men are not.

The legacy of slavery and sexual violence against black women haunts Ursa, and her foremothers' insistence that she reproduce plagues Ursa's consciousness. These manifestations of cultural trauma reappear through the novel's multiple italicized passages, which "alternately symbolize the intrusions of memory or dream states" and demonstrate the past's ongoing interruptions of Ursa's life (Setka 137). Ursa unwittingly remembers her Gram's insistence that, "*The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict*" (Jones 22). After Mutt throws her down the stairs and robs her of her fertility, however, Ursa worries that she has

failed her ancestors. Her inability to reproduce thus exacerbates the individual trauma of her assault, miscarriage, and hysterectomy. The hysterectomy makes her feel "as if part of my life's already marked out for me—the barren part" (6). Not only does Ursa feel that she has lost her womanhood and her freedom, but she also feels the inability to carry on the narrative and biological legacies of her foremothers. Without the capacity to produce future generations, Ursa fears that the story of the Corregidora women will die with her, and her Great Gram, Gram, and Mama's suffering will have been in vain. The marks left by the interwoven cultural traumas of slavery and sexual violence thus complicate Ursa's experience of individual trauma.

Ursa's inherited memories of sexual violence and sexual autonomy affect her ability to cope with cultural and individual traumas. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, set in June 1969, Ursa recalls one of the stories her Gram told her. She recalls her Gram's story of how Great Gram "*ran off cause he would've killed her. I don't know what she did. She never did tell me what she did*" (172). At the end of the story, Ursa thinks of Gram's question: "*What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?*" (173). Ursa's fixation on this story reveals that the uncertainty about what exactly took place between Great Gram and her rapist haunts her. Indeed, Ursa feels both disturbed by what she imagines could have occurred, and in awe of her Great Gram's ability to assert her agency and ultimately achieve freedom from her abuser. The story connects the traumatic past with the potential for a liberating future by foreshadowing Ursa's own discovery of her power and autonomy.

In the final chapter of the novel, Ursa and Mutt see each other for the first time in twenty-two years. Ursa begins to perform oral sex on Mutt as she realizes the answer to her Gram's question. She thinks, "It had to be sexual ... it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora" (Jones 184). Although she cannot be sure, Ursa believes that her Great Gram gained autonomy through an act of sexual violence against her abuser—biting his penis during oral sex. She then narrates, "In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was...A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness" (184). The reference to skin conjures Spillers's notion of the flesh: the body before trauma. Mutt's flesh has not been traumatized, but Ursa recognizes her ability to turn untainted flesh into abused body. Ursa realizes that she has power over Mutt, and "It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora" (184). Like her Great Gram, Ursa uses a sexual act to assert her autonomy. By contrast, however, Ursa chooses to preserve the untainted flesh and thus preserve her power to abuse the flesh and create the body of her partner. In other words, Ursa chooses not to physically harm Mutt because the knowledge that she can harm him is enough. By coming to this understanding, she reconciles the complicated feelings she has for Mutt—the man who hurt and abused her, but whom she loves—and gains sexual autonomy.

Corregidora acts as a literary representation of the cultural trauma borne from centuries of violence against African American women. Because Ursa is marked

by the hieroglyphics of the flesh created by her ancestor's abuse and their repeated narrativization of that abuse, she is predisposed to trauma. Ursa's primary romantic relationship is fraught with sexual violence and manipulation. However, in the final scene of the novel, Ursa reconciles her traumatic history with her desire to gain autonomy in the present. By facing her trauma and reuniting with her ex-husband, Ursa asserts her sexual autonomy and becomes the narrator of her own history. Unlike her Great Gram, Ursa avoids using sexual violence to assert her autonomy. In stopping short of recreating the hieroglyphics of the flesh by abusing her partner, Ursa ends the cycle of sexual violence engendered by slavery and by Corregidora. Ursa retains the lessons learned from the cultural and individual traumas of her past, and she thereby becomes the autonomous subject and creator of her own narrative. Ursa's personal and ancestral narratives illustrate that the legacy of the abuse African American women suffered during slavery was *literally* and *figuratively* passed on to subsequent generations: future generations of African American women *literally* suffer from abuse, and they carry the *figurative* scars of their foremothers. *Corregidora* demonstrates that these scars—the hieroglyphics of the flesh—mark African American women long after the abolition of chattel slavery in the West.

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Memory, Absence, and Aporia in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Andrew Liu

Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is an examination of totalitarian violence and its role in a society emerging from a post-American moment in history. After a hostile military takeover, Congress is attacked and eliminated during a coup by a fundamentalist terrorist group, the Sons of Jacob. The Republic of Gilead takes the place of the United States as the ruling sovereign state of northern middle America. The novel depicts a dystopia. By placing one of the novel's most dystopian signifiers—such as the executed bodies—on a site of liberal progressivism—the Harvard Wall—Atwood suggests that the disruption of social order is swift and nerve-shatteringly unforeseeable (xiv). There is a clear connection between the dystopian vision of the Wall and Harvard's own conservative past as a Puritan theological seminary. In a world where almost every woman has no basic rights, Offred fantasizes about her husband and daughter, the two of whom she was separated from before the start of the novel during a failed attempt at escape to Canada. She imagines her husband receiving a quick and painless death and her daughter being forcibly adopted into a Gileadean family protected by walls of privilege where she would be raised without having to endure the same horrors as Offred, pre-Gileadean woman. Because Gilead is a totalitarian society, these fantasies are a result of political violence. The language of Offred's fantasies reveals how Atwood defines patriarchy through the absences left by its power structure in the experiences of women.

If patriarchy promotes itself through the creation of violence, the means of controlling these absences, resulting from violence, come undone the moment such absences are authored. This is because any text, including those composed of physical violence, is up for interpretation from the moment of creation. Just as an author writes a text, patriarchy authors itself through violence. The effects of patriarchal violence and control are manifested in one particular form as gaps in experiences. The murder of family members, the denial of personal freedoms and liberties, forms of violence both

overt and implicit are employed against not just Offred as a Handmaid, but to women of all diversities in the exercise of power. This is especially evident in Atwood's novel, as the fictional construction of the Handmaids contains details drawn from real-life female underclasses—such as Greek women of antiquity, ancient Chinese concubines, African-American female slaves, and modern Iranian women—all of which reflect Atwood's understanding of female experience within history. Especially in totalitarian governments, patriarchal power dominates through the authorship of violence. So, if patriarchy strives to control the experiences of women by creating gaps, it is through the process of interpretation that this control over subjecthood is wrested away from the patriarchal system. Therefore, Atwood strives to reveal how, even though the experience of violent marginalization and oppression of women, the interpretation of gaps and absences robs violence of its power to silence.

Central to the idea of power is its construction. Michel Foucault describes the structure of a prison designed by the eighteenth-century English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, in his work, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, relating the inception, the history, and the function of the panopticon. A concept he develops to apply to multiple fields, including sociology and history, the panopticon is originally a kind of prison designed to more efficiently monitor prisoners through its centralized design. By locating prisoners in cells along a circular wall surrounding a single watchtower, a single guard within the enclosure can observe the entirety of the panopticon from its center. This design, which centers the prison around the gaze of the warden, the authority, effectively instills within inmates the need to monitor themselves. Because the prisoners cannot tell when they are being monitored and to what extent, even if it is physically impossible for a single guard to monitor them all, the uncertainty of the warden's gaze turns the prisoners' gaze inward. By assuming that they are always being monitored, the prisoner effectively becomes their own surveillance system. Because the panopticon works on the premise of centralizing the gaze of authority—thereby instilling within the prisoners the need to act as though they are always monitored—Foucault uses the panopticon as a concept to explore the nature of power and control. As a result, Atwood's novel is deeply informed by Foucault's theoretical framework.

In Atwood's novel, Offred is similarly aware of the panoptic nature of Gilead's social system. Describing her daily routine of walking in town with her partner-Handmaid, Ofglen, Offred remarks how "[a] rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (Atwood 166). This quote illustrates how aware Offred is of the panopticon which entraps her and Ofglen on their morning walk. The walk, which has become routine, is simultaneously gesturing towards safety and domesticity while being contained by the totalitarian panopticon that encircles the two Handmaids' very existence. The panoptic structure of language and the central function of consciousness in the structure of a panopticon are revealed both in Offred's statement itself and the society of Gilead with its walls, rules, and threat of force. Foucault writes, "All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are composed of those two

forms from which they distantly derive ... to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (199-200). The automation of power is more than just convenience on behalf of those who hold it. It is the expansion of authoritative control and pressure. It is the transformation of the individual into an extension of authority and thus authoritarianism. Although the panopticon is intended to structure and control abnormal individuals, definitions of abnormality are determined by dominant hegemonies and the panoptical structure can house anyone and everyone. Certainly, to the standards of today's American culture, neither Offred nor Ofglen are at all abnormal by any stretch of the imagination. However, because they are politically and culturally valuable as young fertile women of childbearing age, Gilead sees them as precious commodities to be housed, controlled, and stripped of individuality. The panopticon, which is inherently inescapable because it transforms the very self into a prison, simply facilitates this transformation from person to object more efficiently.

The insidious nature of the panopticon with its expansion of control is further evident in the ways Atwood depicts Offred's escape from its gaze. Because the panopticon relies heavily on the prisoners themselves as extensions of the authoritative gaze, interiority and the language of interiority becomes much more important than in other dystopian works which simply aim to explore the female experience. Atwood attempts to counteract patriarchal violence with personal interpretation in part VII, Night, section eighteen, where Offred daydreams about her husband's, Luke's, death. Offred prefaces her daydreams with, "Here is what I believe" (Atwood 104). This preface allows Offred to enter into a grammatical mode that is simultaneously descriptive and hypothetical. It is a mode of description that describes both inner and outer reality as neither separate nor distinct from one another. Offred's thought has become her reality.

She proceeds to describe what she imagines has happened to Luke, her husband, from before the rise of Gilead. The first thing she sees is a swift and painless death from a bullet to the head (104); the next is an image of her husband in a prison cell either awaiting or having followed torture (105). Third, she describes the most optimistic possibility: that he has escaped and awaits her (105). Offred's descriptions of the most likely possibilities of Luke's fate are disturbing because she delves so deeply into the imagined scenarios that it is unlikely for them to be anything other than exceedingly lucid and realistic possibilities—yet, so too are they nightmarish daydreams stemming from Offred's unsentimental and blunt understanding of life in Gilead. These three distinct possibilities offer up a triptych of aporic imagery. Each is horrifying in its own way. The first is so because it brings a sense of relief to Offred while denying the possibility that they will ever meet again. The second is horrifying because it ensures that Luke's continued existence is filled with torture and suffering; although he is alive, it is not for the better. The third is also horrifying, despite its optimism, because it offers the possibility of hope, which is already so extravagant a luxury that Offred can barely hold herself back from believing. She even ruminates on the nature of hope as an extravagance, wondering, "*In Hope*. Why did they put that above a dead person?

Was it the corpse hoping, or those still alive? Does Luke hope?" (106). She points out how strange and ridiculous hope is to inscribe it upon the grave of one who has already died. Because a corpse has neither need nor desire, hope is a function quite beyond the capabilities of an inanimate object, regardless of its previous history as an animate being. Yet, humans still inscribe and see fit to inscribe such abstract functions upon the graves that mark the buried dead.

Offred's question is a valid one: can the dead hold hope for a future they are not a part of? Is this merely the projection of the living and their own desires for a better future on someone who once was animate, but what has essentially become inanimate? This paradoxical state of hope is explored through these questions Offred asks of herself, already half-dead because of the violence she has had to endure. Punishment and imprisonment as functions of the panopticon are never simply inflicted for the sake of satisfying mere sadism. After all, in the modern age of prisons "[t]he body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property" (Foucault 11). The purpose of the isolation and imprisonment of the Handmaids is to prevent them from being able to question their hope as Offred is doing. In fact, instilling an unquestioned hope for change in circumstance is one of the functions of the panopticon, encouraging the incarcerated to begin the process of viewing themselves as beings without agency. As a person threatened with death and already deprived of agency due to the absences inflicted upon her, death becomes another text that Offred must interpret so that her sanity can endure. She is entitled to the questioning of convention and sentiment if it means the interrogation of such things will yield understanding. Hope, then, a sentiment she does not dare allow herself to feel for fear of the damage it will do with nothing more but a raised expectation, becomes simultaneously dangerous and necessary.

The necessity of such dangerous hope is apparent in Offred's musing on the ontological nature of what she imagines, saying to herself in her bedroom at night, "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it" (Atwood 108). A way of both preparing for the worst while denying the worst, Offred uses her daydreams to control her reactions to Luke's destruction while denying the reality that she may never truly know. In this sense, trauma and pain are preferable to ignorance and a lack of information. Concerning the isolation of the prisoner and performative gaze of the warden, Foucault writes, "All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery" (200). The monitoring of prisoners is likened to the experience of watching a play in a theater. Thus, power is linked in part to performativity. Writing of the cells, he states, "They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly

individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately" (Foucault 200). The performance and exercise of power become as important as the rituals of the past which cemented authority and demonstrated its influence before the governed populace. What Offred's daydreams and Foucault's theatrical prison have in common is the performativity of power. Offred struggles to reclaim interpretive control of her experiences by detailing the distinct possibilities for Luke, performing linguistically her own individual capacity to interpret and, therefore, control her experience however small that control may be.

Offred's agency is limited only to her powers of interiority (powers gained and amplified only because she is made to be alone by Gileadean society), and this is a result of the panoptic necessity to isolate and govern individuals with the automatic functioning of power. Because of the denial of alternative interpretations within the totalitarian text (its society, its ideology, the very violence it authors), hybridity becomes exceptionally important in the preservation of selfhood and sanity. Gilead's absolute interpretation of religion and society is intended to discredit and erase all who refuse to fall in line with it. Thus, Offred's only escape is into her own selfhood. Atwood portrays Offred's thought and selfhood as surviving intact only when she is able to retreat into the privacy of her thoughts. In this way, the isolating nature of the self, its fundamental loneliness, become essential bulwarks which shield Offred from the scrutiny of the patriarchal panopticon. Even as she allows herself forbidden thoughts and retreats into an erased past, this discourse between the flawed past and the Gileadean present, mediated by Offred, becomes increasingly hybridized when she realizes fundamental patterns in the politics and discourse of both past and present where the patriarchal panopticon reveals itself as having always existed, within the violence of history, striving for control.

Specifically, the reactions to and interpretation of absence (of language, of memory, of agency) is something patriarchy strives to control. The madwoman, the whore, the disobedient servant, all these archetypes that patriarchy typified and coded into meaning show how it strives to control the interpretation of violence and the gaps it leaves behind. They are images or icons, absent of any actual women despite being manufactured from women's experiences. Madness, especially, is used by patriarchy to dismantle and discredit personal experience, alienating the subject from his/her subjecthood. This is most exemplified by Janine—or Ofwarren, as she is known by her Handmaid patronymic, who endures physical abuse and suffers multiple psychotic episodes during her experience. Her disassociated speech, "Hello... My name's Janine. I'm your wait-person for this morning. Can I get you some coffee to begin with?" during one of her psychotic episodes, mimicking the routine of greeting a customer from her memory of working as a waitress, exemplifies the madness which results from totalitarian violence (Atwood 216). When Moira—who, in a way, represents the most ideologically progressive among the women due to her being a lesbian political activist—snaps Janine out of her madness by slapping her twice and insisting that her madness is not a weakness which can be indulged shows how, even

within the most politically aware of individuals, the power of activist knowledge stems from powerlessness against the system's panoptic surveillance. Foucault explains this paradox as follows: "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (200). The isolating nature of the panopticon, combined with the isolating nature of language and its inability to communicate absolutely, reveals how Moira is a flawed hero who demonstrates resistance that only appears heroic to those who are persuaded to witness her actions as such. The truth is that they are empty of any true and lasting resistance as her captivity in Jezebel's ultimately reveals the boundlessness of the panoptic structure and its perfect gaze. Even at her most heroic, Moira is incapable of doing much else but repeating the same kind of violence that the panoptic system inflicts upon its most vulnerable subjects.

Moira, more than anyone, should understand that empathy towards women who have been brought to their knees by patriarchal violence is key to resistance against that patriarchal system. But their entrapment within the language, the world, the very existence of Gilead ensures that such a possibility of empathy is snuffed out. Foucault explains how the panopticon is designed "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). One of the symptoms of that state is a decreased empathy, even for those who suffer the most. The panopticon's insidious function is to isolate individuals from one another in order to pit them against each other in the struggle for dominance. This is accomplished through the structure of the prison of ideology: "to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary ... in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201). The society of Gilead does not worry about the marginalized women of their society developing rebellious ideas because the panopticon, in part, pits women against women—ensuring a system which upholds the automatic functioning of power because women police other women.

This is most apparent in the existence of the Aunts who parallel anti-feminist figures like Phyllis Schlafly and homosexual conversion therapists. As Foucault explains, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202). The function of the panopticon is to facilitate power more efficiently. This necessitates Offred's deep dives into interiority. She observes her surroundings, cataloguing with intense, private detail her own thoughts and the outside world of Gilead with all its attempts at pastoral facade. She empathizes with the women around her, describing their roles in society and their feelings regarding everyday life. She does not necessarily like these women; but unlike Moira, who is doomed to be caught within the system's

gaze and transformed into a Jezebel prostitute, Offred has the opportunity to exist within the liminal position of Handmaid. The hierarchizing of women in the novel is certainly a reflection of patriarchal hierarchizing, which sorts women into categories, spectrums, and other taxonomic devices to better fit them into a panoptic gaze. The way archetype can be used to control even the wild text of madness is demonstrated by how Moira treats Janine for the sake of their mutual survival. Again, this can be understood as a function of the panopticon as Foucault explains it: "[by the fact that it encourages self-policing], the external Power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects: it is a perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and which is always decided in advance" (202-203). Gilead's power, indeed, patriarchy's power, thus stems from this control over the frame of the narrative, the very foundations of interpretation. The centuries of layered meaning, creation, development, and evolution of the images of even a few of these archetypes, is enough to control individuals' interpretation of each other and themselves through the lens of language which patriarchy offers.

One aspect of Offred's narrative which demonstrates her resistance to the authoritarian ideology of Gilead is her journey towards accepting her mother. She remarks, "despite everything, we didn't do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this" (Atwood 180). Her eventual acceptance of her mother is in line with her struggle against the dystopian present through the process of remembering the past. Another memory connecting Offred to her unattainable past is a memory of her mother, brought on by a video of a long-past women's march shown to her at the Red Center. Offred recalls, "Now my mother is moving forward, she's smiling, laughing, they all move forward, and now they're raising their fists in the air" (120). The ease with which the past displaces the present in memory is emphasized by the anaphoric and declarative sentence structure of Atwood's prose, cementing an almost cinematic certainty in the language describing the moment. The repeated verbs, the slow transition into an image of aggressive, almost-militaristic solidarity in the form of fists in the air, characterizes this image of the Second Wave Feminists as being at ease with themselves: confident, at-home with their bodies, and totally unafraid of what the future will bring.

The added irony of the moment—due to the fact that it is in the Rachel and Leah Center where Offred and the other women see this document of the past—is almost damning in how powerfully optimistic such women seem in this long-dead moment, frozen on the TV like ice on a pane of glass. Offred observes coolly, "The camera moves to the sky, where hundreds of balloons rise, trailing their strings: red balloons, with a circle painted on them, a circle with a stem like the stem of an apple, the stem of a cross. Back on the earth, my mother is part of the crowd now, and I can't see her anymore" (Atwood 120). The balloons are like the ideals of the Second Wave Feminists: high and lofty even at the height of its power. As they float away, it is clear that this vision of the past is viewed through the hindsight of the present—making the dramatic irony of the figures in the video all the more intense with the seemingly

prophetic rise of the balloons, hundreds floating out of reach. The detachment of the description and abstraction of the Venus symbol to stand for female solidarity now become more symbolic of female vulnerability and denial of agency, which shows how mentally distant Offred feels about such militant, political, and feminist concerns. Her mind understands how this freedom of expression and easy joy of being is something she longs for, desperately wanting this past to come back. Yet, at the same time, she intellectually understands how this past is dead, its momentary energy spent, and a new and terrifying present has risen to take its place. The cinematic certainty of the image has been replaced by a present situation palpable with pause and indeterminacy.

If the exercise of memory is crucial to the resistance of the panopticon's interpolating forces, so too is the exercise of language. Deborah Hooker expounds on this closing of possibility, describing how "[a]s flowers and other species of plant and animal life are 'rooted out,' the conditions inspiring our ability to imagine a world otherwise, in which such devastation is not simply the accepted norm, are also attenuated" (299). One instance in the novel where the limitations of a patriarchal language granted to women is played-out is the Scrabble game between Offred and the Commander. The name of Scrabble (meaning to scratch frantically) reveals how language itself is a struggle between parties to communicate or "scrabble" together words to demonstrate power. The game—a commonly available product within the modern world, making it laughable for Atwood to locate it as the site of Offred's confrontation with the Commander (who essentially represents all that has ruined her life, considering he is one of the major architects of Gilead and its social structure)—reveals how the struggle for discursive dominance between women and the patriarchy is trivialized and viewed as a mere form of distraction. Offred even notes how the game is presented to her as a forbidden opportunity to exercise her ability to read and write, something explicitly offered by the Commander in disregard for the rules of a society he helped construct. The reason why the Commander offers such a transgressive opportunity is simple: for the functioning of the panopticon, "[f]ull lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap" (Foucault 200). What the Commander truly offers here, in this forbidden opportunity, is to demonstrate his own ownership of Offred, to reestablish his panoptic control of her. There is a reason for his sheepishness, his practiced vulnerability. It is bait for a trap, a trap that has successfully ensnared women in the past as it does in the dystopian present.

To be clear, what the Scrabble game demonstrates is not a trap for Offred in the sense that the Commander tries to bait her into breaking the established rules of "no reading" for women. He is not simply trying to ensnare her criminally. What he establishes is more about the demonstration of his pre-existing power, of how he already controls Offred in the sense that he determines, in large part, her fate in life. He is already the greatest authority with the most significant amount of influence over her life. What more can be demonstrated of his power? It is clear enough when one sees how with a different context, the game of Scrabble has changed completely. Offred observes, "This was once the game of old women, old men, in summers or in

retirement villas, to be played when there was nothing good on television ... Now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife" (Atwood 138-39). Atwood connects language and sexuality quite explicitly here, framing the Scrabble game as an indiscretion done behind the back of a legitimate woman with a legitimate role to play in the existing power structure. Offred notes further, "We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote* ... *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury" (139). These words demonstrate Offred's confined intelligence, her subconscious desire to inhabit her own rightful agency over her language, her mind, and her body. Larynx, meaning throat, symbolizes the desire to speak, to vocalize, outcry, and protest, to voice dissent. Valance, which connotes wave, curtain, boundary, and domesticity, perhaps even surveillance, reveals Offred's own preoccupation with her ontological state. Unable to vocalize her pain except to herself, she can only imply, sublimate, or transfer her forbidden speech into an opportunity far too small and far too paltry for the significance of her words to be understood by anyone other than a reader explicitly searching for her voice. Quince, zygote, limp, and gorge all reveal how language is tied to sexuality. For Lucy M. Freibert, she explains how, "In satirizing, and thereby demystifying, Western phallocentrism in this worst of all possible contexts, Atwood also tests the viability of French feminist theory" (285). The imagery of pregnancy and fertility in the fruit of the quince, the explicit object of desire within the medical term of zygote, the Freudian castration implications of limp, and the multi-faceted meanings of gorge which can simultaneously mean impasse, gap, swelling, or to over-consume, all these words demonstrate Offred's suppressed language and her need to express her experience outside of her showcasing how Atwood's novel is quite explicitly a kind of *Écriture féminine*.

In the game of Scrabble, Offred's entire body of knowledge has been fragmented and trivialized into a game for old people. Yet, the Commander cannot know that she was planning on playing those words. This is largely because he does not need to know. Safe within the center of the panoptic structure, he can scan at his leisure the limits of the society he has helped build and be assured that a single individual prisoner, like Offred, has no thought and performs no action which he cannot anticipate and neutralize. Scrabble demonstrates who owns the game and sets the boundaries of language as well as who is enticed to play and forced to participate within those boundaries. Functioning as a miniature laboratory of language and power relations, the Scrabble game between the Commander and Offred reveals how inextricably language and the panopticon are tied together. But, because the panopticon can largely function on its own to facilitate the automatic functioning of power, the invisibility of the prisoner's thought becomes even more important in disguising the prisoner from the panoptic gaze. Offred's words may be small and fragmented, played for points in an arbitrary game set and decided by the men above her that ultimately does not matter in the larger scheme of Gileadean society, but they have been expressed nonetheless. Their meaning has been communicated. The reader of the novel ensures this.

Therefore, Offred is not helpless within the panoptic structures of language. What the Commander fails to understand in the Scrabble game is how power distributes and maintains itself. The panopticon is not merely a mechanism he and he alone manipulates, nor is it even a mechanism that can be manipulated by any limited number of people. That is to say,"the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (Foucault 205). Just as the panopticon is not bound to any ruling class, so too do the structures of power shift and move under the hands of its masters. Describing how the panopticon hierarchizes the people who inhabit it, Foucault explains, "The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, on sees everything without ever being seen" (201-2). The Commander, assured as he is standing within the figurative central tower, has no idea of the inevitable collapse of the Gileadean regime or of the panopticon's latent insubordination, loyal as it is to nothing but the function of its own design, to the perpetuation and automatic functioning of power.

Often in response to the automatic functioning of power, women's experiences take the form of narratives textualized in the form of a book, a manuscript, a diary, etc. These experiences, once textualized, function as an attempt to snatch discursive power from the patriarchal system. Thus, it is revealed at the end of the novel that the entirety of the text is actually a transcript, assembled and interpreted by scholars in a future where Gilead no longer exists. The end of the novel demonstrates the upper limits of patriarchal power—to outlast any given individual and to interpret his/her narrative in his/her place. As Foucault writes, "The carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside. It takes back with one hand what it seems to exclude with the other. It saves everything, including what it punishes" (301). In other words, Offred has no escape from patriarchy, either within or outside of her life. The patriarchal panopticon dominates well into the future, destroying the agency to construct one's own narrative. What Atwood suggests, then, is for the assuming of responsibility for the interpretive gaze, holding accountable those who would discredit a work of *Écriture féminine* on the grounds that it is fundamentally unreliable due to it being written by a woman. Offred's narrative within the novel is lucidly told, accurate, and detailed. The problems Professor Piexoto mentions are largely constructed to discredit the narrative's authenticity in favor of the so-called "academic" understanding of the historical Gilead. Of course, this is incredibly misguided sympathy from a patronizing and misogynistic man of academic authority who uses his power to rob Offred of the empathy and attention her narrative deserves. Thus, Foucault's panopticon demonstrates its range, its inescapability, and Atwood furthers her depiction of that panopticon by suggesting how it is a prison without walls or boundaries, capable of extending infinitely through time as long as the culture persists.

This begs the question, how does Atwood suggest the possibility of resistance against violence amidst the experience of it? If the patriarchal panopticon has controlled, does control, and will inevitably control one's experience of its violence, and thus one's resulting interpretation of it, then how is one to resist this interpretive monopoly, this authorial dictatorship over meaning? One way Atwood suggests resistance against patriarchal panoptic language is through the language of absence, a form of aporic language. Aporia is traditionally a sort of feigned or pretended doubt in order to deliver a stronger rhetorical blow, but the way it subverts those original patriarchal forms is by, instead of confronting a faulty argument, confronting a seemingly insurmountable absence. Offred's language is often without doubt or impasse. To use aporia in its traditional sense as a rhetorical device, one could hardly describe the horrifying descriptions of totalitarian violence and repression situated within Offred's private chambers: chambers both of her bedroom with its spartan furnishings and of her mind with its equally un-spartan sprawl of doubts, fantasies, and traumatic reenactments. Yet, aporic it is, in the sense that it is language intended to draw out the seemingly irretrievable and unreachable past, to cross the gap between imaginary and real, to bridge what is known and what is, inherently, unknowable.

After all, patriarchy wishes to author within us all a panoptic obedience, an interpolative complicity in our own subjugation and subconscious coercion. The violence of patriarchy intends to not only create a gap within experience but to control one's interpretation of that gap, viewing it as evidence for the irresistible might of an absolute patriarchal regime instead of what it really is—which is an attempt to control and demonstrate power. A major means by which patriarchy engenders obedience is through physical and ideological violence. Foucault's panoptic prison reveals the structures in Atwood's dystopian model of society as neither arbitrary nor chaotic. On the contrary, they are fully realized structures with an intentionality built into their very existence. Arguing against the myth of the end of patriarchy, Atwood's ending posits that patriarchy is not something that can end permanently and must constantly be renegotiated and interrogated. And, in a very concrete way, patriarchy controls even the absences it leaves behind by creating them to begin with. But at the same time, even the author of a text is just another reader of it. For Barbara Hill Rigney, "The very act of writing, of recording, is for Atwood as well as for her heroines, the final and irrevocable commitment to one's society and to one's own humanity" (121). Patriarchy cannot control absolutely (no matter how it strives to) the ways in which an individual reads the absences and gaps within his/her experience.

Thus, despite the fact that violence and coercion in its many forms may not always be something that can be resisted physically, interpretation of the resulting trauma and engagement with the process of power by examining it and judging it is a form of resistance as well as power. For Shirley Neuman, "The implicit women's Utopia of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not in 'the time before.' It exists outside the 'either/or' thinking so beloved of Aunt Lydia, and outside the novel: outside of the dangers, humiliations, inequities, and backlash that women experience in its 'time before,' but also outside totalitarian Gilead's claims to have improved their lot" (866). Atwood delineates the

inescapability of the patriarchal panopticon but also suggests that its interpretive power is limited, requiring continuous surveillance across time and space to function. Therefore, to subvert both the authorship of violence and the interpretive gaze of patriarchy, the language of absence and narratives of female experience must be united and used to their fullest extent, amplifying memory of the past in order to better resist a Gileadean present.

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Unhomely Language and Space: The Uncanny Aesthetic in Churchill's *The Skriker*

Jessie Bullard

Introduction: Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* and Coded Political Messaging

In the depths of a dark and ominous underworld, a looming giant with square feet who sits atop a humanoid piglike creature passes quickly, throwing stones as he proceeds through the eerie space surrounding him. Following his departure, an apparitional face emerges to the forefront of this tenebrous aperture, one whose eyes possess a haunting quality—a chilling volition to its gaze. The ghostly paleness of the figure's features creates a stark contrast to the deep jet insets of her big minacious eyes and still mouth. This apparitional character then begins to deliver the following words in an indelible voice:

> Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater, daughter could spin span spick and spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonesse under the castle for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved. Chop chip pan chap finger chirrup chirrup cheer up off with you're making no headway. Weeps seeps deeps her pretty puffy cream cake hole in the heart operation. (Churchill 9)

Upon first exposure to this stringing together of linguistic oddities, total confusion seems the appropriate descriptor for an individual's reaction to this unfolding concatenation. This space of mystification materializes in the opening scene of Caryl Churchill's 1994 one-act play, *The Skriker*. The play follows an ancient death portent, which "derives from Irish and northern English myth, in which the Skriker is a banshee spirit who wails loudly to announce imminent death" (Howe Kritzer 112). The Skriker appears to two teenage mothers, Lily and Josie, in mid-1990s England as a glut of various people and inanimate objects. In her numerous appearances to the two teenage girls, the Skriker intentionally seeks to befriend them and ultimately

entrap them in the underworld through seductive means of manipulation. During this ongoing plot of the Skriker's continual shape-shifting encounters with Lily and Josie, the play also addresses an array of concerns, including the troubling state of the world's ecosystem, corrupt materialism in English culture, and the trauma of postnatal psychosis for young women. In the aforementioned excerpt of the Skriker's opening four-page monologue, there emerges a coded political reference to English nuclear power stations (Dungeonesse and Sizewell) immediately from the advent of the play.

These issues in *The Skriker* represent a collective problematic schema of the greater English society in 1994, as demonstrated in Churchill's political commentary on England's industrial contribution to environmental pollution and the abandonment of young mothers struggling postpartum. However, Churchill's political messaging regarding these issues are not communicated overtly to the audience; rather, these messages are coded within the seemingly illogical language of the Skriker in juxtaposition to the colloquial mid-1990s English vernacular of Lily and Josie. The Skriker's language is intentionally cumbersome and appears to be nonsensical and disorienting, creating a significant distance between the expectations an audience would have for a play written by Churchill (whose political messaging is usually more transparent) and the actual result of experiencing the play.

This linguistic coding of Churchill's political messaging in *The Skriker* is examined extensively throughout scholarship published on the magical-realist play. Within this unusual fragmented use of the English language, additional decentering of specific structures within the play occur, which is where many scholars synthesize meaning between the deconstructed use of language and coded political messaging. In her essay "Bringing the Global Home: The Commitment of Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*," literary scholar Candice Amich examines the ways in which Churchill collapses the global and the local together through her dramatization of neo-liberalism and post-modern language. She argues that the audience needs to decipher a new way of interpreting meaning from the Skriker's accelerated use of language, thus also forcing the audience to slow down and consider the proliferation of meaning that the Skriker's words allow for. Similarly, just as Amich discusses the collapse of global and local language and its effect on the audience, literary scholar Elin Diamond argues that Churchill's blending together of ancient time frames consisting of fairy tale allusions and modern time frames abundant with references to 1990s England causes a disorienting experience for the audience. Diamond asserts that it is within this feeling of disorientation that the audience is exposed to Churchill's conceptualization of a post-human tragedy within *The Skriker*, where she explores themes such as a static economy, its pitfalls, and modern English materialistic culture.

In addition to fragmented language in *The Skriker* and the conflation of juxtaposing time frames which shape Churchill's political commentaries, the play's use of shapeshifting characters, like the Skriker, also offer closer interpretation of Churchill's intended messages. Scholar Graham Wolfe's essay, "Shapeshifting in Caryl Churchill's 'The Skriker,'" identifies the role of the Skriker's shapeshifting as a means to express the damage experienced by both the characters and the environment

within Churchill's play. Wolfe contextualizes his argument by reviewing the works of other scholars concerning Churchill's play, which consistently contribute arguments regarding the representation and significance of damage: "feminine damage," environmental damage through materialism, trauma and mental damage, et cetera. Such discussion of "feminine damage" is delineated in Eva Gil Cuder's "More than Words: Drama and Spectrality for the Articulation of Trauma," in which she examines three plays by British playwrights, including Caryl Churchill's play, *The Skriker*. Cuder focuses on the "feminine damage" Wolfe defines as occurring frequently in scholarship, wherein she considers Lily and Josie's experiences of traumatic regressions. The anti-logocentric nature of trauma, Cuder claims, is expressed in Churchill's *The Skriker* through anti-naturalistic language and the concept of fantasy, which Cuder defines as "an unreal mental image or vision" (68). Cuder also discusses the ways in which Churchill's atmosphere in *The Skriker*, involving an underworld and ghostly death portents who shapeshift into various figures, creates a symbolic intrusion of traumatic memories for the two teenage girls.

The Skriker's seemingly random shapeshifting and unanticipated decayed use of language as a means of revealing Churchill's political commentary, such as female trauma, lends itself toward scholarly focus on dysfunction and its treatment within the play. Literary scholar Katherine Perrault asserts that she will use chaos theory, which is the study of apparently-random states of disorder, to apply to Caryl Churchill's play, *The Skriker*, in order to show how the application of chaos theory to drama provides a connection between pre-modern and postmodern theatrical works. This framework for a living and non-static interaction between pre-modern and postmodern theatrical work, Perrault argues, reveals an integration and inclusion of dysfunctional form. When examining *The Skriker* specifically, Perrault also identifies the patriarchal dimension to Churchill's illustration of characters. She calls the two female protagonists in the play representations of semiotic, cultural depictions of damaged women at the hands of patriarchy.

The scholarly conversation surrounding *The Skriker* successfully establishes the significance of the Skriker's disjointed, word-pun generated language, collapsing of time frames, and disturbing shapeshifting as specific contributors to both Churchill's hidden political commentaries on various aspects of English society, as well as her audience's role in decoding these views. In extending this conversation forward, it is important to consider the audience's role further by defining the atmosphere that emerges from decentering language, time, and bodily figures. As each of these unfamiliar aspects materializes within the play, the audience is exposed to both an uncomfortable and curious portrayal of language, time, and bodies. This aesthetic experience of conflicting feelings, wherein the audience undergoes both emotions of horror and awe, may be examined more closely by applying the uncanny aesthetic to Churchill's unnatural use of formally-structured societal concepts, like language; in examining this space of the uncanny more closely, the transition between Churchill's political coding and her audience's revelation to her messaging may be better understood. Churchill's unnatural means of portraying her hidden political message

to the audience reveals obscured societal issues in mid-1990s England, creating a space of the 'uncanny.'

Freud's Uncanny Aesthetic and Further Scholarly Developments

The horrific and the beautiful intertwine through experiencing the unfamiliar in Sigmud Freud's theory of the 'uncanny.' An accomplished psycho-analyst, Freud sought out to "investigate the subject of aesthetics" in order to illustrate "the theory of the qualities of feeling" (Freud 799). Freud takes a linguistic approach to defining the 'uncanny.' He asserts that "[the] German word *'unheimlich'* is obviously the opposite of *'heimlich'* … the opposite of what is familiar" (Freud 800). It is natural, then, to presume that the uncanny is horrific because of its unfamiliarity. However, Freud complicates the simplicity of this notion by reviewing the four sets of definitions for *'unheimlich'* and *'heimlich.'* Of the first set of definitions for *'heimlich,'* all rest upon a central idea of "belonging to the house, familiar" (Freud 801). He then provides a second definition for the same word, *'heimlich,'* which is "concealed, kept from sight" (Freud 801). This second definition of *'heimlich'* collapses with the understanding of *'unheimlich,'* which would be the unhomely or unfamiliar. However, by applying the prefix 'un' to the second definition of *'heimlich,'* a new definition of *'unheimlich'* results in "unconcealed," or the idea of something being inadvertently revealed against the subject's will. Freud asserts, "[*Heimlich*] is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*, … a sub-species of *heimlich*" (Freud 803). This is the space in which Freud seems to rest on for his theory of the 'uncanny': the subspecies of the word '*heimlich,'* which reveals what is hidden from not only others, but from the subject as well.

Freud's original work addressing the uncanny aesthetic dates back to 1919, yet still remains relevant to aesthetics of art and human experience in modern contexts. French philosopher Hélène Cixous took up the uncanny aesthetic in her 1976 essay "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The 'Uncanny')." In examining Freud's literary investigation of fright within the uncanny aesthetic, Cixous turns to Freud's definition of the word '*unheimliche.'* She argues this definition is where Freud anchors his analysis for developing *what* the uncanny is, and therefore she seeks to clarify its meaning as she asserts: "Freud considers the *Unheimliche* as, at the same time, a 'domain' and a 'concept,' an elastic designation. The fact of the matter is that the domain remains indefinite; the concept is without any nucleus: The *Unheimliche* presents itself, first of all, only on the fringe of something else" (528). This idea of the *'unheimliche'* or unhomeliness being "only on the fringe of something else," therefore constantly depending on the relational, familial connection to something before it or close to it, offers additional insight into the revelatory quality of unhomeliness. Cixous's clarification of unhomeliness as fringing upon other concepts or things delineates that the *'unheimliche'* is not of its own singular embodiment, and therefore exuding from other various qualities and aesthetics of which it relates.

In more current discussion of Freud's uncanny aesthetic, also pertaining to Cixous's clarification of the *'unheimlich,'* scholar Scott G. Eberle discusses the

sensation and significance of play, a way of exploring the surroundings of the world with a wonderment, through the lens of the uncanny, a phenomena Eberle is particularly interested in due to its intriguing transition from joy to dread. Eberle relates the act of play to the act of creating art, and claims that "[artists], choreographers, and film *auteurs* have discovered how readily evoking a sense of the uncanny grips their audiences" (173). By presenting audiences with uncanny aesthetics, allowing qualities and things to fringe upon one another to shape the uncanny, Eberle argues that this unfamiliar yet intimate *thing* of which they are exposed to moves audiences significantly. As for why the uncanny aesthetic works successfully within genres of art, Eberle reasons that because artists "[know] how entertaining it is to observe the odd and disquieting from the security of [a spectator's view], [artists] have … shrewdly created many memorable uncanny scenarios" (173).

The uncanny aesthetic, as it is understood from Freud's initial imaginings of it to more modern applications of its meaning, becomes a fitting space in which Churchill's *The Skriker* materializes. As *The Skriker* is art, performed to its audience in the form of a play, Churchill's choice to expose viewers to varying uncanny aesthetics via defamiliarized language and figures suggests her desire to expose her political commentaries on 1990s English society in a way that is truly both captivating and concretely illuminating the relation these issues have to the whole social landscape of England.

Unhomely Language and Figures in *The Skriker*

The Skriker's confusing syntax throughout the play is an embodiment of Freud's uncanny aesthetic because it warps the audience's understanding of standard English. The Skriker's language is ridden with puns, wordplay, and allusion, with syntax that strings each word together in a visually and grammatically confusing fashion. However, each word in the Skriker's speech acts as a production for the word following it. For example, when the Skriker tells Lily's story after their first encounter, each word in her monologue feeds into the formation of the next: "So lily in the pink with a finnyanny border was talking good as gold speaking pound coins round coins pouring roaring more and more, singing thinging counting saying the alphabetter than nothing telling stories boring sore throat saw no end to it fuckit buckets and buckets of bloodmoney is the root of evil" (Churchill 19). Within this excerpt from the Skriker's monologue, the fluidity of each word to the next begins most noticeably with the transition from "good as gold" to "coins," and the subsequent assonance of "pouring roaring more and more." She then proceeds to riff on the word "alphabet" to create "alphabetter," which feeds into the phrase "better than nothing." The same movement happens with the word "buckets," leading to "buckets of blood," which turns to "bloodmoney," and finally arrives at "money is the root of evil" (19). This production of words through association disrupts the audience's expectations of standard English, the familiar means of discourse. As clarified by Cixous earlier in this paper, the *'unheimliche'* is defined by its dependence on associations to other things—of "being only on the fringe of something else" (528). The Skriker's language, similarly, is "only on the fringe of something else"

in its unnatural word-play and inability to make meaning *unless* in consideration of its word association. By making standard English nearly incomprehensible, Churchill is making language itself uncanny to the audience by revealing the concealed abilities and play residing within the English language.

Amich extrapolates on the Skriker's language in that her "uttering sentences whose syntax moves both forwards and backwards at once ... radically disturbs our sense of time and space, compressing *then* and *now*, *here* and *there*, and affecting the disturbance into which the play in performance propels its audiences" (397). As Amich describes, the Skriker's fluidity in moving both forward and backward in language, with the use of word play and its production, continues to disrupt the expectations and anticipation of the audience. This disruption, operating through the voice of an evil figure like the Skriker, often arrives at a place that is disturbing or uncomfortable. The former example of "bloodmoney is the root of evil" creates an uncomfortable atmosphere, again commenting on England's materialistic society in more corrupt terms (Churchill 19). Amich's point that this disturbing experience through language "propels its audiences" is illustrative of Freud's uncanny aesthetic, wherein something once private and concealed is propelled into one's knowing not by their will, but by some natural force through unnatural means. As Freud asserts in his identification of the uncanny, "the production of the feeling of uncanniness" is related to how one is "oriented in [their] environment" (800). This suggests that the disorientation one feels in their environment initiates the possibility of an uncanny experience, where something repressed or private may be revealed. Amich discusses a similar phenomenon that the Skriker's language causes for Lily and Josie: "[The] Skriker's dislocated language [infects] our experience of the action, thus involving us in the inescapable disorientation of the world Josie and Lily inhabit" (397). Amich posits that the Skriker's unnatural way of speaking not only disorients Lily and Josie to their own environment, but also disorients the audience and their environment as onlookers. This disorientation of the environment through the Skriker's language creates an unfamiliar space prone to the uncanny. The Skriker's language is the unnatural means through which the environment is altered, creating a space for the revelation of Churchill's societal messages.

Shapeshifting is another means by which Churchill utilizes the uncanny aesthetic in her play, as the Skriker's shapeshifting creates instability in physical bodily structures familiar to an audience. The first instance of the Skriker's shapeshifting on stage occurs in a mental hospital after Lily and Josie have just finished a conversation concerning issues of postpartum trauma they endure, of which Josie references an old woman who "looks about fifty" and with whom she was "impressed by the magic" (Churchill 16). Immediately after this exchange, the play's stage directions depict: "WOMAN *about 50 approaches. Dowdy, cardigan, could be a patient. It is the* SKRIKER" (Churchill 17). When the Skriker speaks as this woman, her words follow the norms of standard English and are comprehensible, displacing the audience's expectations for the Skriker's language from her previous warped use of the English language. This further defamiliarizes the audience with their anticipation of the Skriker's character from

their earlier exposure to her communication and bodily appearance. The Skriker's shapeshifted body as an older woman who is also a possible patient in a mental hospital creates an uncanny image of physicality, as bodily stability ceases to exist within the play. For the Skriker's first form by means of shapeshifting to occur in juxtaposition to the two teenage girls' concerns about Lily's pregnancy and Josie's being committed for an "illness" implied as having to do with her own baby's death, this instance of the uncanny reveals Churchill's commentary on the abandonment of young mothers and traumatic postnatal psychosis in 1990s English society.

Wolfe examines the Skriker's shapeshifting more closely in addressing the destabilizing quality of which it possesses for audiences. He contends that "[the] Skriker's refusal to occupy stable places ... [by resisting] schemata ... [impresses] upon audiences their habitual spectatorial expectations and cognitive tendencies" (Wolfe 236). In this impressing upon audiences their habitual spectatorial expectations, the Skriker's shapeshifting and the instability it causes for anticipated structures in the play underscore the audience's cognitive desire for familiarity and structure. The Skriker's various forms undermine that desire for familiarity and instead constantly disrupt and defamiliarize these spectatorial expectations, allowing only for "[anticipation] teetering at that fascinating, wobbly point between understanding and uncertainty where familiarity and the alien meet" (Eberle 174). As the Skriker's shapeshifting acts as a nexus wherein familiarity and unfamiliarity coincide, her various forms serve as an exposure to the uncanny and allow for Churchill's political messages to be fully realized.

The additional underworldly figures presented in *The Skriker* continue to materialize an uncanny space by manifesting in the balance of an audience's understanding and uncertainty. Besides the Skriker, Churchill draws on canonical knowledge of other mythical figures an English audience may be familiar with and then distorts that knowledge in her treatment of each figure. Within the play, the other underworldly characters are described as performing odd actions during disjointed moments in the story. As depicted in the beginning of this paper, a giant figure called Johnny Squarefoot "[rides] on a piglike man, throwing stones [and] goes off" prior to the Skriker's opening monologue (Churchill 9). This description of Johnny Squarefoot and his actions has no immediate visual connection to the Skriker's already nonsensical language. Another underworldly figure, the Kelpie described as "part young man, part horse," is staged to be apparent along with Lily and Josie in their initial scene in the mental hospital, also for no clear or significant reason (Churchill 13). As the girls begin their dialogue on postnatal trauma in this scene, the Kelpie's being there has no direct visual relationship to their conversation. This pattern of underworldly figures being present for no apparent reason during moments, happening in the context of the real world within the play, continues throughout *The Skriker*.

A climax of this pattern occurs when the Skriker successfully takes Josie with her to the underworld, and the stage directions describe "*As* SKRIKER *and* JOSIE *arrive, [the underworld] springs into existence. Light, music, long table with feast, lavishly dressed people and creatures, such as* YALLERY BROWN, NELLI LONGARMS, JENNY

GREENTEETH, THE KELPIE, BLACK DOG, RAWHEADANDBLOODYBONES, THE RADIANT BOY, JIMMY SQUAREFOOT, BLACK ANNIS *(with a blue face and one eye)*" (Churchill 34). While before underworldly figures were staged within the context of the real world disjointedly, when the Skriker and Josie arrive in the context of the underworld, there awaits a plethora of underworldly figures—some of which are previously presented, like the Kelpie—and people with more humanistic sounding names—"THE RADIANT BOY"—who were presumably also taken to the underworld, just as Josie was. This portrayal of other human beings, donned with names that defamiliarize their humanness, again disrupts the audience's anticipation to see only the underworldly figures, just as their anticipation to see only human beings is disrupted earlier when underworldly figures appear disjointedly throughout the beginning of the play. Howe Kritzer identifies Churchill's use of these figures "with their distinctive appearances and forms of communication [as emphasizing] the disturbing threats inhabiting the familiar, everyday world, while the broader mythic resonances of these figures suggest universal and irreversible damage in the natural world" (112). These underworldly figures, along with the figures inhabiting the underworld who may appear humanistic but unfamiliarly so, contribute to the uncanniness of the disturbing qualities hidden within the homely or familiar. These figures, in their seemingly illogical appearances on stage, act as indexes for political messaging Churchill is coding within the uncanny in her play. Just as the Kelpie was present in the mental hospital during Lily and Josie's conversation about Lily's pregnancy and Josie's "illness," these figures create an uncanny experience for the audience during significant moments of underlying political commentary on issues within English society.

Unhomely language and figures in *The Skriker* manifest in a wider uncanny space, wherein Churchill codes political commentary pertaining to 1990s English societal issues. While the Skriker's language may appear nonsensical and the presence of unhomely figures throughout the play may appear disjointed, they actually illuminate the uncanny space wherein Churchill's political messaging operates. Similarly, her treatment of time throughout the play, in its conflation of the past and the modern, continues to define this uncanny space and further reveals additional political perspectives on 1990s England.

Ancient Allusions to Modern Slow Violence and Materialism Through Unhomely Space

Churchill's conflation of ancient and modern time frames, accomplished through allusions generated from unhomely language, is another instance in which an uncanny space for the audience emerges. Within these allusions to ancient figures, Churchill is able to further characterize the Skriker's being as dysfunctional and manipulative, while also utilizing this characteristic to materialize the uncanny aesthetic wherein her political message is coded. Beginning from the Skriker's opening monologue, Churchill starts imbuing the text with references to well-known fairy tales. For example, the Skriker references Rumpelstiltskin, saying: "[If] she can't guessing game

and safety match my name then I'll take her no mistake" (Churchill 9). This allusion to Rumpelstiltskin, a literary and fairy tale figure who has evil connotations, not only helps characterize the Skriker as a potentially menacing force, but impresses upon the audience a specific image already resonating within their canon of recognition. By alluding to this fairy tale, Churchill brings the past—particularly an English literary past that English audiences would familiarize with—into the present moment of the play, conflating the ancient with the modern. As Perrault asserts in reference to this scene, "this suppressed, unconscious world" of the Skriker's allusions to ancient fairy tales "whirls inexorably in a deadly cyclone of death and destruction—repeatedly rupturing into the conscious terrain of the play" (51). The confluence of ancient and modern time structures consistently disrupts the play, thereby also disrupting the audience's conscious awareness of the play's larger spatial landscape.

These allusions to Rumpelstiltskin come just moments after Churchill has the Skriker's language reference two nuclear power plants prominent in England at the time, mentioned earlier in the introduction of this paper, when she says "dungeonesse" and " size well" (9). By first referencing two well-known power plants of contemporary society by name and then calling upon the fairy tale Rumpelstiltskin, a character of folklore whose significance rests within the ability to name, Churchill's naming of the two power plants is emphasized further. This blending together of time frames causes the collapse of historical issues and contemporary issues which, for Churchill, may not be that distanced. Diamond argues on this point: "Churchill creates a rhetoric that, like folklore, is both ancient and modern and generates a hyperbolic world that, like our bodies, contains multitudes" (755). Diamond's point that the language Churchill gives the Skriker creates a world of hyperbole and multiple dimensions illustrates the collapse of linearity within the play. By instilling language within the Skriker that contains references to traditional, canonical knowledge and present-day knowledge, Churchill frames the play to have no sense of real time. Rather, the play exists in the "gravitas of tragedy," a space where "nature's destruction" transcends the historical timeline that has helped create it (Diamond 755). The uncanny emerges within this transcendence of linear time because this nonlinear confluence "involves feelings of uncertainty and apprehension and a crisis of the boundaries of inside and outside—an unsettling of time and space" (Beyes). The play's lack of concrete boundaries as pertaining to time and space suggests that the societal issues Churchill confronts in the play, such as nature's destruction by nuclear power plants in England, has reached an intensity that no longer adheres to time's constraints. Churchill's political message, as revealed through the space of the uncanny, may be contextualized as her recognition of slow violence—"a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all"— in 1990s England (Nixon 2356). This slow violence to the environment that Churchill may be identifying through political coding in the uncanny "focuses on the temporal, as the workings of time allow gradual forms of violence to be decoupled from their origins" (Christian 1068). As Churchill is addressing environmental decay and damage occurring in England from pollution

by nuclear power plants, this type of slow violence is not instantaneously identifiable; rather, its incremental damage becomes more noticeable and harmful over time. Therefore, Churchill's choice to destabilize time within her play through uncanny use of literary allusions is a fitting approach to fully delineate the temporal aspect of England's slow violence. This detachment from time allows Churchill to reveal the urgency behind these issues spatially, or in other words, as a fluid motion between the past and the present.

Churchill also defamiliarizes images from classic fairy tales by blending them with modern concepts in order to reveal her political commentary of toxic materialistic culture in mid-1990s England. One instance in which Churchill does this is when the Skriker appears to Lily as a derelict woman in the street and asks her for some change, "the price of a cup of tea" (Churchill 18). After their encounter, the Skriker leaves Lily, and it is described in the stage direction that "*[pound] coins come out of her mouth when she speaks*" (Churchill 18). This image alludes to the fairytale "Diamonds and Toads," in which precious jewels and flowers would fall from a girl's mouth every time she spoke for giving an old woman some water to drink. Churchill's remaking of this image not only displaces the audience's familiarity with the original, but it illustrates another concern she has for contemporary society, which is the materiality of people. Her disruption of the audience's familiarity takes the form of Freud's uncanny aesthetic. The exchange between the Skriker, appearing as a woman asking Lily for money to drink, may recall the alluded fairy tale. This familiarity of "Diamonds and Toads," however, is disrupted when the stage direction is enacted, and the audience receives the image of many pound-coins falling from Lily's mouth when she tries to speak. As this is not something that naturally occurs in human beings, nor is it matching the anticipation of the alluded fairy tale, the audience is left in a space of Freud's first definition of *unheimlich,* the unknown. In this fashion, some audience members may not fully recognize the uncanny—"something which is secretly familiar"—but for those who do recognize Churchill's message, the uncanny aesthetic or the "secretly familiar, which has undergone repression" returns from repression and is revealed to the individual (Freud 811). The connection this image has to materials and money may reveal repressed notions concerning 1990s England's material culture. For those in the audience who make the connection between the pound-coins falling out of Lily's mouth and the materialistic culture of England at the time, the horrific aesthetic suddenly reveals a message about the culture which may be repressed.

Churchill's allusions and their defamiliarizing affect on time and imagery within the play further shape an uncanny space for the audience. As the structure of time is destabilized through nonlinear allusions and modern references, and as fairy tale images are conflated with modern English concepts, the audience is exposed to things of which they are familiar with in a manner that is unfamiliar. These allusions, then, provide an uncanny space wherein Churchill's political messaging, concerning issues like environmental slow violence and cultural materialism, is revealed. This uncanny space is further defined by Churchill's wider structural choice of space in which to interact with her audience—the theatrical space.

Theatrical Space Entering an Uncanny Space

Churchill's *The Skriker,* as a play being performed in front of a live audience, further creates an uncanny space and allows for her political stances to be fully revealed. Freud's main criticism of the uncanny in literature is that "[readers] adapt [their] judgment to the imaginary reality imposed upon [them] by the writer," and therefore figures and concepts that would normally be uncanny no longer constitute as such (Freud 814). However, Freud also acknowledges that "[this] situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality" (814). When readers and audiences are exposed to settings of common reality that integrate and blend unhomely qualities, the uncanny aesthetic emerges. Therefore, the theatrical space of plays, where a literary work literally livens, delineates this notion of moving literature into the world of common reality. Literary and drama scholar Carol Leader extensively considers this notion of theatrical space entering uncanny space in her essay "Supervising the uncanny: the play within the play." Leader contextualizes this discussion first, stating that live theater is the most intensely participatory of all the arts due to its form of delivering dramatic narrative into direct action which allows for an audience to interact through visual and auditory senses. She then asserts: "The play can thus operate on a number of levels as both an external work of art but also much more viscerally for some; feeling states are communicating with feeling states. Unconscious is speaking to unconscious. What starts out as musings in an author's mind … spirals out … in wider expression through the actors, the director, the audience, and beyond" (Leader 667). As Leader's analysis of theatrical space shows, the performance of a play has a significant capability in exceeding the pages of an author's literary work and into the living bodies of actors and audience members who each viscerally, on both conscious and unconscious levels, receive that literary work. Because Churchill's *The Skriker* is a play, her audience is able to witness a richer expression of this story due to the many subtexts a play contains: movement, speech, noise, silence, listening, et cetera. While Churchill's play is still widely read alone, the ability for its text to transition to the theatrical stage allows for its story (and hidden political messaging) to transcend the problematic scope of the unfamiliar losing its uncanniness. In enactment, the text may flourish in its uncanniness due to the unfamiliar figures and language being livened by a theatrical performance and visceral audience participation.

In her examination of *The Skriker* as a performed expression of trauma, scholar Eva Gil Cuder argues that the theatrical expression of a play allows for the most accurate and compelling representation of trauma because of its ability to extend beyond language for means of expression, such as bodily and physical communication. As postnatal trauma for young mothers is one of the specific societal issues Churchill identifies within coded political commentary dispersed throughout her play, this choice for theatrical expression allows for repressed unconscious feelings to be exposed through the uncanny. Like the uncanny within Churchill's play, Cuder asserts that "[trauma] is … disassociated from the rational and the analytical as well as from

the logocentric, since the use of verbal language alone seems to be discredited in its potential to articulate it" (67). Because the trauma Churchill identifies as occurring for Lily and Josie postpartum, as being inflicted upon the environment through slow violence, and as circulating within the English culture through materialistic attitudes and practices would be discredited in its written expression alone, the performative aspect of the theatrical space allows these different instances of trauma to liven for the audience and expose them to uncanny qualities wherein Churchill codes her political ideology.

Conclusion: Urgency in the Uncanny Space of *The Skriker*

Churchill's play is, by no means, a traditional political play. The blurring of genre, experimental language, and the mythical quality of the characters all contribute to *The Skriker* standing apart as a play that stares fearlessly into the face of society's problems. Churchill's *The Skriker* makes use of unnatural images and means of communication in order to reveal political messages that are, in her view, pressing to the well-being of 1990s English society. The images and language Churchill depicts in her play are unnatural because they position the audience in a space of unfamiliarity, distancing the audience from their understanding of each. This distance creates a space of the unknown, where Churchill presents her political messages concerning England's ecosystem, materialistic culture, and postnatal trauma; this leads to revelation of obscured issues in an unfamiliar space and places the audience in the realm of the uncanny. Churchill's concealed political messages revealed only through unnatural and unfamiliar spaces suggests that the uncanny aesthetic may be an effective means for expressing urgency of a situation in an otherwise repressed or passive context. Similarly, Churchill's deconstruction of expectation through an evil figure suggests that a reinvention of tradition is needed, even and especially if accomplished by radical means, in order to bring awareness to the devastation she imagines in contemporary society with an urgent and lasting impression.

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Poe's Perverse: The Impulse for Negative Sublimity through Self-Destruction

Christopher Jozef Chrobak

In the preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, Edgar Allan Poe writes: "If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is … of the soul,—that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results" (621). Despite his own urging, many readers simply fixate on the horrific elements of his work without acknowledging, in his own words, the "Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty, the manifestation of [which] is always found in an *elevating excitement of the soul*" ("Raven" 94).[1] This "supernal beauty" serves as Poe's expression of the sublime. While many of Poe's Romantic and Transcendentalist contemporaries lost themselves in the sublime, positively, through the grandeur of Nature, Poe perceived it negatively through death, disease, decay, and, ultimately, self-destruction. Instead of *ascending* to the sublime as if it were a literal and figurative peak expressed by the likes of Emerson and Coleridge, Poe's narrators *descend*, wholly internally, to utter destruction; however, it is only through this *perverse* downward transcendence into self-obliteration, and contemplation thereof, that they have any possibility of attaining sublimity. This essay examines Poe's notion of the sublime: the irresistible, irrational compulsion for self-negation—the *perverse* delineated in "The Imp of the Perverse," and how this impulse allows the narrators in three of his stories ("The Imp of the Perverse," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat") their only chance of experiencing the sublime—through self-destruction.

Poe's Sublime

Poe articulates his notion of the sublime in "The Poetic Principle," wherein he writes:

> *That* pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation of the Beautiful. In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement *of the soul* … which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason … Beauty, therefore—using the word as inclusive of the sublime. ("Raven" 93)

Interestingly, he notes that it is not solely through the creation of Beauty that one can achieve sublimity, but also through its contemplation. Fortunately, artists are not the only ones capable of experiencing the sublime. Although a writer may produce the work and bring it into existence, a reader engages in contemplation of the artistic product, whether through the act of reading itself or pondering anything urged by the work when not reading. Poe claims this contemplation leads to sublimity as it touches upon "[a]n immortal instinct deep within the spirit of man [which] is thus plainly a sense of the Beautiful" (91). Despite physical and temporal distance, contemplation of a written work establishes a sort of communion between writer and reader. According to Kenneth Burke, the sublime constitutes a "realm 'beyond,'" one which humans can only access by transcendence or "the building of a *terministic bridge*" from *this* realm to *that* sublime one (187). In this sense, there exists a transcendental element between creator and participant through the experience of an artistic work. Poe clearly exalts Beauty,[2] or the sublime, not only through the artistic endeavor of its creation, but also through its contemplative potential for experiencing the "pleasurable elevation or excitement" of the soul.

The process of creation or contemplation of Beauty—or, as rendered by Poe, the human aspiration for supernal beauty—need not remain positive. Edmund Burke, one of the 18th century's most prominent writers on the sublime, considered it thus: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger … whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (51). Poe's sublime echoes Burke's depiction of it as that which is powerful enough to destroy, hence its provocation of passion, fear, trepidation, mortal dread, and similar "negative" emotions; however, Burke also adds that this terror must not impose "too nearly," or else it would be "incapable of giving any delight, and [would be] simply terrible" (52). To Burke, the sublime experience blurs the line between terror and delight and cannot consist of one element overly disproportionate to the other. Poe, on the other hand, embraces this overwhelming terror and contrarily finds pleasure *in* it: "And yet it is but a *Thought*, although one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror" ("Imp of the Perverse" 404). Without this irresistibly alluring terror, his narrators cannot experience the sublime.

Another shade of the sublime is described by Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. Expanding Burke's notion of the sublime, Kant adds that the sublime experience is unique in that, briefly, it allows humans to wield rational *power* over the natural world, even though humans recognize they are *powerless* to its life-threatening forces (111-112). In other words, in the face of such prodigious danger, say, an earthquake or hurricane, the natural response is terror due to humanity's inadequacy to grasp the magnitude of such a natural phenomenon; yet, simultaneously, humans, in a position of safety, experience this fear without being *afraid*. To Kant, this establishes the mind's ability to judge itself as both separate and superior to nature, "whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion" (Ginsborg). Although Kant praises human reason in this sublime experience, it must not be overlooked that there also exists an irrational element, as he claims that the sublime is a "pleasure which is possible only by means of a displeasure" and a "negative liking" (Ginsborg). Poe embraces this irrational element of the sublime experience and takes it to the furthest extreme.

As Poe notes in "The Poetic Principle," his sublime does not respond to "Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason" ("Raven" 92). Unlike Kant's formulation, in which one can consider oneself superior to a phenomenon's physical magnitude and attendant danger by observing it from a safe position, Poe's sublime, by way of its perverse impulse, compels one to thrust oneself wholeheartedly into the danger despite its existential threat: "We stand upon the brink of a precipice … It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height … and because our reason most strenuously deters us from the brink, *therefore* do we the more unhesitatingly approach it" ("Imp of the Perverse" 404). Poe's sublime resonates with Kant's insofar as one recognizes one's inadequacy compared to the sublime, but distinguishes itself by perversely compelling its beholders to plunge into its depths instead of keeping distance. He continues, "And this fall—this rushing annihilation … involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering … *for this very cause* do we now the most impetuously desire it" (404). In her article, "Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity and Disease," J. Alexandra McGhee notes what Poe reveals above, that he recognizes "the possibility—and promise—of transcendence downward, through dissolution and the embrace of annihilation" (57). Rationally, to embrace self-destruction makes no sense, as self-destruction directly contradicts self-preservation; however, Poe dismisses Kant's idea that human faculties of reason can even properly explain the sublime, and finds this negative sublimity, through self-destruction, even more attractive.

To Poe, the sublime experience, the Beautiful which lies beyond, occurs during these moments of rational collapse. Within this negative sublimity, Poe anticipates a source of knowledge,[3] which he can only describe as existing beyond the scope of the human mind, its rational faculties, and existence itself— "of the glories beyond the grave" ("Raven" 92). As McGhee observes, "Death and nothingness, for Poe, represent the ultimate states of being, where the cosmic truths hinted at by art actually exist …

The poet can illuminate, fleetingly, the barest reflection of these truths from beyond the grave, but they are by nature unattainable" (59). What Poe understands as a source of knowledge beyond human rationality, wherein sublimity resides, can be likened to the depths of the unconscious, but it must not be overlooked that, during Poe's time, incipient studies in the psyche, self, and unconscious hardly held the currency they do today. As Poe was contemplating phenomena that had yet to be delineated, he envisions these Beautiful truths as constitutive of a sublime realm beyond the rational mind; since Poe perceives glimpses of this realm through death, decay, and disease, he sensibly deduces that one must not resist these "perverse" impulses, no matter how irrational they may seem, if one hopes to achieve sublimity. One needs merely to reflect on Poe's claim in "The Philosophy of Composition" that, "'When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world'" to grasp his belief that death alone provides access to these Beautiful truths, whether through its phenomenal experience or, harkening to his "Poetic Principle," the contemplation thereof (680). To Poe, death impetuses the "pleasurable excitement" of the soul because it leads one to contemplate these truths which lie beyond life. If death is the ultimate sublime experience, and henceforth delivers one to these truths, then the very processes of death and degeneration provide the closest opportunities to grasp them.

If complete apprehension of these truths lies in, or after, death, Poe cites this as their appeal—whether by virtue of their own ineffability or due to a perceived promise of a perennial existence after death. Broaching upon metaphysics, Poe opines that the insatiable "thirst" for these truths is "at once a consequence and indication" of human immortality ("Raven" 92). Since these truths are of another world, one which transcends time and space, and can only be attained through death, Poe believes that it is their eternal essences that promise knowledge beyond life. In other words, to Poe, the transcendence of earthly life into the sublime truths of eternity indicates that there is *something* beyond this mortal life, and that *something* can be ascertained—but only through death. One may try to wrangle them from beyond, but one will only retain vague impressions. Again, Poe maintains that, given a glimpse of this precious sublime, humans seek it all the more fervently, albeit futilely, compelled by a "certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which … we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses" (92).

Given Poe's philosophy of the sublime, it is unsurprising that his characters possess such precarious psychologies. For them to experience any notion of sublimity, they must submit themselves to death. Although the narrators in these three tales exhibit utmost rationality in either their extremely calculated murders and/or their ingenious disposal of the bodies, once they encounter the sublime through directly dealing with death, they inevitably begin to contemplate what lies beyond it.[4] When this occurs, they become irresistibly drawn to their own destruction as their sanity deteriorates, which signifies the surfacing of Poe's imp of the perverse. McGhee summarizes this condition: "Poe's perverse characters, who actively seek their own

dissolution and the dissolution of those around them, are the most successful artists, the closest to grasping the truths which lie beyond death. Their proximity to death is heightened due to their connections to disease, insanity, and the macabre" (59-60). This drive for self-dissolution, from which there can be no return, Poe articulates through "The Imp of the Perverse," which functions as both a fictional depiction of and treatise on this inexplicable impulse for self-destruction, and it is as tantalizing as it is incomprehensible.

The Impulse for the Perverse

Although Poe did not publish "The Imp of the Perverse" until 1845, two years after both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," these stories exemplify his concept of this imp in action, specifically as it contributes to the narrators' encounters with the sublime and subsequent rational collapse. "The Black Cat" even incorporates some of the same language that Poe would later use in "The Imp of the Perverse," notably when the imprisoned narrator defines the "spirit of perverseness" as "this unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex* itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" ("The Black Cat" 350). He further qualifies this impulse in "The Imp of the Perverse" as the likewise condemned narrator muses about "an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something which for want of a better term, we may call *Perverseness* … [through which] the desire to be well is not only *not* aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment prevails" ("The Imp of the Perverse" 403). This propensity is not to be confused with even the darkest masochism, but instead seen as an earnest compulsion to "act for the reason that we should *not*"; it is not only a temptation to do wrong, but the "unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us, to its prosecution" (403). The narrators, goaded by this perverse impulse, senselessly eschew all security and ultimately confess their crimes,[5] which then lead to their imminent executions.

Although many have claimed that Poe's narrators are categorically irrational, which would render this perverse impulse unexceptional, this is not entirely true. They may be unreliable or deceptive, as well as exhibit disordered behavior and thought processes, but they still possess a mental acuity insofar as they impeccably plot their horrific acts. In "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator unashamedly boasts of his crime, saying that it would have been impossible for any act to be more thoroughly deliberated, that "for weeks—for months—I pondered upon the means of the murder"; similarly, in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator recounts, "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!" (405, 317). "The Black Cat" bears a slight exception in that the narrator does not purposefully plan to kill his wife, but, having done so, he proceeds just as diligently when he entombs her in the cellar wall: "And in this calculation I was not deceived … I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood … with every possible precaution … When I had finished … [the] wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed" (354). The scrupulous planning reflects the narrators' determination not to be caught. Had they been irrational from the onset,

they likely would not have undertaken such labors to ensure their safety. Despite their disturbing actions, as well as the morbid guiltlessness they feel, the narrators remain relatively rational until, precipitated by the perverse imp, they become exposed to the terror of the sublime and their sanity begins to deteriorate.[6]

In the titular story, the imp does not materialize until years after the murder, when the satisfaction of the narrator's having gone undetected for so long suddenly opens him up to the *perverse*, or the irrational drive to undo everything for which he had so long labored. Despite the successful murder—by virtue of leaving no hints of detection and inheriting the deceased's estate—the narrator, for no real reason, begins to question his security and grows more unstable. The imp's appearance coincides with the narrator's fanciful hallucinations of a creeping shadow, which indicates that his sanity has begun to decay. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," the imp reveals itself to the respective narrators much sooner and more intensely: in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the imp manifests immediately after the murder when the narrator still perceives the old man's heart beating, although it does not reach a fever pitch until the police arrive; in "The Black Cat," it surfaces when the narrator cuts out the cat's eye in a drunken fury, though it is not as forcefully apparent until he hangs the cat soon thereafter.

F. Gül Koçsoy writes in the article "The Trangressive Sublime in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Imp of the Perverse'" that the imp motivates the narrators in the respective stories *to* commit murder, but, despite its validity, this does not seem likely (144-145). If the narrators had encountered the imp before committing the murders, as she argues, this would entail that they acted irrationally; however, it can be seen that the narrators very rationally devise their plans of murder. Although the imp causes the narrators to spiral into oblivion, it does not surface in earnest until the narrators feel their most secure, thus rendering their self-betrayal even more senseless. It does not seem to initially motivate them to murder. The narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" admits to a monomaniacal obsession with the old man's eye, but, in the same sentence, details how he "made up [his] mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid [himself] of the eye forever" (317). It does not seem likely that the narrator would proceed so deliberately in plotting the old man's death if he were so compelled by the perverse, irrational imp. In addition, in "The Imp of the Perverse," the murder likewise has been so calculated that, in both cases, the narrators leave no evidence pointing to themselves[7]; if this were the work of the perverse imp and not the narrators' own actions, however horrific, the question remains—in what way would these murders serve as expressions of irrational self-vexation? The pathological fixation of the narrators inherent to the murders is certainly disturbing and seemingly without purpose, but, however macabre their motives, the narrators devise their plans so carefully and cleverly that no possible element remains unaccounted, which requires utmost calculation. It would be fallacious to claim that the narrators acted without any element of human rationality due to the imp's machinations. This would imply that the murders are categorically irrational, which projects a presupposed moral dimension on to the stories that Poe does not seem to intend. There seems to be no morality in

Poe's perverse in the slightest. Although the narrators are ultimately coerced by the imp to unburden themselves to the law, and thereby face imminent execution for their crimes, there is no moralistic redemption in this retribution; none of them experience spiritual absolution for having confessed their guilt. Although the narrators' minds are "abnormal" insofar as they commit murder for seemingly capricious reasons, they still possess their rational faculties at this point.

If Koçsoy's point is granted, that the murders were committed entirely irrationally, for them to satisfy Poe's definition of the perverse they would need to serve the larger purpose of intentionally, maliciously, harming the narrators. It is true that, by virtue of their having committed murder, the narrators then possess something which they *can* confess, but to claim this evidences the imp in action and suggests that their futures were already wholly determined by their having committed murder; this proposes that the imp preordained the rest of their lives so that they would eventually snap. Not only is this a strong accusation on its own, but it also assumes that the imp *rationally* devised, prior to the murders, how their lives would advance; however, Poe insists that the imp of the perverse *is* the very absence of rationality, "a *mobile* without motive—a motive not *motivirt*" ("Imp of the Perverse" 403). The imp is agreeably malevolent, and perhaps such a ruse is not out of the realm of possibility, but the imp's entire essence is that it acts compulsively "to do wrong for wrong's sake" (403). Granted, this view of the imp as a diabolic mastermind *may* apply to "The Tell-Tale Heart" as the narrator hears the phantom heartbeat of the old man immediately after having murdered him, which ultimately leads to his confession among the police. But this carries the implication that the imp acts according to standards of human rationality, which would deter from its sublime incomprehensibility that Poe rather seems to intend.

Furthermore, in "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe's narrator begins to unravel upon reflection of his own safety when introduced to its contrary thought, effectively initiating his downward transcendence: "I would perpetually find myself pondering upon my impunity and security, and very frequently would catch myself repeating ... 'I am safe—I am safe ... yes, *if I do not prove fool enough to make open confession*'" (406). Despite the narrator's security and rationality, evidenced in his elaborately calculated murder, this perverse impulse seizes control when he contemplates his hypothetical undoing. As in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," the imp strikes its deathblow when the narrators feel the most confident and assured in their safety—when the police have determined, satisfactorily, that each narrator could not possibly have been involved with the respective murders. Try as they might, the narrators cannot bring themselves to understand their abrupt confessions because a reason does not exist; however, that is the nature of Poe's perverse: it operates completely outside the realm of human understanding, and, through an irrational pull, lures its victims to their deaths, where there may or may not be the Beautiful, sublime truths they come to seek.

Unlike the positive sublime prized by Poe's Romantic and Transcendentalist contemporaries, Poe's sublime exists entirely outside the realm of human

comprehension. In specific contrast to Kant, there is no positive affirmation of human rationality over the natural world for any of the narrators in "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," or "The Imp of the Perverse," only a negative transcendence to oblivion. Since Poe considers this the only way to access deep, eternal poetical truths, their precarious psychologies and willingness to directly deal with death incidentally give them an advantage for their attainment. Although the narrators exhibit acute rational faculties, when Poe's *perverse* imp reveals itself to them, they begin their downward transcendence until it inevitably consumes them. This impulse is as horrible as inexpressible, yet the narrators are so compelled that they do not—*cannot*—do otherwise. In harmony with Poe's aesthetic and poetic philosophies in "The Poetic Principle" and "The Philosophy of Composition," these narrators' encounters with the sublime, and subsequent enthrallment by the imp of the perverse, generate and embolden an internal attraction to the realm beyond this mortal life. In addition to committing murder, the narrators, as a result, experience heightened conditions of hyperesthesia, which only contributes to their anxious contemplation of the negative, Beautiful sublimity that soon swallows them. As the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" fittingly pens his final thought, "To-day I wear these chains, and am *here*. To-morrow, I shall be fetterless—*but where?*" (406). Through these stories, Poe hopes to find an answer.

Notes

1. All emphases in quotes hereafter contained in the originals.

2. Not to be confused with Immanuel Kant's distinction between "beauty" and "sublime," where "beauty" more closely equates to "taste" and requires an entirely different form of judgment from that of the sublime (Ginsborg).

3. Modern readers have associated this with the unconscious, for its power to control both human reason and imagination (Koçsoy 144). For the purposes of this analysis, however, psychoanalytic theory will be left to Marie Bonaparte's The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation (1949).

4. Whether or not they are immediately conscious of it, the narrators experience sublime moments of transcendence through their apprehension of spectral heartbeats ("The Tell-Tale Heart") or apparitional shadows ("The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse"). These moments point to their mental disintegration.

5. In "The Black Cat," there is no direct textual confession, but the perverse impulse guides the narrator, "through the mere phrenzy of bravado," to expose his crime to the police by rapping upon the exact spot in which he entombed his wife, thereby awakening the cat and ultimately revealing his wife's murder (355).

6. In "The Black Cat," the imp's process is more insidious. The narrator encounters the imp when killing the cat, but he still carries on with a certain degree of rationality until the police investigation. The imp still ultimately leads to the narrator's undoing, however, by pushing the narrator to essentially expose his crime by arrogantly calling attention to the very spot in which he entombed his wife.

7. Interestingly, the narrator of "The Black Cat" insists that it was entirely due to perverseness that he killed the cat, unlike the narrators of the stories subject to analysis by F. Gül Koçsoy; however, since human murder is her focus, this omission makes sense, since an admitted "rage more than demoniacal, " not the perverse, causes the narrator to murder his wife (353).

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Repression, Fantasy, and Desire in Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

Melissa Berland

The haunted house is one of the most popular tropes used in novels to frighten readers. Stephen King's *The Shining*, Richard Matheson's *Hell House*, and Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* all encompass the trope of the haunted house, but horror is rarely their only function. Critics have noted that the trope of the haunted house provides an adequate workspace for examining the processes of the mind, such as the house in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Novels such as these reflect interest in "psychic grotesquerie" that highlights the "landscapes of the mind," which are deranged by the "psychological obsessions" of the characters (Punter 2). Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* displays this type of psychological approach to horror. Hill House, with its haunted reputation, undergoes investigation by Dr. Montague and his guests in order to explain the psychic phenomena in the House. Among these guests is Eleanor Vance, whose connection to the House soon becomes psychologically detrimental. While the rest of the group find themselves unable to explain the supernatural happenings in the House, causing them to regard the events as either natural or paranormal, Eleanor shows a unique susceptibility to the House. This vulnerability, which is fueled by her past and ongoing fantasies, leads her to accept the House as a place where she might obtain all of her desires, a place in which she feels she belongs. However, the House as an embodiment of "absolute reality"—to be argued as an unrealizable reality or truth—forces Eleanor to face elements of her past that she wishes to forget (Jackson 3). Jackson's novel encompasses the tropes of the haunted house and the repressive qualities of child-like fantasy to reveal that Eleanor's journey towards consummating her desires is impossible due to her inability to recognize and progress from the underlying truths of her character (3).

It is Eleanor's past that has made her susceptible to Hill House. She had spent eleven years caring for her mother, and in that time she became lonely and antisocial. Throughout the novel, Eleanor reveals many desires which develop in defiance of her

past experiences. One of these is her longing to find and be her true self, a desire for independence, which is understood from her comment, "insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again" (Jackson 22). This derives from the evident effect her mother has had on her:

> her years with her mother were built around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair. Without ever wanting to become reserved and shy, she had spent so long alone, with no one to love, that it was difficult for her to talk, even casually, to another person without feeling self-consciousness and an awkward inability to find words. (6-7)

Eleanor had lost most of her own will and personality at the expense of caring for her mother. Most influential is Eleanor's desire for belonging and for a home and family, one that is not as damaging as the one she has come from. This explains her insistence on considering herself and the rest of the group at Hill House as a family (97). She wants to become "[a]n Eleanor ... who belongs" (61). Unfortunately, her later statement, "I am home," indicates that she believes that she has found this belonging with the House, instead of with the individuals around her (232). Having such a damaged past which has encouraged her to create new desires for herself makes her an eligible candidate for the House to prey on. She is the weakest member of the group, the one most in need of change and who is willing to accept what is to come; she has, after all, "been waiting for something like Hill House" all her life (7).

Jackson begins her novel by challenging the construction of reality, suggesting that "absolute reality" may not be experienced for long without losing one's sanity (3). According to Patricia Waugh, it is necessary to identify reality as something "subjectively constructed," and, through fiction, readers might "discover how we each 'play' our own realities" (35). The reader must wonder, then, what sort of reality is absolute and what might constitute it as a threat to one's sanity. Here, Vijay Mishra's observations of "The Gothic Sublime" prove helpful. Traditionally, the sublime is "a fundamentally religious category" that considers the subject's attachment to God as an attachment to an "absolute Other, a wholly Other, who exists beyond concept" (Mishra 290). This relationship, however, has the capacity to become a "negative sublime—uncanny, unfamiliar, awe-inspiring, beyond representation." That which is indescribable but induces feelings of awe and desire is defined as *ineffable*. It is impossible to give a name to or put into language that which is ineffable because "to do so is more than mortals can bear" (Wilson 114). Jackson's "absolute reality" is, then, supranatural and beyond human comprehension. It may, at first, mask itself as something pleasant and desirable, only to be revealed as something dangerous and negative. Eleanor is the one who falls into this trap. She is the poor soul who has come into contact with House's "absolute reality" and, just as Jackson has predicted, is not able to "exist sanely" for long under its conditions (Jackson 3).

In light of these examinations, another interpretation of "absolute reality" is that it represents absolute truth. The original religious framework of the sublime offers

an explanation for this. If the absolute truth behind human existence is of likeness to an "absolute Other," then it is also beyond human comprehension and, crucially, detrimental to witness. While an individual might desire the truth, it is not possible for him/her to know what this truth is. Furthermore, in a more literal manner, the truth might reveal information that an individual may have wished to have left forgotten, or it might reveal truths counter to the ones the individual has already constructed for him/herself. In this regard, the truth will have revealed something about an individual's own existence that he/she had not wished to face; this is so for Eleanor. The House forces her to face elements of her own existence that she wishes not to be true. In this way, Waugh's idea that individuals construct their own realities becomes crucial. An individual will construct his/her own reality—which Eleanor accomplishes through fantasy—in order to protect him/herself from the unwelcome truth.

Dreaming, or creating fantasy, becomes the barrier which shields any human being from the truth or the ineffable. If one considers Jackson's concept of "absolute reality" as one which is unrealizable and detrimental, then the reader's own constructions of reality prove as necessary to protect him/her from that danger. For the purposes of this essay, dreaming will be understood as fantasy, so as to suggest the deliberate creation of fantasy in order to fabricate an individual's own understanding of reality. This concept is highlighted throughout the novel via Eleanor, who is an elaborate builder of fantasy wherever she goes. During her journey to Hill House, she creates a number of scenarios in her head. When passing a large house, she begins to imagine that "she might live there," but her imagination becomes excessive (Jackson 18):

> Every morning I swept the porch and dusted the lions, and every evening I patted their heads good night, and once a week I washed their faces and manes and paws with warm water and soda and cleaned between the teeth with a swab ... When I slept it was under a canopy of white organdy, and a nightlight guarded me from the hall. People bowed to me on the streets of the town because everyone was very proud of my lions. (18)

Eleanor's constructions have an excessive quality to them that include elaborate details such as the stone lions at this home's front gate and unusual scenarios of people bowing to her in the street. Her inclination for fantasy is an example of how an individual might shape, or *play out*, his/her own realities as Waugh has suggested. This instance of fantasy allows Eleanor to ignore the fact that she has stolen her sister's car and is running away from her troubles at home. Her journey to Hill House, and the fantasies which accompany it, allows her to overlook the unpleasant reality of her actions.

Hill House uses Eleanor's weakness for fantasy to lure her into its trap of "absolute reality." It is her fantastical imagination which keeps her from seeing the immediate danger threatening both her sanity and her life, up until the moment of her death. When the other individuals have realized just how dangerous Hill House has become for Eleanor, they decide to send her away; however, by this time, Eleanor has

decided she cannot leave or, rather, that "Hill House means [her] to stay." Regardless, the others are able to convince her to leave. As she drives away from the House, though, her imagination steps in for one last time: "But by now they must be beginning to realize; I wonder who notices first? Luke, almost certainly. I can hear them calling now, she thought, and the little footsteps running through Hill House and the soft sound of the hills pressing closer" (Jackson 245). Her fantasy is overwhelmingly driven by her desire to finally do something "all by [herself]." This dreamy state is broken, however, by the "crashing second before the car hurled into the tree," during which she rightly questions, "*Why* am I doing this?" (246). Up until this moment, she had not realized that what she was doing was suicidal; to her, it appeared to be an act that was finally all her own, a consummation of her desires. Her fantasy—both her belief that the House meant her to stay and her internal rambling as she sped her car towards the tree—veil the reality she is soon to face, her death.

There are defining moments in which Eleanor appears to have truly lost her sanity to the House. One of these occurs during the picnic that she and Theodora encounter. In this scene, the two are walking through the grounds of Hill House at night, but the imagery describes them as walking into an unsettling black-and-white image: "the trees, silent, relinquished the dark color they had held, paled, grew transparent ... [t]he grass was colorless, the path wide and black" (Jackson 175). They eventually come to a point where the path ends, and the colorless grass is transformed into a rich green; the sun shines, and an array of colors are now visible to Eleanor. She describes a picnic scene with a family, hearing children laughing, a mother and father, and a puppy (176). A curious difference that Wilson notes in this scene is that the reader only knows what Eleanor sees, not Theodora. Theodora screams and yells in fear to Eleanor, "don't look back—don't look—run!" (177). After the event, Theodora is unable to describe anything which had happened. However, she expresses a sense of horror and guilt from having looked back: crying and laughing thinly, she says, "I went on and looked behind us." Her inability to communicate what she sees shows that it was "indescribable ... something that she either *cannot* or cannot *bear* to describe" (Wilson 119). In comparison to this is Eleanor's ability to describe what she sees with ease. During this event, she had at first thought to herself that she was afraid, but when she begins to see her colorful vision, her fears become practical: "she was afraid she might stumble over the puppy" (177). However, Theodora's reaction of screaming and telling Eleanor to run suggests something entirely more horrifying than a picnic and puppies. The vision, therefore, does not appear as a horrifying hallucination to Eleanor, but as what she wishes it to be. The elements of the picnic coincide with Eleanor's own desires: a happy family enjoying a picnic. Eleanor's vulnerability to fantasy (an innocent image of a picnic and puppies) shields her from the supposed terrifying experience that Theodora witnessed.

What is often ignored in regards to Hill House is the concept of its being a living entity which is able to act upon its victims. Even Jackson, in a note on an old home she once lived in, believed in a house capable of living and acting upon those who have lived within it. She states that her old home "had grave reservations about [them] and

would allow [them] to feel only provisionally at home" ("Good Old House" 223). This figure of a house as able to feel and have various effects on people clearly reflects her creation of Hill House; for the House, from the beginning of the novel, is described as "not sane," "vile … diseased," and "disturbed, perhaps. Leprous. Sick. Any of the popular euphemisms for insanity; a deranged house" (Jackson 3, 33, 70). Anything which is sick or insane must certainly be alive. Its liveliness is further confirmed in that its central room is described as the "heart of the house" (119). In other words, it contains a central organ which maintains it. The House's liveliness allows it to be discernable as a monster, as is necessary in any horror novel. Noël Carroll states that a "monster may be threatening psychologically, morally, or socially," but a monster may even be "physically dangerous" (43). While one of Dr. Montague's guests, Luke, states that he does not feel "in any *physical* danger" from the House, Eleanor challenges this thought by saying that she feels the House is, rather, trying to "consume us, take us into itself" (139). This imagery of consumption suggests a physical danger, as Eleanor's demise confirms, but it does not neglect the other dangers that Carroll references. To make victims a part of itself is to threaten the victim's individuality and being, which reflects the idea that monsters might "destroy one's identity" (Carroll 43). Hill House's desire to consume individuals confirms its presence as "diseased" and "leprous." It acts as something infectious which passes on its disease, infecting the victim as well. There are no ghosts in Hill House; the terror of it is the House itself, and its representation of something ineffable. This ineffability, as well as its characterization as a living organism, turns it into a monster who is wholly capable of choosing its victims and luring them "into itself," as it does Eleanor, proving dangerous to both the mind and body.

The ways in which the House lures Eleanor into its trap are specific and all connected to her repressed past with her mother. Because of this, Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny applies to the hauntings of Hill House. Freud describes the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (825). The uncanny will have a sense of familiarity but also of the unknown (826). Hill House uses elements of Eleanor's past in frightening ways. A clear example of this is seen in the first supernatural event in the House. Eleanor wakes to the sound of banging on the walls and hears a voice calling her name. She instantly exclaims, "[c]oming, mother, coming" (Jackson 127). She starts and realizes that she is in Hill House but still insists on thinking, "my mother is knocking on the walls." The House mimics the past experiences Eleanor has had with her mother, creating both a familiar and frightening experience for her. The association of the sound with her mother is later proven significant. Eleanor reveals that the night her mother died, "she knocked on the wall and called me and called me and I never woke up" (212). She later confesses, "it was my fault my mother died." The event, then, not only mimics Eleanor's experience with her mother but also serves as a reminder of her guilt. It confirms the notion that "everything is [unfamiliar] that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 828). Thus, the House embodies a familiar entity that Eleanor is not able to ignore, while also bringing to light secrets that she has been

withholding. This is due to the lasting impression her mother seems to have had on her. More than once, the group stumbles upon writing on the walls that says, "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME" (146, 155). The only individual who would be likely to cry to Eleanor for help to come home would be her mother. The House, having written this message itself, establishes an even more personal connection with Eleanor by knowing her name. One might also consider Freud's examinations of the word *heimlich*. Deriving from "*'homelike', belonging to the house,*'" Freud establishes that it will inevitably "[coincide] with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (828). It will be familiar, but terrifyingly so. Thus, the House's façade of being welcoming cannot be trusted.

The House also lures Eleanor through its understanding of her desires. Eleanor's journey into becoming a part of Hill House is confirmed by the House's playful performance with Mrs. Montague, who claims to be able to communicate with the ghosts of Hill House. During a séance that Mrs. Montague leads with the help of her assistant, Arthur, she asks the ghosts, "Who are you?" The House then responds, "Eleanor Nellie Nell Nell" (Jackson 192). The House thus takes possession of Eleanor's name and continues by naming Eleanor's own desires:

> "What do you want?" Arthur read.
> "Mother," Mrs. Montague read back.
> "Why?"
> "Child."
> "Where is your mother?"
> "Home."
> "Where is your home?"
> "Lost. Lost. Lost." (193)

The responses indicate a desire for the bond between mother and child, for childhood itself, and for a home which has been lost. They clearly mimic Eleanor's erratic attachment to her deceased mother, linked both to the mother and to the idea of home. Eleanor's feelings toward her mother are ambiguous. It is difficult to conclude whether she truly misses her mother, or if she is haunted by the guilt of her death. This scene also invites one to associate this state of being lost with Eleanor's state of being without a real home. Is the desire for home a desire for the home she has lost, or desire for a new home? The answer is unclear. It reflects the same sort of conflicts which are presented in Freud's concept of the uncanny. In connection to Eleanor, it can be said that the House uses that which is lost but familiar—Eleanor's home and her mother—to attract her to it.

Early on, Eleanor recognizes the House as potentially living and acting upon them, which the others in the group are reluctant to do. During a discussion about their purpose at Hill House, Eleanor suggests, "I don't think we could leave now if we wanted to," but the others reject the idea that the House is in control (Jackson 75). She begins to notice a pattern in their conversations; when the topic of fear comes about, or when they attempt to explain the happenings in the House, "the conversation [is] being skillfully guided away from the thought of fear." She further thinks that "she was

to be allowed to speak occasionally for all of them" (98). This is because she believes herself to be a product of fear, one who has experienced "every kind of fear." Her sense of fear, then, is dulled and allows her to accept the horrifying notion that the House is in control. The only thing that the group agrees on is that something *does* happen in Hill House. Dr. Montague suggests that "the menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armor of superstition and have no substitute defense." Thus, the individuals most strongly targeted by supernatural powers are those who would be the most unsettled by tangible evidence of what they know (or what they think they know). Time spent in Hill House, then, is a threat to reality itself, a place where one questions what is real and what is not. Eleanor's suggestion is that "none of this is real," a statement rebuked by the Doctor but noted by Eleanor as a truth that they cannot recognize (140). On the subject of reality, Wilson notes that it "constitutes the ultimate threat to human existence and sanity" (120). Wilson's study progresses from this to suggest that the House's representation of reality reveals that reality is, in fact, nothing—a meaningless void. This appears to be what Eleanor is suggesting: that reality is nothing. It is understandable, then, for the Doctor to rebuke Eleanor for "venturing far too close to the state of mind which would welcome the perils of Hill House" (Jackson 140). To accept reality as nothing is madness and terrifying in itself.

Counter to Eleanor's perception of the House as alive and in control is Dr. and Mrs. Montague's reliance on scientific and paranormal explanations. The Doctor, especially, clings to scientific and logical explanations. Fear, he states, "is the relinquishment of logic" (Jackson 159). He references various theories which attempt to explain the happenings at Hill House as "psychic" disturbances, the "result of subterranean waters, or electric currents, or hallucinations caused by polluted air" (71). Mrs. Montague believes that the House is full of spirits "*suffering* because they are aware that you [the group] are afraid of them" (183). The husband-and-wife duo continually battle over their respective explanations, each believing the other to be impossible. The bickering shows that "[i]gnorance, rationalization, and blindness are the only alternatives to madness in the world of Hill House," and the frustration of this inability to see things as how they really are is reflected through Eleanor (Wilson 120). The Doctor and his wife's desperation to find either paranormal or scientific explanations mirrors the Doctor's complaint that people are "always so anxious to get things out into the open where they put a name to them, even a meaningless name" (71). However, their desire to *know* and give a name to what is happening in Hill House is denied by the constant insinuation that the House is more than just haunted by spirits or influenced by scientific phenomena. The imbalance between supernatural and natural explanation shows that the novel harbors qualities of "the fantastic," as defined by Tzevetan Todorov. Carroll defines Todorov's genre as "an oscillation between naturalistic and supernatural explanations," and he considers Jackson's novel to be a prime example of this type of genre (145-46). He notes various contradictions which are present in the novel, notably the debate between Eleanor's "possession [or] madness" (147). The inclusion of supernatural and scientific explanations in the novel

becomes altogether confusing when in combat with one another. The inclination is to discard them because of their ridiculousness, just as Eleanor discards one of the events as "too silly" (156). She says this when the House writes her name on the wall for a second time. Only, this time, Eleanor cannot understand why the House would do such a thing. By this point, the possibility of a ghost trying to frighten her is a ridiculous idea.

Hill House would not have the effect it does on Eleanor if repression did not play the role that it does in the novel, which is communicated through childlike behavior and fantasy. These are displayed through the use of language in the relationship between Eleanor and Theodora. Theodora often calls Eleanor names such as "[p]oor baby," and Eleanor even refers to herself as "a very silly baby" (Jackson 94). Notably, though, the early stages of their relationship plays out like that of "two little girls" (57). This language serves to "create a barrier of nostalgia and regret," connected both to Eleanor's past and present (Coveney 240). Considering that her relationship with her sister has been damaged from an early stage, it is likely that Eleanor's willingness to have this relationship with Theodora, such that Theodora takes on the likeness of a bossy, big sister, is a reflection of her desire for a relationship that she never had. For Theodora, it is a means of temporary distraction. Before her arrival at Hill House, it is said that she argues with her female roommate so much that "only time could eradicate" the issue (9). She has accepted Dr. Montague's invitation to Hill House out of a necessity to get away. And so the relationship she develops with Eleanor becomes a temporary replacement for the one she has lost.

A further example of childlike behavior is the presence of games within the novel. Luke, Eleanor, and Theodora are seen taking part in or referencing various children's games such as hide-and-seek, tic-tac-toe and racing each other across the House. But, most notable is their play with the imagination—their ability to play off one another to create wild stories about themselves as children would do:

> "I live a mad, abandoned life, draped in a shawl and going from garret to garret."
> "Are you heartless and wanton?" Luke asked. "Or are you one of the fragile creatures who will fall in love with a lord's son and pine away?"
> "Losing all your beauty and coughing a good deal?" Theodora added.
> "I rather think I have a heart of gold," Eleanor said reflectively. (Jackson 62)

This is a small example of how the three introduce themselves to one another. The conversation begins as one normally would, with general information such as names, but it soon becomes a game of make-believe in which each character creates a wild description of themselves. In this way, their behavior acts as a "means of detachment and retreat from the adult world" (Coveney 241). Or conversely, it acts as an escape from having to mean anything, either allowing freedom from the responsibilities of their own lives or a nostalgic desire for that which is lost (Waugh 38).

What Eleanor's relationship with the House shows is that the supposed freedom found through childlike behavior—her play with fantasy—is actually unobtainable. Coveney further notes that the "freedom" of childlike behavior is an illusion. It is merely a "regressive escape into the emotional prison of self-limiting nostalgia" (Coveney 241). As she spends more time in the House, it becomes clear that Eleanor's desires are unobtainable. Her desire for a sisterly relationship with Theodora is denied when she announces to Theodora that she is going back home with her (Jackson 208). Theodora, naturally, denies this request and questions, "Do you *always* go where you're not wanted?" So Eleanor must admit that she has "never been wanted *anywhere*" (209). Whatever romantic attachment she might have had with Dr. Montague or Luke is destroyed as well, as Dr. Montague's wife arrives at the House, and Luke becomes "selfish" and "simply not very interesting" to her (Jackson 167). Additionally, Eleanor has continuously insisted on creating fantasies about her dream home and has relied on the lie that she lives alone in this made-up home. Despite this fantasy, though, she must come to admit that she has no home at all. During her stay at Hill House, the fantasies that might connect her to the real world are destroyed one by one. It becomes more simple, "more sensible," for her to stay within the "comforts of Hill House" (239, 244). This is because, as Eleanor has realized upon her arrival at the House, "there was nowhere else to go" (40). The beginning of the novel suggests that Hill House is a place for those who "walked alone," and so it is only fitting that Eleanor should belong to the House; however, even the comforts she thinks she has found in the House reveal themselves to be false (3).

It has been noted that the House desires to bring its victims into itself, and Eleanor has surely reached this point of immersion with it. There are telling moments in which Eleanor and the House appear to be one. Eleanor thinks, "all this noise is coming from inside my head … I am disappearing inch by inch into this house" (Jackson 201). During this time, the group is huddled together while the House performs another banging-on-the-walls episode, but Eleanor begins to question whether it is she, not the House, who does it. Her thinking, "I can hear everything, all over the house," suggests that she has acquired an otherworldly psychic ability, giving her the impression that she is everywhere at once (206). At this stage, Waugh's concept of the "illynx" character is helpful, which is "an entropic, self-annihilating form" of character that "loses him or herself in a fantasy world" (40-41). She has become so deeply involved with the House that she does not appear to be a part of the real world anymore, similar to her experience of stepping into the "absolute reality" of the picnic scene. During her final night at Hill House, she is said to have approached Theodora's room and taken on a familiar behavior: she "pounded and slapped the door, laughing, and shook the doorknob and then ran swiftly down the hall to Luke's door and pounded" (229). The act mimics that of the first haunting she had experienced; she has become the House itself, which is evident in her establishing the relationship by saying "we trick them so easily" (230). By this time, she has determined that "[t]ime is ended now … all *that* is gone and left behind," indicating that she believes her life in the real world is now behind her (232). This statement also shows that she is in a

place beyond that of the reality that readers might know and understand. This, again, references Jackson's use of "absolute reality" as being an indescribable space, where time and meaning escape significance. However, it also suggests that both her sense of individuality and her sense of reality have been lost. Eleanor is detached from her true self, finding home in the fantastical reality she has created of Hill House. This "spell" is, however, broken in the seconds before her death, when the veil of her fantasies is finally lifted and she sees all things as they truly are (232).

The others are able to leave Hill House unscathed not only because they are less susceptible to the House than Eleanor, but also because of the various realities that they have attached to the House in order to explain the events taking place. Dr. Montague leaves with enough conclusions to write an article on "the psychic phenomena of Hill House," but whether this article includes the sad case of Eleanor is unknown (Jackson 246). Mrs. Montague's experience with the House gives her no other avenue but to insist on paranormal manifestations, and it is briefly mentioned Luke disappeared to Paris, insinuating that he is able to easily slip back into his life of luxury. The only possible exception is Theodora who, in light of the picnic scene, had a glimpse of the true horror of Hill House. But, instead of accepting it as Eleanor did, she "completely blocks [the event] out" and retreats into a "world where events make sense" (Wilson 119). These characters' perceptions of the House reflect humanity's inability to name the ineffable. In the face of bizarre events, they are repeatedly unable to explain the reality of Hill House and what is happening. For them, Hill House's "absolute reality" goes unrealized, and they slip back into their own realities, content with their own perceptions.

Jackson's novel explores the issues of guilt and desire through the sensitive personality of Eleanor. Eleanor's fantasy world has protected her from the truth of "absolute reality" for most of her stay in the House and, because of this, the House has been able to lure her into a false sense of security constructed by the promise of independence, love, and belonging. Her slow detachment from the other characters, paired with her deepening connection to the House, reveals the various ways in which her fantasies are unobtainable, in such that her fantasies cannot be consummated in the real world. This shows that the House reveals to its victims their own absolute realities. In Eleanor's moment of death, her realization of things as they truly are means her realizing the horrible truth of her own existence. She killed her mother, was loved by no one, and has not had a home in the world. Essentially, she was nothing. This brings forth, once again, Wilson's notion that "the end" represents something worse than death. Confronting "absolute reality" might lead not only to a loss of the self but to a horrifying realization that life is meaningless, or that people, individually, mean nothing. Hill House becomes a reflection of what we fear most, that is: "seeing ourselves clearly and without disguise" (Jackson 159).

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“Stored destruction” of Slow Violence: Muriel Rukeyser’s Eco-poetic Activism in *The Book of the Dead*

Mo/e Gámez

Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* employs a documentarian form to portray the injustices of the Hawk’s Nest industrial disaster, a form that adequately posits the nature of a type of “slow violence” that still persists in capitalist America. The “stored destruction” within the “clouds over every town” in Rukeyser’s “Alloy” seems a fitting parallel to Rob Nixon’s ecocritical delineation of “slow violence” (99). Rukeyser poses the destruction as looming and so interconnected in the natural processes of the earth that it becomes suddenly apparent and impossible to ignore the ways in which it had been delayed. “Finally indicate[d],” the “slow violence” perpetuated by the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation in the town of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia comes to light in Rukeyser’s cycle of poems, particularly within “Alloy,” “Power,” and “The Dam.” Thousands of lives lost in one of the most horrific industrial disasters in American history, the Hawk’s Nest disaster would seem, by present day sentiment, a horrific demonstration of capitalist-driven violence. However, tucked into the timeline of the Great Depression, the efforts of Union Carbide to silence the families of the dead and the court proceedings that upheld such efforts reveal an already burgeoning disregard for the average worker. Thus, the documentarian form, though initially intended to be a collaborative effort with photographer Nancy Naumberg, further employs a tense conversation regarding mediums of art and their utilization in effecting change, particularly within photography and poetry. Analyzing the efficacy of Rukeyser’s form in the cycle of poems as well as the ecologically attuned language, it becomes evident that, as an eco-poetic writer-activist, Rukeyser invites readers to engage with the “slow violence” witnessed in Gauley Bridge.

Before engaging in a direct analysis of Rukeyser’s cyclical collection, the theoretical framework must be established to better comprehend the ways the primary text engages in an ecocritical activism. Pairing Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* with Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology*, the working

critical lens envelops ecological attunement as well as socio-economic injustices as interlaced with corporate-driven environmental degradation. Nixon examines this interconnection by means of deconstructing the socially-accepted meaning of the term 'violence,' that of which the *OED* denotes as "[t]he deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.; physically violent behaviour or treatment." The resolute emphasis on the 'physical' nature in the enactment of violence already reveals a problematic presumption about the constitution of such an act. Secondly, the notion that it must be 'deliberate' in order to be considered violent reveals another issue with the construction of the definition, particularly with the concept that the one inflicting violence had to have premeditated the act. What this definition fails to acknowledge are the possibilities of emotional violence as well as the possibility that violence can be inflicted without premeditation. The attritional violences that need be unwound are those entrenched in the capitalist narratives of production and extraction at all costs—a narrative that propounds workers as 'heroes' and 'essential' when they really mean 'expendable.'

Nixon works out an alternative terminology to pinpoint what the term 'violence' has thus far failed to acknowledge, a "slow violence ... of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Nixon reveals that violence, as it has been understood thus far, becomes temporally reliant, which is evident in the way that most activism responds immediately to violence that occurs within the present moment. Though Nixon develops his argument around the current 'turbo-capitalist' age, much of his theory is applicable to the kind of work Rukeyser was producing in her lifetime. Entering the 1930s, Rukeyser saw a glaring issue in the reportage of the Hawk's Nest industrial disaster, and took it upon herself, with the company of Nancy Naumberg, to become witness to the realities of the incident. Rukeyser's political activism becomes intertwined with the recognition that "speed has become a self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders 'uneventful' violence (to those who live remote from its attritional lethality) a weak claimant on our time" (Nixon 8). Her cycle of poems serves as a blatant refusal to let Americans render the people killed in the Hawk's Nest industrial disaster as part of an "uneventful" narrative of violence, and to make less remote the "attritional lethality" experienced by those under the employment of Union Carbide.

Rukeyser's determination to be a documentarian of the disaster becomes a response to the many ways in which traumatic events are forgotten or disregarded across the country. Rukeyser's decision to document these injustices through poetry thus becomes an important point of contention in the discourse of her activism. The choice to develop a poetics around a series of events that were catastrophic in nature might seem to some as an appropriation of that trauma for artistic benefit. However, the "slow violence" perpetrated at these sites of trauma had developed a network of interconnected violences that cannot be reported in a simplistic, linear form. Tantamount to that fact, the difficulty of witnessing testimonials to traumatic events cannot be truly transferred to the audience in their totality. The closest one may get to representing such catastrophe would involve an incorporation of data from those

who had experienced most closely the effects of said traumas. As Eric Keenaghan notes on Rukeyser's poetic politics, "[h]er poetic modality has to do less with translating personal narrative into art than with using poetic texts to register political feeling" (261). In this way, Rukeyser does not attempt to translate the events for readers who find such events remote, but rather she aims to combine poetry and data from the events in order to give readers the opportunity to develop an attunement on their own. To register or refine one's "political feeling" and compel one to act on such emotions, Rukeyser feels that the poet is responsible to provide the poetic texts to invoke them, a sentiment which seems the predominant mode of her collection *The Life of Poetry*.

Thus, the documentarian form of *The Book of the Dead*, laced with verbatim dialogue from family members and trace figures of the community, illustrates that ideal of Rukeyser's felt poetic responsibility to advocate for a community without speaking for them. Kelly Oliver's "Witnessing and Testimony" explores this concept similarly, with particular regard to the matter of "witnessing in its double sense of eye-witness and bearing witness to what cannot be seen" (79). The sense of eye-witness testimony involves an objective relaying of what one has visually seen with their own eyes, something that is often challenged by an authority figure determinant of the accuracy of the testimonial information. Bearing witness to an experience, with all the emotional underpinnings included, is something far more difficult to relay to an audience, as it involves something almost incommunicable. Oliver sees this as a "tension inherent in the notion of witnessing in the sense of eye-witness to historical facts or accuracy and witnessing in the sense of bearing witness to a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts" (80). These notions of witness and testimony are integral to comprehending the significance of Rukeyser's work in that it aims to give voice to those individuals who sought to speak out about "bearing witness" to the atrocities exhibited at Hawk's Nest. Because, as Nixon implies in his own text, "as a corollary, if it's bloodless, slow-motion violence, the story is more likely to be buried, particularly if it's relayed by people whose witnessing authority is culturally discounted" (16). Seeing as "[t]hree-quarters of the workers were migratory blacks from the South who lived in temporary work camps, with no local connections or advocates," it becomes apparent that the "witnessing authority" present in the community being only a fourth of the people affected, the issue likely seemed far more diminutive to the public (Moore 6). By representing the Hawk's Nest disaster as a cycle of poems, Rukeyser attempts to ameliorate the tension "between historical facts and what we might call psychoanalytic and phenomenological truths," and to provide readers with an opportunity to give value to those phenomenological truths often "cultural discounted" (Oliver 80).

What Nixon brings to the forefront of his theory, Rukeyser subtly incorporates in her poetics: she participates in an investigation of the relationship between n/Nature and humanity. The ecology of her cycle of poems becomes most evident in the utilization of natural imagery in her rhetoric and style, but also in the careful placement of the content she presents. However, Rukeyser is eco-poetic not just because she uses natural imagery, but because she poses it in conversation with human

intervention. At this point in developing the critical framework, it seems pertinent to interlace the theory of Morton's *Dark Ecology*, particularly to understand the ways that becoming ecologically aware requires a self-consciousness of complicity in environmental harm. It seems that Rukeyser invokes the natural world in poems such as "Alloy" and "Power" to juxtapose the more visually violent industrial sector, incorporating language that challenges readers' assumptions of what they are witnessing in Rukeyser's poetics. Yet, Rukeyser successfully manages to turn readers' attention to questioning how such a juxtaposition could have arisen: she brings to the foreground the damaging realities associated with products ruthlessly churned out for consumers, the consequences imposed upon human bodies as well as the natural landscape. Morton proposes that ecological awareness comes in a loop form, primarily because biological systems function that way naturally. To link this theory with human systems, industrial and technological sectors aim to streamline human existence, but create such environmental harm that human effort must be expended in ecosystem maintenance and rebuilding.

Morton's sense of ecological awareness paired with Nixon's engagement with "slow violence" further helps readers comprehend the sort of Marxian eco-poetics of the poems. Morton's exploration of ecognosis helps readers comprehend that such disasters as Hawk's Nest may seem like an "uncanny, unexpected fallout from the myth of progress" in the sense that abstractly, industrial advancement seems like a human 'progressive' effort, but slowly reveals that that is not quite the case. Rukeyser engages readers in the political feeling of that "uncanny" sensation; her political efforts and general feelings about the poet's responsibility resonate in *Dark Ecology,* when Morton states, "I'm the detective *and* the criminal! I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now a *geophysical force on a planetary scale*" (9). Rukeyser does not seem to take direct aim at any particular perpetrator, though she does provide various, glaring instances of incriminating data. Yet, in "Power," when the speaker says "this is the road to take when you think of your country," it almost seems an indictment of the reader themselves, inviting them to take a more critical look at the country they inhabit (101). Jane Cooper's foreword to *The Life of Poetry* characterizes this most astutely when she states, "that whatever we despise, we are; that every morning, in order to begin to be non-violent, we must acknowledge our own violence" (xvii). Rukeyser pins down an interconnectivity between the country and its participation in "slow violence," that whenever one thinks of one's country, one must first forage through the landscape of its wrongdoings.

Though this paper focuses on three aforementioned poems within Rukeyser's cycle, the entire collection of poems incorporate ecological attunement to "slow violence," starting with "The Road," which places the speaker directly in the various roads to travel en-route to Gauley, West Virginia. The speaker notes, "Here is your road, tying / you to its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice," which contains the presence of human intervention in the land, as well as the seemingly untouched 'natural' components of the rest of the landscape. Roads thus become representative of that 'myth of progress,' the frontiersman mythos that propels the individual into

those natural places under the guise of exploration—an exploration that proves far less harmless than the term implies, where colonization and dominion over land becomes the imperative of that exploration. Rukeyser problematizes that type of travel, questioning the perspective of the photographer, who "surveying the deep country, follows discovery / viewing on groundglass an inverted image" (62). The description of the country sought after as "deep" coincides with the notion of a wilderness undiscovered: it remains nestled in the further reaches of collective imagination.

Going so far as to include the "groundglass" component of the photographer's camera, Rukeyser interrogates that style of viewing the world, seeing the "inverted image" as wholly different to the reality. She does not necessarily disregard the photographic capacity to portray meaning, but she intends to reveal to the reader the limitations bound in forms of artistic communication. For Rukeyser, the transference of meaning involves a close examination of the relationship between the poem and the audience, and as Justin Parks notes, "calls attention to the processes by which documentary, led by photography, envisioned a reorganization of society along the lines of interested perspective of the camera eye" (153). That "interested perspective of the camera eye," mirroring that of Dos Passos' similar use of form in *The U.S.A Trilogy*, is necessitated by Rukeyser's sense that the audience must envision the content for themselves initially, and then discover or happen upon the meaning of the poem. Only in this way does she see the audience as capable of arriving at the truth. Rukeyser reiterates this when she describes the immortalization of history in the form of physical monuments, stating "[m]any of our poems are such monuments. They offer the truths of outrage and the truths of possibility" (Rukeyser *The Life* 66). Thus, Rukeyser's choice of form becomes integral to her style of documentary activism, integrating that contentious relationship between humans and the land, by attempting to dig deep into the well of those "truths of outrage" and "possibility."

Rukeyser begins with "The Road" as a sort of preliminary framework by which to travail the rest of the cycle, particularly with the focus on that human/land dichotomy. Towards the later portion of the collection, "Alloy" picks up again on the land, beginning with, "This is the most audacious landscape. The gangster's / stance with his gun smoking and out is not so / vicious as this commercial field, it's hill of glass" (99). The use of the word "audacious" in this opening stanza elucidates the contradictory nature of the term; the OED denotes it as both "[d]aring, bold, confident, intrepid" and "[u]nrestrained by, or setting at defiance, the principles of decorum and morality; presumptuously wicked, impudent, shameless." The initial definition encapsulates a sense that to be 'audacious' means to be adventurous or willing to take risks, but the second definition questions that praise of confidence: noting the "unrestrained," an audacious person may be perceived as evil. These denotations, however, are character traits typically ascribed to humans, so using the word to describe the "landscape," thus becomes a way of anthropomorphizing that which is nonhuman. Yet, Rukeyser does not use the term to denigrate nature, but rather to question the imposition of humanity upon such a Nature. As the stanza continues, the speaker appropriates an archetype typically associated with a violence perpetrated for the purposes of gaining

or maintaining power. The reader acknowledges "[t]he gangster's / stance with his smoking gun and out" as representative of not just a manifestation of violence with the presence of the gun, but the appearance of a type of violence widely acknowledged as an issue requiring direct action. Juxtaposing this more blatant representation of violence with that of the "commercial field, it's hill of glass," reveals that the human imagination perceives violence in specific forms that have been culturally and biologically molded. Corporate forces have convinced the community that the silica "hill of glass" is not remotely as dangerous as the "gangster," and its "commercial" benefits should far outweigh any of the consequences that may arise. This misperception paired with the frontiersman mythos informs the ways that "slow violence" persists unacknowledged in suffering communities.

Rukeyser continues to describe the surrounding area of the metallurgical plant in "Alloy," invoking the qualities of the natural landscape to elucidate a sense that an unacknowledged violence looms predominantly in the community. Within the second stanza, the speaker notices "clouds over every town finally indicate the stored destruction" in which that "stored destruction" emanates not from the clouds but from the "hill of glass" aforementioned in the previous stanza. The "stored destruction" becomes one way in which Rukeyser alludes to a type of "slow violence"; yet, in this instance, the violence seems contained or controlled to a certain extent.

Though "Alloy" directly engages with natural aesthetic, "Power" focuses on the individuals associated with the construction of the architectural structures that composed the network of "slow violence" in Hawk's Nest. In this poem, readers are introduced to "the engineer Jones, the blueprint man, / loving the place he designed, visiting it alone" (101). For Jones, the structure of the power plant becomes integral to his identity, and it represents an architectural accomplishment of which he is immensely proud. While Jones sees the power plant as representative of his success, for others it is a mausoleum. The power plant is placed in relief in the poem, at the end of the first large stanza, stating, "The power-house stands skin-white at the transmitters' side / over the rapids the brilliance the blind foam" (101). Here, Rukeyser directly places the structure into the landscape, highlighting the ways that it "stands skin-white," or rather stands out distinctly separate from the landscape it inhabits. The building becomes representative of not just humanity but the capitalist structures that impose on the land and destroy the natural components already operating within it.

Returning briefly to Nixon's ecological theory, Nixon poignantly reminds readers that "green commitments are seamed through with other economic and cultural causes as they experience environmental threat not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of inhabited risks, some imminent, others obscurely long term" (4). Nixon's reformulation of environmental threats as "a set of inhabited risks" is especially significant in understanding Rukeyser's documentarian eco-poetics, in that she develops the cycle to represent each individual important point involved in telling the story of Hawk's Nest. The last line of the stanza beginning with "over the rapids" utilizes double spaces between the dominant phrases, each following phrase describing the qualities of the rapids, causing readers to pause longer between each of them. This

stylistic choice serves to help readers ruminate on the rapids and their characteristics—so that they may exist with them and remind themselves of moments where they have experienced such tranquility in any environment. Positioning readers in such a way, Rukeyser continues with her description of the power plant and Jones admiration of it, all of which seems crude compared to the effortless beauty of the landscape.

The final poem to be examined as Rukeyser's attempt at eco-poetic writer-activism is "The Dam," which incorporates a troubling perception of water and its relationship with humankind. The poem thus examines a particularly anthropocentric interest in quantifying and calculating the almost unknowable, 'natural' characteristics of the water they wish to harness; much in the way capitalism seeks to employ, or more accurately, control, 'nature,' so do they attempt to control the bodies of the working class community. It becomes evident that Rukeyser's finely woven interconnectedness between human bodies and water becomes a metaphor for the way capitalism views nonhuman and working class humans simply as resources, the depletion of which is made to seem impossible. The impression that humans, just as water, are an infinite resource is an act of "slow violence," and "[v]iolence, above all environmental violence, needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time" (Nixon 8). The most thorough violence exacted upon humankind has been the perception of humans as resources, and Rukeyser calls attention to this glaring issue in the capitalist thought pattern to get readers to empathize. The interconnection of water and humans can be witnessed when the poem states, "This is a perfect fluid, having no age nor hours, / surviving scarless, unaltered, loving rest, / willing to run forever to find its peace / in equal seas in currents of still glass" (109). In the mindset of a corporation that attempts to calculate the value of the vast 'resource' of water, the fact that it has "no age nor hours" means that it is the perfect employee.

On the matter of ecological awareness, Rukeyser has proven in several instances with *The Life of Poetry* and *The Book of the Dead* that she has engaged the science as well as the poetic similarities shared with ecology. Rukeyser becomes especially interested in the establishment and nurturing of relationships when she states, "we have become used to an idea of history in which process and relationship are stressed. The science of ecology is only one example of an elaboration of the idea, so that the life of land may be seen in terms of its tides of growth" (*The Life* 12-13). All of these poems highlight distinct instances in which slow violence has been engaged in the Hawk's Nest industrial disaster, and they sequentially represent a mapping of specific instances where violent beginnings can be witnessed by the readers themselves. Nixon's terminology becomes a useful critical tool to analyze Rukeyser's poetry, in that it serves as a framework for understanding the socio-economic underpinnings associated with the rendered invisibility of the working class people within Gauley Bridge, West Virginia.

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