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

All papers have undergone a blind peer-review and editing process.

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that CSU Long Beach continues to occupy ancestral land of the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples. We pay our respects to these communities who were removed unjustly and acknowledge how we at CSULB are beneficiaries of this removal. We honor and remember the Gabrielino/Tongva ancestors past and present and their connection to this land.

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A Note from Watermark's Executive Co-Editors

When we began working on this edition, we brought with us many high hopes and aspirations. We reflected on our time at CSULB and on the work produced by fellow students of the English graduate program, past and present. We were struck by the rigor and abundance of ideas that poured out of our seminars. Seeing the bright minds and intellectual vigor of our classmates, we wanted to continue the *Watermark* tradition of highlighting emerging scholarly voices, while continuing to establish our name as a producer of thought-provoking and challenging research.

We also agreed early on that we would acknowledge the current state of the world. As we write, thousands of men, women, and children in Gaza continue to suffer from displacement, starvation, and the violent destruction of schools, hospitals, and refuges. The death toll in Gaza exceeds 39,000 and Palestinian and Israeli prisoners and hostages remain captive. The humanitarian crises in Sudan endures, the war in Ukraine continues to harm civilians, and the political turmoil in our own country continues to threaten LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities, women's access to healthcare, and human rights on the whole.

Working against this background of global violence, our work can often feel aimless and ineffectual. The devaluing of education across the globe only exacerbates this feeling and threatens many of our livelihoods while encouraging more hatred and violence. It was our hope that *Watermark* would amplify voices that interrogate the institutions and regimes that inflict such violence. We established the core theme of "Traces and Transformation" to signify what we felt was a shift not only in the journal, but in the many areas of critical research that the English faculty and students engage in as we continue to grapple with an uncertain future and to bear witness to so much loss and suffering.

We are extremely grateful that our call for papers was met with great interest and an influx of submissions from across the globe, as far as Ireland and as local as our own CSULB campus. After many months of hard work, we are proud to present this selection of stand-out essays from outstanding new voices across different fields. In this collection, you will find works that demonstrate unique interpretations of what "Traces and Transformations" can mean. We showcase criticisms of gothic horror, contemporary media, and modern adaptations of classical tales and their resonances with queer and feminist readings. We also encounter interrogations of the histories and ongoing systems of racism, colonialism, and imperialism, and the role of literature as a form of dialogue and resistance. From Jade Saffery's provocative examination of non-heteronormative dynamics in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, to Randy Reynaga's fascinating study of posthumanism in *As I Lay Dying,* the works selected for this edition all engage with the theme in a manner that looks to the past to trace a new future where violence and discrimination are not tolerated, and where film, literature, art, and activism continue to empower our marginalized communities.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to *Watermark*. This final edition has surpassed our initial expectations, and it would not have been possible without the hard work and expertise of our staff and the CSULB English faculty and administration. We are proud of the work that our team of editors and readers have put in, and we extend our gratitude to the professors who have shaped us into the analytical and critical scholars that we are today. We would like to thank Dr. Susan Carlile for providing her expertise at our inaugural Watermark publishing workshop hosted back in April. Furthermore, we would like to thank our faculty advisor Dr. Dennis López for his guidance throughout this process, as well as Lisa Behrendt, Heather Ross, and Dr. Eileen Klink. We hope that this edition of *Watermark* serves as a testament to the immense talent and bright minds of students and faculty in the CSULB English department.

Without further ado, we are proud to present this vibrant and insightful collection and to carry on the *Watermark* tradition.

Shannen Escote & Sarrah Wolfe
Executive Co-Editors, 2024

In memory of Dr. Marie Kelleher

Tracing Languages of Power and Gender

A More Palatable Bite: Exploring Deviance from Heteronormative Sexuality in *Dracula*

by Jade Saffery

The figure of the vampire—imbued with sexuality through its practices of penetrating victims, exchanging bodily fluids, and thereby spreading its disease-like condition or even reproducing—is one into which Bram Stoker's *Dracula* leans to subvert heteronormative sexual roles and socially comment on perceived sexual transgressions within the text. Through the vampire's fluid, otherworldly nature, characters and readers explore and challenge our world's boundaries surrounding sexuality, prompting the revaluation of conventional beliefs on identity and desire. In *Dracula*, the vampiric threat, and its associated sexual threat, both necessitate an active response rooted in a moral duty to protect loved ones, avenge the vampire's victims, and overall, defeat the vampire. As characters undergo non-heteronormative sexual acts spurred by Dracula throughout the text, this incitement to duty helps provide valid reasoning for any perceived transgressions. In addition, the text's characters display sympathy towards vampires, generating a sense of ambivalence where seemingly negative depictions of non-heteronormative sexuality tied to these vampires can be entertained without being fully denounced. As a result, *Dracula*'s vampires—and any associated expressions of "transgressive" sexuality they either partake in themselves or impose onto other characters—are vindicated through a sense of necessary moral duty and viewed with an ultimately sympathetic regard, creating an ambivalent space where non-heteronormative desire can be explored with the vampire as vehicle.

Currently, most criticism dissecting sexuality in *Dracula* focuses on homoeroticism within the text, whether as a result of authorial repression or in service of greater commentary on heteronormative gender or sexual roles. The early scene between Jonathan Harker, the three vampiric women, and Dracula in his castle in Transylvania, serves as the focal point of these works with scholars citing this moment as one of the text's most direct evocations of sexual desire. As one of the vampiric women nurses her desire to bite Jonathan, "lick[ing] her lips like an animal," her "red tongue … lapp[ing] the white sharp teeth," Jonathan responds with his "wicked, burning" desire to be bitten, overcome with "longing" and "deadly fear":

> …the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer—nearer. I could feel the shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited — waited with beating heart (Stoker 63-64).

In this sexually tense scene, the vampire cements its role as an intensely sexual figure by highlighting vampiric penetration of victims and exchange of bodily fluids. Sexual roles are notably subverted here: Jonathan demonstrates a desire to be penetrated while the female vampire prepares to penetrate. Dracula interrupts before anything ensues, marking his territory on Harker with his exclamation that "[t]his man belongs to me!" (Stoker 64).

This scene is most often read for its homoerotic undertones. Christopher Craft suggests that this scene is the book's single demonstration of "a male's desire to be penetrated," a desire which is never realized in *Dracula* because "such desire seeks a strangely deflected heterosexual distribution; only through women may men touch" (111). Dejan Kuzmanovic proposes that the homoerotic subtext highlighted by Craft is used instead to comment on Harker's masculinity and elucidate gender roles, suggesting the woman's actions "connote fellatio" and "her impending bite clearly endanger the throat/penis and suggest castration, which Harker…almost welcomes" (417). Talia Schaffer—who urges through her influential reading that *Dracula* is an expression of Stoker's closeted homosexuality and feelings toward Oscar Wilde, who serves as real-life inspiration for Dracula's character—implies a dual function:

The vampire figure therefore fits easily as metaphor for the love that dare not speak its name. To homophobes, vampirism could function as a way of naming the homosexual as monstrous, dirty, threatening. To homosexuals, vampirism could be an elegy for the enforced internment of their desires (399).

All three critics focus on the text's invocation of anxieties surrounding monstrous homosexuality, but to stop at the homoeroticism alone fails to account for all the varying expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality and their function in the text. Though Schaffer's argument relies on an authorial intent confirmed only through implications in Stoker's letters, the double function of homosexuality for which Schaffer advocates most closely relates to the basis of my argument: that through justification by the moral duty needed to address the vampiric threat and an overall sense of ambivalence toward vampires, the vampire and the acts of sexuality tied to it have space to serve a dual purpose where non-heteronormative desires can be explored.

Hence, I propose an alternative reading of this moment: I contend that Dracula's assertion of ownership over Jonathan Harker is actually an assumption of his ownership over the sexual agency of the novel's characters and any acts of non-heteronormative sexual transgression Dracula orchestrates between them. Dracula does not allow Jonathan Harker to enact his personal desires. Instead, Dracula and the dangerous vampiric threat he poses pushes Lucy, Mina, and the members of the Crew of Light into a variety of non-heteronormative sexual schemes currently underrepresented in criticism. Whereas most critics typically read the Crew of Light's exploits as a sort of violent, hetero-protective frenzy used to uphold accepted norms of gender and sexuality and destroy any transgressions from

these norms, such readings neglect the paradoxically non-heteronormative, subversive quality of their same exploits. The Crew of Light's transgressions from heteronormative sexuality, as instigated by Dracula following this symbolic assumption of agency, cannot simultaneously be condemned for their depraved nature as they are also made justifiable for their moral necessity. In other words, to defeat Dracula and the transgressive sexuality he comes to represent, characters in *Dracula* must actively engage in these acts of "transgressive" sexuality first, creating an ambivalent, complex dynamic where the exploration of non-heteronormative sexuality is not just necessary and justified, but noble.

Dracula first orchestrates acts of non-heteronormative sexual transgression when his involvement with Lucy requires Mina to take on a more dutiful, intimate role in their friendship. As a result of his influence, the relationship between Lucy and Mina is driven to a point where the line between friendship and same-sex intimacy is blurred. In one of her early letters, Lucy expresses her apprehension toward marriage—specifically, heterosexual marriage—to Mina: "I suppose that we women are such cowards that we think a man will save us from fears, and we married him. I know now what I would do if I were a man and wanted to make a girl love me" (Stoker 81). Lucy's near-mocking tone indicates that heterosexual marriage is merely a perfunctory motion, an act of settling resulting from women's cowardice. She then likens herself to a man, aligning herself with his role in a heterosexual marriage plot as she imagines what she might do in his position. This message can be read as suggestive of lesbian desire: Lucy seems disinterested in pursuing the cowardly act of heterosexual marriage, bravely exploring the possibility of another fate in her imagination.

Still, Lucy's expression makes only the suggestion of an alternative form of desire—one she dismisses immediately. Charles E. Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio explore this moment, using observations by Marjorie Howes to make the compelling argument that "although seemingly unaware of the disruptive potential of their friendship, Mina and Lucy still deploy tactics that veil their impulses" (497). According to Prescott and Giorgio, when "Lucy claims 'I know now what I would do if I were a man and wanted to make a girl love me'" she catches her expression of "inappropriate sexual desire" and rectifies it by following up with a decisive "'No, I don't,'" (497). Prescott and Giorgio highlight a parallel correction by Mina later on in the text, who writes: "It must be so nice to see strange countries. I wonder if we—I mean Jonathan and I—shall ever see them together" (497). Like Prescott and Giorgio, I recognize these impulses and subsequent corrections as indicative of the destabilizing potential for same-sex desire between female friends in an environment constrained by heteronormativity. However, I expand by explaining this destabilizing potential, in conjunction with Mina's duty to uphold her intimate female friendship, renders her vulnerable to one of Dracula's non-heteronormative sexual schemes after his vampiric threat forces her to act on Lucy's behalf.

While typically innocent in nature, the text does make some charged references to Mina and Lucy touching one another in addition to these verbalized indicators. In her first letter to Mina, Lucy recalls her past with Mina as she looks forward to her future with Arthur:

> Mina, we have told all our secrets to each other since we were children; we have slept together and eaten together, and laughed and cried together...But oh, Mina, I love him; I

> love him; I love him! There, that does me good. I wish I were with you, dear, sitting by the fire undressing, as we used to sit; and I would try to tell you what I feel. (Stoker 79)

Even if not explicitly sexual in nature, Mina indicates a closely intimate relationship between the pair marked by the sharing of secrets, emotional moments, and even beds. In addition to sleeping together, Lucy's imploring wish to be with Mina, undressing together by the fire, could be suggestive of a more physical attraction or desire for her. In following the repetition of "I love him" and the immediate message of reassurance to herself "[t]here, that does me good" with her desire for Mina, the moment can be read as an attempt by Lucy to convince herself that she loves Arthur because it will "[do her] good" compared to a more forbidden love for Mina. During intimate moments, Mina does not shy away from touching Lucy either. In one of her diary entries, Mina writes that "Lucy and I sat a while, and it was all so beautiful before us that we took hands as we sat" (Stoker 91). The overwhelming beauty of this private moment results in an affectionate touch shared between the pair. Still, these instances bear an innocence associated with close female friendships during the period. It is only through the entrance of the vampire—and its vampiric sexual threat—that these innocent expressions, memories, and touches reach a heightened point where non-heteronormative sexuality is actively conveyed.

The vampiric threat in *Dracula* is countered by a sense of duty to address, immobilize, and eventually defeat said threat. Eric Kwan-Wai Yu argues that "fear aroused by the paranoiac perception of sexual perversity begets a curious kind of work ethic in the imperial subject," the provocation of work ethic he mentions specifically referring to the members of the Crew of Light (146). I advocate for the expansion of Yu's argument to Mina and her initial interactions with Lucy because the same "curious kind of work ethic" is awakened in Mina when Lucy falls subject to the vampire's sexual threat. When Lucy begins sleepwalking and acting out of character as a result of Dracula's feedings, Mina's work ethic is incited as she becomes dutifully observant of her friend, taking note of her appearance changes—trading in her "anaemic look" for "lovely rose pink" cheeks—and her sleepwalking patterns (Stoker 96). Among these observations, Mina's description of the "colour in Lucy's cheeks" "look[ing] oh, so sweet" stands out. Mina aligns herself and her appreciation for Lucy's looks with one of Lucy's suitors: "If Mr. Holmwood fell in love with her seeing her only in the drawing-room, I wonder what he would say if he saw her now" (Stoker 111). As Mina nearly assumes the role of a protective husband through her faithful commitment to maintaining Lucy's well-being and image, aligning herself with Mr. Holmwood through her enjoyment of Lucy's appearance is a natural next step. Still, this is not an enactment of her same-sex attraction: she can only "wonder" what he might say, but not actually say anything explicit because to say anything too expressive of this desire would violate social mores.

Mina's dutifully observant nature is taken one step further when Mina writes about being pushed to act on Lucy's behalf: "Lucy was very restless all night…she got up twice and dressed herself. Fortunately, each time I awoke in time, and managed to undress her without waking her, and got her back to bed" (Stoker 109). As the vampiric threat becomes more influential, leading Lucy to a place of increased restlessness and, eventually, recklessness, Mina is slowly forced to engage in increasingly sexually transgressive behaviors, including

the undressing of Lucy. The vampiric threat and the expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality incited by said threat reach a peak when Lucy escapes in the middle of the night. Mina, "fear[ing] that Lucy must have gone out as she was," is pressured to act quickly: "There was no time to think of what might happen; a vague, overmastering fear obscured all details. I took a big, heavy shawl and ran out" (Stoker 112). The vampiric threat and the "vague, overmastering fear" it incites, in this case, necessitates Mina to leave the home without getting dressed to find Lucy, taking no further consideration for how they might appear to others. Both women are not clothed properly when Mina finds and observes Lucy in a near-aroused state: "Her lips were parted, and she was breathing — not softly, as usual with her, but in long, heavy gasps, as though striving to get her lungs full at every breath…when her breathing became quieter, she put her hand to her throat again and moaned. When I had her carefully wrapped up I put my shoes on her feet" (Stoker 113). Here, Lucy's breathing and moaning are suggestive of orgasmic pleasure—an orgasm that Mina is made voyeur to and indirectly involved in as a result of Dracula's influence. Because of the vampiric threat, Mina is lured into a non-heteronormative sexual situation, intimately interacting with Lucy after finding her at her most vulnerable state. It is almost as if Mina is aware of a sense of shame associated with what she and Lucy have experienced together, "heart beat[ing] so loud" and "filled with anxiety" in hopes that no one should catch them on their way home from this transgressive act (Stoker 114). Prescott and Giorgio underscore how these occurrences blur their relationship: "Lucy and Mina's moments of transgression, whether a simple slip of the tongue or a kiss from the vampire, move their friendship further from the tolerated space of the romantic friendship and closer to the sign of gender slippage that must be repulsed" (498). Even if the non-heteronormative sexuality evoked between them does not correspond exactly to an explicit, physical expression of desire, the influence of Dracula and his vampiric threat push Mina into a position of "gender slippage." Dracula's actions incite Mina's need to uphold her moral duty to Lucy, providing reasoning for this slippage. As a result of this justification, characters and readers reevaluate ideas surrounding female same-sex desire.

The polyandrist relationship between Lucy and the four men, precipitated by the exchange of bodily fluids via blood transfusion, is another example where the vampiric threat posed by Dracula allows for another transgressive sexual act. In addition to the same-sex desire Lucy alludes to in letters exchanged between her and Mina, Lucy also hints at a potential desire to have more than one man when she asks Mina "why [they can't] let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble" (Stoker 82). Within the bounds of Lucy's imagination, this moment is a fleeting thought—it is only through Dracula's influence that the thought becomes a physical act of non-heteronormative sexual transgression.

As stated before, Yu argues that sexual threat in *Dracula* awakens a sense of duty used to affirm the importance of labor. The provocation of the four men to help Lucy and eventually kill her—both actions inherently tied to allusions of sex—is motivated by this same sense of duty. According to Yu, "fear, often aroused by the perception of sexual anarchy, demonic uncleanliness, or disfiguring excess is productive rather than paralyzing. It arouses in the bourgeois imperial subject a quasi-religious sense of 'calling,' an imperative to work assiduously together to exterminate the demonic Other" (149-50). Similarly to Yu, I propose

that the vampiric threat—and its associated sexual threat—triggers an impression of duty within *Dracula*'s characters. But, while Yu suggests that acts of sexual anarchy help provoke this sense of calling, I argue that characters' repressed, non-heteronormative desires may have existed before Dracula's involvement. However, the sense of duty prompted by the vampiric threat is what makes the actual acts of sexual transgression permissible.

Through the four men, the role of duty is made abundantly clear. Craft recognizes the blood as a substitute for semen, suggesting that "Van Helsing and the Crew of Light counteract Dracula's subversive series of penetrations with a more conventional series of their own, that sequence of transfusions intended to provide Lucy with the 'brave man's blood' which 'is the best thing on earth when a woman is in trouble'" (Stoker 121). When Van Helsing reduces the act of polyandry created by the text to a simple, two-part exchange—a brave man's bodily fluids deployed to help save a woman in trouble—it turns the sexual transgression of polyandry to a necessary, noble, and almost natural relation between a man and woman. The text implies the substitution Craft invokes here. After receiving her first transfusion from Arthur, necessitated because of Dracula's feedings, Lucy describes Arthur's presence warming her, implying physical intimacy: "Somehow Arthur feels very, very close to me. I seem to feel his presence warm about me" (Stoker 144). The text also suggests these transgressive acts foster a sense of pride in each of the men, tied to the enactment of their high duty to save Lucy but also potentially to the sexual conquest the act signifies. Seward makes this idea clear when he writes that "It was with a feeling of personal pride that I could see a faint tinge of colour steal back into the pallid cheeks and lips. No man knows till he experiences it, what it is to feel his own life-blood drawn away into the veins of the woman he loves" (Stoker 146). Through his act of penetration with bodily fluids, Seward alludes to a phenomenon "no man knows till he experiences," not only heightening the sexual significance of their exchange but also alluding to his moral mission of saving Lucy, effectively providing reason for this transgressive act.

Possibly the most compelling evidence for aligning the blood transfusions with exchanges of semen is Arthur's suggestion that his transfusion secured his and Lucy's status as husband and wife. Seward writes of this idea: "Arthur, who, poor fellow, was speaking of his part in the operation where his blood had been transfused to his Lucy's veins…Arthur was saying that he felt since then as if they two had really been married, and that she was his wife in sight of God" (Stoker 187). Van Helsing's response to the somewhat ludicrous idea references polyandry directly: "If so that, then what about the others? Ho, ho! Then this so sweet maid is a polyandrist, and me…even I…am bigamist" (Stoker 189). By orchestrating a situation where each of the four men is pushed to dutifully consummate a polyandrous union through the necessary transfusions of blood, Dracula's vampiric threat creates space for another non-heteronormative expression of sexuality—in this case, polyamory—to be explored. The obligation each of the four men have to save Lucy is what corroborates these polyandrous acts of what Craft refers to as subversive penetration. Again, the vampire's schemes and the moral duty used to address them allow for reasonable exposure to non-heteronormative sexuality.

As the vampiric threat again reaches a new peak as Lucy becomes a vampire, it is met with another intensified and more direct act of non-heteronormative sexuality: the joint

killing of Lucy, an implied near-orgy between the men and Lucy. Here, the text again leans on a sense of duty to absolve the members of the Crew of Light, providing sound reasoning for the sexual transgression they are to commit. The collective nature of the act is made evident by Seward, who writes that "[they] all looked at Arthur. He saw, too, what [they] all did, the infinite kindness which suggested that his should be the hand which would restore Lucy to us as a holy, and not an unholy; memory," and Van Helsing, who reminds Arthur before the staking to "only think that we, your true friends, are round you" (Stoker 225). Both quotes exemplify the sense of shared duty between the men, motivating the sexual act about to transpire. As Arthur begins executing the act, its positioning as an enactment of moral duty becomes that much clearer: "...Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his trembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. His face was set, and high duty seemed to shine through it" (Stoker 226). Lucy responds to this penetration in kind, "writh[ing]," "shak[ing]," "quiver[ing]," and "scream[ing]" as if in sexual ecstasy (Stoker 226). In likening Arthur to a godlike figure, calling his penetrative stake "mercy-bearing," describing the "high duty [shining] through" his face, and depicting Lucy as a woman experiencing orgasmic pleasure, the polyandrous expression of sexuality here, as a result of vampiric threat, is elucidated and justified as a necessary moral duty. As Arthur comes down from this peak, "breathing [coming] in broken gasps," Lucy's face rekindles its "unequalled sweetness and purity" and Van Helsing suggests Arthur should "kiss her dead lips...she is not a grinning devil now – not any more a foul Thing for all eternity" (Stoker 224-225). Van Helsing's suggestion poses that through the vampiric threat, non-heteronormative sexual acts made necessary through moral duty are redemptive for Lucy and redeemable for the men of the Crew of Light. In this way, the vampire's incitement to duty orchestrates another means for expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality to be explored.

The scene between Mina, Dracula, and Jonathan is Dracula's most direct execution of non-heteronormative sexuality: in this case, the introduction of kink practice and the subversion of typical sexual roles. Instead of working from afar, Dracula's vampiric sexual threat is direct here. Dracula violates Mina into drinking his blood without giving her a choice, forcing her into a non-consensual dynamic evocative of what we regard today as BDSM: bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism. While the scene calls to mind a sort of male breastfeeding, it also equates Dracula and Mina to "a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink," further subverting heteronormative sexual roles (Stoker 285). Craft argues that this moment is one where "gender distinctions collapse, where male and female bodily fluids intermingle terribly. For Mina, drinking is double here, both a 'symbolic act of enforced fellation' and a lurid nursing" (125). Craft's argument aptly captures the inversion of heteronormative gender and sexual roles, but can be developed further to highlight the fetishistic, kink-adjacent implications of such a subversive, forceful act. The "Count's terrible grip" also leaves a "red mark" on Mina's hands as well as the mark on her forehead, the act of branding or leaving bruises another established characteristic of BDSM practice. Later in the text, Dracula cements Mina's role as his submissive partner, saying "[she] is to be punished" and "shall come to [his] call" whenever "[his] brain says 'Come!'" (Stoker 290). Kink and fetish play, the non-heteronormative sexual act with the highest

potential for causing harm, is the one aligned most closely with the danger of the vampire, displayed by Mina's inability to consent or fight back against Dracula's impositions.

Dracula's controlling, dominance-submission dynamic forces Mina to undergo this non-heteronormative sexual act against her will. This nonconsensual interaction not only reinforces her role as a submissive sexual partner to the dominant Dracula, but also dulls any danger posed by her feminine sexuality—the same non-heteronormative, subversive threat that leads to Lucy's downfall—because here, Mina's agency is forcibly violated and suppressed. Unlike the previous acts of non-heteronormative sexuality highlighted, which were necessitated by the vampiric threat and motivated by a moral imperative to address said threat, Mina's lack of agency prevents her from invoking this same sense of duty to defend her involvement. However, I argue that this moral duty is displaced onto Jonathan to help vindicate one final instance of non-heteronormative sexuality, still brought on by Dracula but this time not in his control: the fatal penetration of Dracula by Jonathan Harker. Kuzmanovic argues that the scene between Mina and Dracula "turns her into a helpless victim whose salvation now depends on her husband's manly heroism" and "[places] her in the position necessary for the recovery of her husband's masculine identity: a lady in peril" (421). Like Kuzmanovic, my argument also recognizes Jonathan's role in responding to the acts of sexual transgression posed by Dracula in service of his wife. But, unlike Kuzmanovic, who poses that Dracula and Mina's transgressive sex act provides the means for Jonathan to undergo his masculine recovery, I suggest that the act instead serves to justify Jonathan's last non-heteronormative sexual act of penetrating Dracula—a symbolic reassumption of the sexual agency initially appropriated by Dracula after interrupting Jonathan and the vampiric women and subsequently entertained throughout the text. In this way, Mina's inability to enact control and uphold her agency inspires Jonathan to assume control again and help reinstate it. His penetrative act—delivered in "the sweep and flash of [his] great knife," "shear[ing] through the throat" in the same way the vampires penetrate their victims—is a homoerotic sexual act necessitated by the vampiric threat but vindicated again by his moral duty to his wife (Stoker 370). Because it is underscored by a righteous foundation to fight the vampiric threat, these expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality are justified to characters and readers alike. The moral imperative to confront the vampire and the sexual transgressions he orchestrates and comes to represent turn the vampire into a vehicle where non-heteronormative sexuality can be explored.

The text's ambivalent attitudes toward non-heteronormative sexuality are made clear through sympathy expressed towards the vampires who have come to represent these acts. This idea is clearly demonstrated by the Crew of Light's feelings toward Mina regarding her potential transformation into a vampire, but it is also further conveyed by Mina's simultaneous sympathy for Dracula. Jonathan Harker elucidates this sympathy when he states: "To one thing I have made up my mind: if we find out that Mina must be a vampire in the end, then she shall not go into that unknown and terrible land alone" (Stoker 299). Harker, willing to become the very thing that endangers them all if Mina is subject to the same fate, proves that vampirism—and the deviance from heteronormative sexuality it comes to signify—is not completely vilified. It is a fate Jonathan is willing to choose despite its seemingly immoral, non-heteronormative implications. This assertion demonstrates the

idea that because Mina and the members of the Crew of Light confront and carry out the non-heteronormative sexual acts Dracula orchestrates throughout the text, they simultaneously confront their fears of vampirism and the vampire's sexual threat, undermining both as Jonathan undergoes one last defining non-heteronormative sexual act.

Mina's feelings toward Dracula also support this notion. Mina urges Jonathan to have sympathy toward both her and Dracula, stating: "'Perhaps… some day… I too may need such pity; and that some other like you – and with equal cause for anger – may deny it to me!'" (Stoker 309). By facing Dracula's vampiric sexual threat head-on, Mina is pushed to overcome her fear of Dracula and the non-heteronormative sexuality he exhibits, prioritizing sympathy toward him instead. Furthermore, her statement could be aligned with attitudes toward the transgressions from heteronormative sexuality that vampires represent: even if they cause anger, they should not be denied pity. Even in his final moments, Mina displays a more ambivalent attitude toward Dracula, writing that "I shall be glad as long as I live that even in that moment of final dissolution, there was in the face a look of peace" (Stoker 370). Mina does not completely condemn Dracula or the non-heteronormative acts of sexuality he represents. It is this ambivalence that permits the vampire to act as a vehicle of exploration for taboo ideas about sexuality. Craft writes that "in its ambivalent propensity to subvert its own fundamental differences, [*Dracula*] sympathizes with and finally domesticates vampiric desire" (127). Though heteronormative views on sexuality are technically upheld as Jonathan and Mina settle into the marriage plot with their son, they both acknowledge "the things which we had seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears were living truths," non-heteronormative desire still housed, if only in memory, under the veil of domesticity (Stoker 371).

To only look at homoerotic undertones in *Dracula*, as so many critics have done before, does a disservice to the manifold role of non-heteronormative sexuality in the text. It is crucial to expand our perspective of *Dracula* to not only include these varied readings of "transgressive" sexuality, but to properly acknowledge the ambivalence that the text displays toward non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality. Stripping our readings of sexuality in *Dracula* down to mere homoeroticism altogether disabled in the final act following Dracula's death not only suppresses the dynamic, varying expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality in the text, but also fails to account for the range of potential interactions readers might have with said expressions—a range Schaffer alluded to when posing a dual function for homosexuality in *Dracula* that simultaneously recognizes and reviles, that both vilifies and vindicates. From female same-sex desire to polyamory, Dracula provokes, indirectly and directly, a multitude of sexual acts subverting heteronormative conventions. Throughout the text, the novel's characters rationalize their participation in these acts by invoking a moral duty to confront both him and the non-heteronormative sexual schemes he incites, thereby diminishing their threat. In this way, both the figure of the vampire and the non-heteronormative sexuality he evokes are ultimately met with ambivalence, allowing both characters and readers the room they need to reconsider accepted notions about desire and sexuality.

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Artivism in *#streetsforus*: Transforming Place for Female Street Musicians Through the Material Ecofeminist Rhetorical Lessons of Aditi Veena

Tristan Graney

Aditi 'Ditty' Veena, known professionally as Ditty, is an Indian musician and environmental activist whose work transcends traditional boundaries of art and advocacy. She combines live music and visual art in public spaces, creating performances that highlight environmental and feminist issues. Through her innovative project and blog founded in 2016, *#streetsforus*, Ditty emphasizes empowering standards for female street performers and musicians. Her performances defy patriarchal norms, engaging women directly and challenging traditional public space ownership. This form of activism, often referred to as "artivism"—a blend of art and activism—allows Ditty to use her art as a tool for protest and social change. This portmanteau that Ditty employs signals the interrelationship between her performance music and the activism with which it is ingrained.

Understanding artivism within the cultural rhetorical practice is crucial to appreciating the depth of Ditty's project. She posits art as a transformative medium, bridging public spaces, social interactions, and individual belief systems. According to Ditty, art fosters a unique connection between urban spaces devoid of specialized infrastructure and the public, encouraging a reevaluation of societal values and norms. By bringing people together through music, visual art, and performances, she fosters community while simultaneously challenging the social norms that marginalized populations seeking justice. Ditty's work not only invites her audience to reconsider their values but also critiques the systems of domination prevalent in India and Sri Lanka through her music and visual media. This synthesis of public art and music is pivotal for advancing climate rhetoric within the realm of music, urging a reassessment of the artist's role in justice-oriented discourse. Ditty's approach offers a replicable model for other artists.

Ditty's holistic artivism weaves together technoculture and audiovisual artistry with an approachable narrative. By choosing to accompany her performances with informal, journal-like captions on the *#streetsforus* page, she eschews complex jargon in favor of broad

accessibility, solidifying that her message resonates with a diverse audience. This strategy reflects the essence of artivism, which speaks a universal language through its multifaceted nature—whether through the music, visual elements, or the digital platform itself, each aspect conveys the foundational principles of material ecofeminism. Common elements in Ditty's performances include live music intertwined with environmental visuals, such as scenes of natural landscapes or ecological crises projected behind her. These elements work together to create a powerful narrative that emphasizes the connection between environmental care and social justice, showcasing the power of art as a medium for advocacy and change. As Ditty recounts from one of her performances, "As usual a few were curious, unsure. 'Love the writing. Who wrote the songs?... Why are you playing here? It's not suitable for the music. You should do it in other venues.' 'Is it okay for two girls?'" (*#streetsforus*). This response underscores the societal challenges she faces and addresses through her art. As a cultural rhetorician, she advocates for both women and the environment, choosing to busk in public spaces despite having a large following that could secure her traditional venues. Ditty's approach is crucial for expanding the scope of material ecofeminism, a field traditionally dominated by white voices.

This essay begins with an ecofeminist analysis of Ditty's *#streetsforus* project, which challenges and redefines public spaces for women. Material ecofeminism, focusing on the interplay between environmental awareness and feminist activism, serves as the ideal framework for examining Ditty's work. Through an artivistic perspective, this analysis addresses the current inaccessibility of public places for female street musicians and envisions a future where public spaces foster both artistic expression for women and environmental justice. Rethinking the role of streets can enrich our rhetorical understanding of the relationship between place and space. My analysis extends the concept of cultural rhetorics as defined by Phil Bratta and Malea Powell, emphasizing how Ditty's performances embody this approach by challenging environmental issues and cultural norms through her choice of performance spaces. This not only illustrates the practical application of Bratta and Powell's theories but also highlights Ditty's significant contributions to cultural rhetorics as a vibrant and embodied practice. Material ecofeminism, by challenging traditional binaries and fostering a nuanced understanding of Ditty's ecofeminist stance, offers the most insightful lens for this exploration. Ditty's work, merging environmental education with performance art and critical commentary, defies simplistic categorizations, enriching the material ecofeminist discourse by emphasizing the rhetorical significance of place in her digital archive.

Ecofeminism, a movement intertwining the liberation of women with environmental advocacy, has evolved significantly since Francoise d'Eaubonne first introduced the term in 1974. Traditionally dominated by Western perspectives, the inclusion of transnational feminist voices like Ditty, a woman of color and a street performer, heralds a pivotal diversification in ecofeminist discourse. Indian ecofeminist Geetika Khanduja stresses ecofeminism's core, identifying the parallel between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women (105). This perspective is crucial for challenging the historically white-centric ecofeminist canon and its underlying assumptions about control over women and nature. The call for an intersectional approach within ecofeminism aligns with Stacy

Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which merges bodily experiences with environmental consciousness in a way that fosters a unique environmental engagement (Alaimo 238).

Ditty's artistic expression embodies this theoretical intersection. By performing in the streets, she forges a direct, level connection with her audience, eschewing the conventional separation between artist and spectator, as well as artist and ownership, found in traditional venues. This approach not only democratizes the artistic experience but also highlights the physical and cultural interconnectedness emphasized in material ecofeminism. Ditty's work, therefore, not only challenges societal norms enforced by patriarchal structures but also vividly demonstrates the practical application of ecofeminist theories. Her integration into the public sphere and reliance on social engagement rather than financial compensation exemplifies a living model of ecofeminism that is deeply embedded in the physical and cultural landscapes she navigates. By examining Ditty's street performances through the lens of material ecofeminism, my analysis reveals the intricate ways in which environmental activism, feminist practice, and cultural expression can converge to challenge and expand ecofeminist discourse.

Ecofeminism in India has roots that intertwine with the country's struggles against colonialism, environmental degradation, and gender oppression. Figures like Vandana Shiva have pioneered this movement by highlighting how the commodification of nature parallels the marginalization of women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities. Shiva's work emphasizes the importance of recognizing traditional knowledge and practices, advocating for an ecofeminism that respects both the environment and women's roles as its custodians. In this light, Ditty's street performances can be seen as an extension of this ecofeminist tradition. By choosing public spaces for her art, she challenges the privatization and commercialization of cultural expression, akin to Shiva's challenge against the privatization of seeds and natural resources. Ditty's music, often focused on themes of environmental preservation and social justice, echoes the ecofeminist principle that the liberation of women and the earth are inextricably linked.

> *We meet in the mornings to say hullo*
> *She looks me in the eyes extends her soul*
> *Took me long to see she's inside of me*
> *She says, she wants to live under the sun*
> *She says her boys were meant to run*
> *No school for them*
> *The earth's enough* ("Under the Sun")

Material ecofeminism, with its focus on the tangible interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment, provides a useful lens to examine Ditty's busking in Indian society. Through her performances, Ditty embodies the ecofeminist principle that personal and political, human and nonhuman, are deeply interconnected. Her choice of venue—public streets—serves not only as a stage for her art but as a statement on accessibility and community engagement, reflecting an ecofeminist commitment to democratizing spaces for expression and interaction. Ditty's work

illustrates her contribution to material ecofeminism, as her songs draw attention to specific environmental crises in India, such as water scarcity and deforestation.

> Money's becoming a burden now
> So I lighten my pockets
> All the greens - they are chopping it down
> *So we go grow a forest*
> *Smoke from the cars is killing my cat*
> *So I built her a garden* ("Garden")

By performing these songs in public spaces, Ditty not only brings environmental issues to the forefront of societal consciousness but also reclaims these spaces for communal dialogue and activism. This act of public engagement serves as a practical application of Vandana Shiva's theoretical insights, bridging the gap between individual action and collective awareness.

Through her integration of ecofeminist themes with her musical performances, Ditty offers a vibrant model of how art can mobilize societal change. Her work demonstrates the potential for creative expression to not only critique existing power structures but also to envision and enact alternative futures grounded in principles of sustainability, equity, and justice. A recent example is Ditty's music video for her song, "Mamma" released through YouTube on April 22, 2024. The video, which is an open letter to Mother Nature, features Ditty and three other women dancing and becoming one with nature. This visual representation conveys the ecofeminist connections between women and the environment, highlighting a promise to stand alongside Mother Nature. The imagery of women merging with natural elements in the video vividly illustrates the intertwined liberation of women and the earth, reinforcing the principles of ecofeminism. Ditty contributes to a broader ecofeminist movement in India that seeks to address the intertwined crises of gender inequality and environmental degradation, reaffirming the relevance and urgency of these issues in the contemporary moment. Ditty's street performances, or busking, in this context, emerge as a modern iteration of ecofeminist activism. By choosing public spaces for her art, she challenges the conventional boundaries that separate the private (feminine) from the public (masculine), a dichotomy entrenched in Indian society. Her music, which often revolves around themes of environmental preservation and social justice, becomes a vehicle for raising awareness among a diverse audience. In a country where public spaces are mainly male-dominated, Ditty's presence and performance disrupt traditional gender norms, offering a powerful example of material ecofeminism in action. As such, her work has yielded ugly reactions: "Outside a popular bar in Vasant Vihar in New Delhi, drunken men heckled them. Someone tried to push her and snatch her mic in order to sing instead. People even scolded them about how unsafe their actions were....It involved catcalling, lewd comments, public manhandling and discouragement. The worse came in the way of misogynistic policing" (Rana).

Ditty's ecofeminist stance holds particular significance within the Indian context, where environmental decline impacts women disproportionately, particularly those in rural regions. As primary collectors of water, fuel, and food, women bear the greatest burden of

environmental crises, transforming their participation in environmental activism from a political act to one of survival. In taking her ecofeminist message to the streets, Ditty does more than just stand in solidarity with women affected by environmental degradation—she elevates their voices within urban settings, areas often detached from the direct consequences of ecological harm. She embeds her beliefs and practices in the cultural realities they stem from, thereby ensuring her work resonates authentically and responsibly with those it aims to support; cultural rhetoricians like Ditty, "prioritize accountability to the communities whose meaning-making we investigate" (Ramos 2). Through the conspicuousness and daring nature of her performances, Ditty confronts patriarchal claims over public spaces and times, embodying her commitment to both the environment and the women she advocates for. Her choice to perform at night not only challenges gender stereotypes and social hierarchies but also signifies a poignant form of cultural protest, especially in regions like India and Sri Lanka, where the night brings increased risks for women.

Ditty's defiance of gendered norms surrounding place ownership not only challenges the barriers to women's participation in public spaces but also pioneers new avenues for female artistic expression. Her performances act as a vivid counter-narrative to the prevailing belief that streets are domains exclusively for men, effectively cultivating a space where women's voices and creativity can flourish. Through her artivism, Ditty doesn't merely navigate the cultural constraints that perpetuate oppression; she actively dismantles them, paving a new path for women artists to express themselves freely and boldly. Amid the inherent risks of nighttime busking, Ditty's performances carry a dual message of gender equity and environmental stewardship. Accompanied by visuals of the Indian Ocean and its diverse ecosystems, her music—imbued with environmental motifs—serves as a compelling call to action. This fusion of art and activism imparts a profound truth: human well-being is inseparably linked to the health of our planet. Ditty's work transcends the physical reclaiming of the streets, proposing a broader vision of environmental justice where art becomes a conduit for fostering a deeper connection with the natural world, advocating for a harmonious coexistence that extends beyond mere occupation of space to embodying principles of ecological balance and sustainability.

One video of Ditty performing at night to a crowd in the streets of Sri Lanka is captioned on *Instagram*: "When women do walk by, they glance and leave, they don't stay. It's another reminder that streets after dark aren't a place for women" (Lakshya). Her performance during nighttime hours rejects the restriction on the movements of women in the streets, regulated by the patriarchal relationship between time and place. While simultaneously appealing to feminist ambitions, she channels material ecofeminism with the bedsheet behind her while she performs—a projector displaying scenes from the ocean running while she sings. This intentional move to ground her performance in environmental activism pairs effectively with the overwhelming environmentally focused appeals of the music she writes. Ditty dubs her musical creations "earth songs," demonstrating the deep connection between her art and activism. The strategic use of a bedsheet as a backdrop, projecting environmental scenes while she performs, not only enhances the visual experience but also bridges communicative gaps. This innovative approach offers a visual narrative to accompany her music, making it accessible to those who are hard of hearing or face language barriers, thus broadening

the pathway to understanding musical environmentalism. Her decision to perform in the streets—places where human, environmental, and gendered narratives intersect—serves as a deliberate protest against conventional norms of space ownership and gendered restrictions. Opting for busking over traditional venues, despite her significant following, shows her commitment to maintaining the integrity of her protest within her artivism. This approach highlights that artivism inherently combines social justice with performative acts that demand societal change.

Ditty writes that in India, women are told not to go out after dark. The streets are partisan to cars over pedestrians. There is crime that makes it impossible for people to walk home from work. Trees on the streets are chopped every day for more parking space- robbing them of shade and oxygen and making cities reminiscent of our relationship with nature. (*#streetsforus*)

The environmental appeal she makes is closely tied to that which implores safety in the streets for women. By refusing to separate Indian culture from nature, Ditty is destabilizing the culture/nature binary to develop a position in line with material ecofeminism (Gough and Whitehouse). There is no gap between how and why she performs, demonstrating a need to similarly understand the justice initiative through an embodied material ecofeminist conceptual framework that is rooted in wholeness. Ecofeminism interrogates dualistic hierarchies that have devalued women and nature. Alternatively, material ecofeminism engages with women, nature, and the body as a whole rather than its parts at odds with one another. Material ecofeminism is explicitly embodied, rejecting the dualism of mind and body that privileges the former while relegating the latter as a detached and restricted entity. The framework re-recenters lived experiences and presents the self as a unified whole (France 41). Alaimo and Heckman argue a reconceptualization of the relationship between nature and material feminism that attends to the "'intra-action' (in Karen Barad's terms) between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological" (5). The female body cannot be reduced to its individual parts for cultural examination, as the scholars are rejecting the essentialism that aims to separate women from the environments they inhabit.

To further enrich this discussion, it is essential to distinguish between "space" and "place" and to consider Ditty's work through the latter's lens, as she navigates the creation of space in the streets. While space relates to the regulation of spatial thinking and social structures, place pertains to a specific location and its rhetorical potential. According to Endres and Senda-Cook, place can perform rhetorically in three ways: by enhancing its pre-existing meaning, temporarily reconstructing its meaning, or allowing repeated reconstructions to forge new meanings (259). This conceptual framework of place-as-rhetoric suggests that the very act of protesting in a particular location is a form of rhetorical performance. Analyzing the interaction between words, bodies, and place offers deeper insights into how individuals relate to the urban environments they inhabit. The streets, often seen as domains regulated by patriarchal norms and gendered restrictions, become sites of resistance in Ditty's work. By choosing to perform at night, Ditty engages with the streets' pre-existing narratives as male-dominated spaces, challenging these notions and reclaiming the streets as safe and rightful spaces for women. Her assertion that streets have become "unsafe and hostile environments" for women after dark underscores her act of performing

in these spaces as a powerful form of protest against gender-based restrictions (*#streetsforus*). Through her artivism, Ditty not only questions the existing gender norms but also reclaims female presence in public spaces, asserting that such spaces should be defined by individual agency rather than oppressive social constructs.

Ditty's *#streetsforus* project serves as a powerful digital counterpublic, challenging the status quo by addressing environmental degradation and advocating for safe spaces for women street musicians to perform at night. The audio-visual narrative and blog components of the project encourage similar engagement through reproducing the hashtag namesake of the site: Ditty writes that with the use of the hashtag from the website's namesake "the project seeks to inspire citizens and more artists to take to the streets and engage in making it a safer place." (*#streetsforus*). She is building a counterpublic coalition with other female street artists through this invitation to collaborate in posting. Her work confronts the gendered notions of ownership—both of time and space and in our relationship with nature—proposing a radical reimagining of our interactions with the world around us. By contesting patriarchal claims over public spaces and questioning the exploitative dominance over nature, Ditty's artivism encourages a profound reconsideration of how we coexist with our environment and each other.

The impact of *#streetsforus* must extend beyond its digital manifestation, offering a blueprint for scholars, street musicians, and cultural activists to reevaluate the dynamics of place and space through a material ecofeminist perspective. Ditty's work is understudied and demands more visibility not only for her own messaging, but to illuminate other forms of ongoing artivism. This call to action is not only for those who directly engage with her work but also for the broader academic and activist communities to explore the intersections of gender, environment, and public spaces across the globe. Future research should delve into the experiences of women street musicians worldwide, confronting similar obstacles and highlighting the efforts of musical environmentalists championing eco-justice initiatives. For material ecofeminism to reach its full potential and foster a truly inclusive and transformative discourse, it must embrace and amplify diverse voices, moving beyond its historically white-centric focus. In doing so, it will better reflect the multifaceted efforts of scholars, activists, and artists like Ditty, who are breaking barriers and envisioning new futures where art and activism merge to create more equitable and sustainable worlds.

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Beyond Asexual Readings: Generative Asexuality in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*

by Nicholas Colecio

Marriage is a Curse we find, Especially to Women kind.
–Margaret Cavendish

Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) has garnered a fair amount of attention for its presentation of woman-woman partnerships, its critique of marriage, and its overall rejection of patriarchy.[1] However, until recently, its presentation of asexuality has remained under-discussed. Considering the recent growth of asexuality studies, Cavendish's play provides readers with the perfect opportunity to analyze not only its queer lesbian pairings, but also its treatment of (a)sexuality in general. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Lady Happy—a recent heiress to a vast fortune—swears off the rest of the world and cloisters herself in a convent solely comprised of unattached women, including those who are unmarried, virgins, and widows. She feels that the world causes nothing but misery for women and vows to create a utopic space—free from men's many impositions—for the women in her convent, rousing discontent among the men vying for her hand in marriage. Against all odds, the convent is a massive success, considering the women continue to live happily in the convent even after the play's close. However, after Lady Happy later falls in love with a visiting Princess (a Prince in disguise), she leaves the convent and marries him. Despite her marriage, which complicates my reading of Lady Happy as occupying an asexual subject position, the convent remains in operation, housing virgins and widows.

Rather than simply *doing* an asexual reading of Cavendish's play, I attempt to pinpoint how it develops asexuality and alternate conceptions of sexual and nonsexual desire

[1] Katherine Kellett explains that "under the lenses of queer theory and performance studies, [Cavendish's] plays—which interrogate the limits of performance with their dizzying mix of theatrical conventions and which often envision utopian alternatives for their female characters—emerge as a provocative site of cultural contestation" (419).

within the narrative. Accordingly, I argue that *The Convent of Pleasure* creates generative asexuality, this being asexuality that breeds new outlooks on life, reproduction, and desire while subverting hetero-patriarchal conceptions of success. I situate my reading alongside foundational and emerging concepts in queer theory and asexuality studies. Ultimately, in this essay, I demonstrate the presence of asexual subject positions in literature that extends into the distant past.

Locating a Proto-Asexual Subject Position

The difference between identifying as asexual and occupying an asexual subject position is a distinction that is important to my argument. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault posits that "when one looks back over these last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion" (17). Within this discursive explosion, "there was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" (18). Here, Foucault identifies the rising urge to classify various sexual subject positions. The desire to name and categorize sexual activity became an integral part of Western society over the last three hundred years, and the power mechanisms at play mandated this discourse on sex. Following Foucault's logic would lead to the belief that individuals before this discursive explosion did not identify themselves as gay, straight, or anything in between. Similarly, then, the idea of auto-identification as asexual would be unheard of. Hence, I am not making the argument that Lady Happy and her convent of women identify as asexual, but I am claiming that they occupy asexual subject positions.

While a discussion of asexuality in the play may seem contradictory—considering *The Convent of Pleasure* is an early modern text published before the discursive term was coined by Foucault—it still presents characters that occupy what would now be called queer and asexual subject positions. Calling oneself asexual is an active form of identification that aligns with our modern conceptions of sexualities, and occupying an asexual subject position can simply mean displaying asexual tendencies. For example, a character occupying an asexual subject position does not need to ever declare themselves asexual; they do not even need to *be* asexual at all. Consequently, a character who occupies an asexual subject position can engage in a romantic or sexual partnership with another individual without it invalidating a prior asexual subject position they may have occupied. For example, Lady Happy occupies an asexual subject position before her eventual marriage to the Prince(ss) at the end of the play. It is in these fleeting subject positions that *The Convent of Pleasure* displays generative asexuality. Analyzing Lady Happy as a character occupying an asexual subject position helps us see the various moments throughout the play in which she displays asexual tendencies that disrupt common notions of sexual and nonsexual desire.

I derive this queer generative reading of *The Convent of Pleasure* from Madhavi Menon's "Queer Shakes." In this essay, Menon provides a roadmap for how early modern texts can develop queerness within their narrative. Menon explains that queer theory often avoids labeling Shakespeare as a writer of queer texts, and that "it has become increasingly impossible to cross the temporal boundaries within which the institutionalized version of queer theory has bound itself" (2). Essentially, Menon asserts that some scholars avoid analyzing queerness prior to their existence as named states of being. She laments this

historical boundary, insisting that we reassess the idea that queerness has a historical start date. Menon's formulation in *Shakesqueer* "reformats the historical date we currently attach to the idea of queer" and ruptures notions of linear time and historical progress (3). Essentially, queerness can transcend time; queer ideas can be located before queer was coined as a term. She continues: "even as queerness is informed by its historical association with sexual irregularities, it cannot be reduced to or located in their embodiment" (4). Even if a text contains no characters who outwardly identify as queer, it can still generate queerness; in these terms, *The Convent of Pleasure* is rife with generative queerness, especially as it contains explicitly denoted female-female partnerships. Therefore, when the women in the convent express a desire to live free from patriarchal sexual imperatives, they should be taken at their word and investigated through the asexual subject positions they create for themselves.

Analyzing the presence of asexuality in early modern texts is not a novel phenomenon as a subfield of asexuality studies does exist within early modern studies; however, *The Convent of Pleasure* remains untouched in this aspect, with scant scholarly articles discussing asexuality in the play. Unsurprisingly, much of the scholarship revolves around Shakespearean texts, with heavy emphasis on *Venus and Adonis*. For example, Simone Chess argues that Adonis clearly expresses an asexual identity within the text. Classically, Adonis has been characterized as presexual; however, Chess stresses this is not sufficient, arguing that Adonis and other eroticized male early modern characters should be "described as actively asexual rather than passively presexual," while emphasizing their ability to successfully profess indifference to sex and romance (31). Chess follows the same logic I employ in my analysis of Cavendish: Adonis clearly states he is chaste and does not desire romance—enough to indicate an inherent asexuality within his character. Chess and other scholars read an asexual identity onto early modern figures; however, I seek to qualify such moves. Although identifying these identities remains important, that is not this project's sole goal. When Lady Happy and the other women of the convent express a desire to avoid sex, reproduction, and heteronormative life paths, they clearly occupy an asexual subject position. They may or may not actually *be* asexual, but that does not matter if they create and reside in these queer, asexual subject positions.

Lady Happy signals her asexual subject position early in the play during her first appearance when she argues with Madam Mediator about her intentions to create the convent. Madam Mediator cannot believe that Lady Happy would cloister herself in the convent, and Lady Happy retorts, "yet would a Marry'd life have more crosses and sorrows then pleasure, freedom, or happiness: nay Marriage to those that are virtuous is a greater restraint then a Monastery" (Cavendish 2). In this outburst, Lady Happy demonstrates her opinion of marriage: she feels that marriage restricts women and prevents them from obtaining any sort of agency or joy in life. For Lady Happy, to be married is to lose social mobility, control over her own life, and hope of any satisfaction. The institution of marriage, in her formulation, acts as a severe limitation on women's mobility in society, even if their husbands were the most noble and virtuous of men. Before Act One's close, Lady Happy cements her asexual subject position with a declaration that rejects a life destined to please men:

> Wherefore, in order thereto, I will take so many Noble Persons of my own Sex, as my Estate will plentifully maintain, such whose Births are greater than their Fortunes, and are resolv'd to live a single life, and vow Virginity: with these I mean to live incloister'd with all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful; My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them. (3)

With this affirmative statement, Lady Happy effectively brings the convent into existence. She insists that the women living there will lead single lives without sex, confirming their status as individuals occupying asexual subject positions. Immediately after this statement, she outlines how their asexuality can be generative. Their convent will not be a place where the life horizons—normally limited to confining marriages—of its inhabitants will be restricted by hetero-patriarchal notions of marriage and reproductive imperatives. Instead, their "convent of pleasure" will produce a multitude of new outcomes for its inhabitants: chief among them pleasure, but also liberation, mobility, and the freedom to abstain from sex.

Desire Divorced from Sexuality: Reading Asexual Erotics

Queer studies scholar Ela Przybylo's theory of asexual erotics remains essential to my analytical framework, providing a lens through which to investigate the gender and sexuality politics present in *The Convent of Pleasure*. In *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, Przybylo builds upon the long-held concept of compulsory sexuality, a theory derived from Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence." Just as the concept of compulsory heterosexuality points to the "necessity" of partaking in heterosexual relationships, compulsory sexuality highlight's society's obsession with sex and sexuality in general. It "speaks to the ways in which sexuality is presumed to be natural and normal to the detriment of various forms of asexual and nonsexual lives, relationships, and identities" (Przybylo 1). Essentially, it outlines how individuals are forbidden from being non-sexed bodies without sexual desires. *The Convent of Pleasure* displays this sense of compulsory sexuality throughout the entire narrative, and it is this force against which Lady Happy fights. The men in the play vividly illustrate compulsory sexuality at work when they discuss Lady Happy and the convent. After hearing about how many women live there, Monsieur Take-Pleasure—aptly named—declares, "If there be so many Women, there will be the more use for Men" (Cavendish 4). In his mind, women exist solely to pair off with men. Even when presented with a large swath of radical separatist women, his first thought is how many men this group of women could serve, and in fact that the women *need* men. The men do not view the women as independent beings, but only as potential sex partners.

Asexual erotics underpins my analysis of all relations in the play as they help reveal new, asexual modes of relation between the characters. In *The Convent of Pleasure,* these various erotics, like asexual erotics and classical erotics, battle for primacy. However, these asexual erotics do not replace classical erotics altogether, with classical erotics being those that we link the erotic with the sexual. Instead, they act as alternate frames to conceive of desire, intimacy, pleasure, and modes of being. Asexual erotics "[envision] the erotic as beyond the sexual, evocative of life energies and deep seated emotional and psychic needs that

cannot be enfolded within sexuality" (24). The existence of asexual erotics in one scene does not extinguish the possibility of a parallel usage of classical erotics. Rather than supplanting classical erotics entirely, "asexual erotics is interested in challenging compulsory sexuality while drawing out erotic moments that also skirt around, radically refuse, or are adjacent to sexual expression" (28). Often, the two are inextricably entangled, informing and contradicting one another. It is within these zones of contention that we can begin to see the radical potential of asexual erotics.

The framework of asexual erotics challenges compulsory sexuality by questioning the linkage between erotics and sexuality writ large. Przybylo claims that "asexuality is an unmined provocation of erotic possibilities, a theoretical, affective, and relational challenge to imagining what can be" (20). Lady Happy's entire character revolves around imagining new possibilities that exist outside the sexual imperatives present in society and envisioning alternate conceptions of pleasure. Studying asexual erotic possibilities "provide[s] a promising language for discussing forms of intimacy that are not simply reducible to sex and sexuality and that, further, challenge the Freudian doxa that the sexual is at the base of all things" (20). Studying the various ways that Lady Happy and the other women in the convent characterize both desire and pleasure reveals how the play generates its own language of asexual erotics independent from any theory merely "applied" to the text. The phrase "asexual erotics" simply names forces already present *within* the play.

To fully understand asexual erotics, however, it is also necessary to dwell for a moment on classical conceptions of the erotic. Przybylo argues that through the Freudian tradition, "*eros* came to be understood as rooted in 'the sexual' and framed as a sexual life force and libidinal energy behind all human progress, action, and 'civilization itself'" (20). This causes erotics to be popularly conflated with "the sex drive, with sexual desire, and more broadly with muddy understandings of sexuality in general" (20-21). These classical erotics manifest in *The Convent of Pleasure* through the male characters, most notably the Prince(ss). After successfully wooing Lady Happy while disguised as the Princess, the two discuss their love. The following exchange represents the tensions between classical erotics, that being erotics tied to physical embrace and kissing, and asexual erotics, which is an innocent erotics not connected to sex or physicality:

> *Prin.* Can Lovers love too much?
> *L. Happy.* Yes, if they love not well.
> *Prin.* Can any Love be more virtuous, innocent and harmless then ours?
> *L. Happy.* I hope not.
> *Prin.* Then let us please our selves, as harmless Lovers use to do.
> *L. Happy.* How can harmless Lovers please themselves?
> *Prin.* Why very well, as, to discourse, imbrace and kiss, so mingle souls together. (Cavendish 12)

In this exchange, the Prince(ss) attempts to seduce Lady Happy through a classical conception of erotics, one mainly used by men in the play. (S)he craves an excess of love, something of which Lady Happy is quite wary. Then, the Prince(ss) delineates innocent love as that which seals itself with a kiss. In doing so, (s)he links the physical kiss—a signal of classical erotics—

to Lady Happy's alternate asexual erotics, that of discourse and the ephemerality of souls. By pitting these erotic forms against each other, Cavendish enables readers to see the tension between these two alternative modes.

From the outset, Lady Happy intends to escape the sex-driven erotics that invade all aspects of her life. In an early debate about the convent, Madam Mediator exclaims, "You intend to live incloister'd and retired from the World." Lady Happy responds, "'Tis true, but not from pleasures; for, I intend to incloister my self from the World to enjoy pleasure, and not to bury my self from it, but to incloister my self from the incumbred cares and vexations, troubles and perturbance of the World" (3). Here, Lady Happy pinpoints the notions of compulsory sexuality and classical erotics present in society, refuses to accept them, and shows that, in rejecting them, she plans to create a new framework for pleasure. The vexations, troubles, and perturbations that accompany compulsory sexuality do not hold the only path to desire and pleasure in society. Instead, Lady Happy vows to establish her own networks of pleasure that circumvent the necessity of male-female erotics and relations within the convent. These new networks of pleasure point to the existence of latent asexual erotics within the play.

Gestures toward asexual erotics appear consistently throughout *The Convent of Pleasure.* For example, when talking with Lady Happy's wooers, Madam Mediator recounts Lady Happy's declaration:

> She hath avoided the company of Men, by retirement, meerly, because she would enjoy the variety of Pleasures, which are in Nature; of which, she says, Men are Obstructers; for, instead of increasing Pleasure, they produce Pain; and, instead of giving Content, they increase Trouble; instead of making the Female-Sex Happy, they make them Miserable; for which, she hath banished the Masculine Company for ever. (4)

In Lady Happy's mind, men prevent the creation of alternate paths of asexual erotics, desire, and pleasure. They obstruct her access to explore other avenues of being. Importantly, Lady Happy connects these nonsexual pleasures to nature, showcasing how they predate the existence of men and their artificial hetero-patriarchal constructs within society. These asexual erotics that Lady Happy seeks out challenge "the conflation of sexual desire with the erotic…thus opening up different paradigms for thinking about relating" (Przybylo 21). By eschewing men from their lives, Lady Happy and the women in the convent create a new paradigm for relating, one free from the compulsory sexuality wielded by men. In the convent, they cast off all expectations of sexual availability and mandatory reproduction.

Failure to Acquiesce Or: Why Must We Marry?

While *The Convent of Pleasure* generates asexual erotics, it also offers images of queer temporalities and queer failure. These two theories, first developed by Jack Halberstam, help articulate how Lady Happy and the women of the convent all occupy asexual subject positions that disrupt expected life paths. The two theories exist independently, but I will use them concurrently here. Queer temporality exists "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction," and it "develop[s] in according to other logics of location,

movement, and identification" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 1). Essentially, queer time incorporates any temporalities or life arrangements that refuse to adhere to expected chronologies of life. Take, for example, the women in the convent: by isolating themselves from men and society, they refuse to partake in heterosexual life markers such as marriage and child rearing, fulfilling queer time's "potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time" (2). These unique temporal life renderings act as queer interpretations of what life could be. Queer failure, similarly, stands in opposition to typical heteronormative notions of success that "society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 2). To succeed in life, according to this ideology, one must be a generative body fulfilling the imperatives to reproduce and acquire wealth. Analyzing the two theories synchronously reveals their interwoven nature; adopting queer temporalities, then, would be a form of queer failure. Lady Happy and her convent, in turn, create new life chronologies for themselves and fail to reproduce through expected means. Therefore, they fail queerly on multiple levels.

Encloistering themselves within the convent immediately decouples the women from their anticipated life chronologies. When Lady Happy and the women first join the convent, they cast off all expectations of marriage, inheritance, and heterosexual family-rearing. The women embody queer temporality because they "[disrupt] the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 152). Their decision to encloister themselves is truly radical because they shed the hallmarks of society, ultimately relinquishing their wider social standing. Taking the Prince(ss)'s comments at face value, many noble women willingly cede their power to join the convent: "Sweet Lady Happy, there are many that have quit their Crowns and Power, for a Cloister of Restraint; then well may I quit a Court of troubles for a Convent of Pleasure" (Cavendish 7). Even royal women, belonging to the highest possible social standing, happily relocate to the convent for an entirely new type of life. Queer temporalities offer them freedom from their restrictive past lives.

Embracing these queer temporalities, though, positions Lady Happy and the women as outcasts. As willing exiles, they fail to accept society's normal practices. Additionally, as women occupying asexual subject positions, they fail to fulfill the roles men have historically laid out for them. This multifaceted failure constitutes a queer failure in that it generates new modes of being and new outlooks on life. Halberstam explains that these generative queer failures can allow its practitioners "to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to predictable adulthoods" (*The Queer Art of Failure* 3). Essentially, the unpredictable nature of their new chosen life paths allows them to escape the troubles of their original lives. Importantly, a key feature of queer failure involves "a host of negative effects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair;" however, these negative effects become weapons to rebel against societal norms. Fueled by these negative emotions, the women create new possibilities for themselves (3).

By joining the convent, inhabitants remove themselves from heteropatriarchal society, thereby liberating them from compulsory reproduction, the logical endpoint of compulsory sexuality. Consequently, they fail to perform their role as women—read: sexual partners and eventual mothers. The decision to reject these mandates goes against what the men view as

natural, as discussed by the Advisor: "Her heretical Opinions ought not to be suffer'd, not her Doctrine allow'd; and she ought to be examined by a Masculine Synod, and punish'd with a sever Husband, or tortured with a deboist Husband" (Cavendish 4). Madam Mediator claims the only recourse is "to make your Complaints, and put up a Petition to the State, with your desires for a Redress" (4). The Advisor finds her actions so reprehensible that she should be punished with what they consider the worst aspects of heteropatriarchal society: an abusive or disloyal husband. Women already regularly suffer from these wrongdoings at the hand of men. The entire middle portion of the play containing the sub-plays exemplifies this harsh truth. This interlude portrays the various horrors women must suffer, including poor health when pregnant, abusive husbands, the death of their children, and their treatment as lower than men. Their attempt to involve the state demonstrates how women's behavior and sexuality are not just controlled by men, but by the state, which solidifies their power and gives it legitimacy.

The convent breeds new ways of being. It becomes a "weapon of the weak" that allows the convent's inhabitants to refuse "to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline" (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 88). The type of reproduction that the women espouse is not of normal means. Instead of producing offspring, like they would be expected to do in normal society, they produce pleasure. Returning to one of Lady Happy's declarations, she retorts that "Men are Obstructers; for, instead of increasing Pleasure, they produce Pain" (Cavendish 4). Men produce pain in society and reproduce it consistently. In her convent, Lady Happy refuses to allow for this reproduction of pain. Instead, she insists that they focus on reproducing pleasure. This reproduction of pleasure is their "weapon of the weak" that they can use to resist prevailing norms in society. Asexual erotics undergird this discussion of their alternative methods of reproduction. Instead of centering their lives around childbirth, they place their own desires and nontraditional relationships first.

Looking Backward and Forward: The Convent as Queer Asexual Utopia

Lady Happy's convent ultimately acts as a queer utopic space. According to Robert T. Tally Jr., Spatiality, or the analysis of "spatial practices and historical spaces" enables readers "to recognize the degree to which literary texts operate with and help to shape the geography of their worlds, and through them, of ours" (99). For Tally, studying the construction of space within a text reveals information about the world of both the text and the reader. Examining the titular convent in *The Convent of Pleasure* uncovers the workings of the narrative world and "enables new ways of seeing the spaces of our own world, while also imagining different spaces altogether" (154). My analysis—informed by José Esteban Muñ oz and Jack Halberstam's theories of queer utopias and spaces—imagines Lady Happy's convent as a queer utopia that enables its inhabitants to reject compulsory sexuality and embrace asexual erotics. Their queer formulation of space and adoption of asexual erotics allows Lady Happy and the other women to occupy asexual subject positions.

Labeling the convent as a utopia is not a new idea within the scholarship surrounding the play: multiple scholars have discussed its utopic elements. For example, Erin Lang Bonin argues that Cavendish "reconfigures traditional distinctions between private and public by creating utopian heroines who take women's sequestration to extremes, completely

insulating themselves from men's public spheres" (339). The convent allows women to seclude themselves from public life, freeing them from societal expectations. The scholarship on *The Convent of Pleasure's* utopic elements also often notes its feminist and queer potential. As Bonin explains, for the men in the play, "perhaps most frightening of all was the notion that women did not need men to satisfy their sexual desires" (347). Vanessa L. Rapatz, takes up a similar project, asserting that Lady Happy attempts to completely insulate the women from the outside world. She tries "to shut off all potential outlets for male control over or interventions in the convent's daily operations" (126). Both scholars focus on the radical nature of the convent, exemplifying how it acts as a shield from the horrors that society inflicts upon women.

The convent evokes heavenly imagery that lends to my reading of the space as a utopia. Early in the play, immediately after Lady Happy vows to create the convent, she describes it in fantastical terms: "*For every Sense shall pleasure take, And all our Lives shall merry make: Our Minds in full delight shall joy, Not vex'd with every idle Toy*" (Cavendish 3). Lady Happy claims that the convent will allow the women to happily experience all the pleasures of life, and that they will not need to concern themselves with everyday worries. There, they can "Live with Delight, and with it die" (3). The contentment they feel will last until their dying day. Lady Happy's heavenly descriptions of the convent clearly sketch a utopic image. Madam Mediator, who was initially against Lady Happy's encloistering, later describes the convent in glowing terms: "She has so much compass of ground within her walls, as there is not only room and place enough for Gardens, Orchards, Walks, Groves, Bowers, Arbours, Ponds, Fountains, Springs and the like" (Cavendish 4). Even when looking at the convent solely through an aesthetic lens, it conjures utopic images.

In addition to its aesthetically utopian qualities, the convent also generates a queer utopia for its inhabitants. For Muñoz, queer utopias are "about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). Lady Happy rejects the standards of her present time and creates an alternate world for herself and the other women. She creates a utopia so perfect that no need for men exists at all. As Madam Mediator explains to Lady Happy's suitors, "but also for conveniency for much Provision, and hath Women for every Office and Employment: for though she hath not above twenty Ladies with her, yet she hath numerous Company of Female Servants, so as there is no occasion for Men" (Cavendish 4). The inhabitants of the convent have made men obsolete within their walls, allowing them to pursue pleasures of all manners. Lady Happy's fixation on pleasure and desire free from the outside world mirrors Muñoz's observations about queer utopias and where they can go wrong:

> Abstract utopias are indeed dead ends, too often vectoring into the escapist disavowal of our current moment...This maneuver, a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled for a desire for futurity. Queer futurity does not underplay desire. In fact it is all about desire, desire for both larger semi abstractions such as a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure. (30)

Lady Happy's convent is *not* an abstract utopia. The convent is concrete and does not hit a dead end. Even after Lady Happy marries the Prince(ss) and leaves the convent, it remains operational. Lady Happy builds futurity into the convent; it can continue to generate queerness independent from her. Furthermore, the convent's defining traits—utopic and free from men—acts as a critique of the society within the narrative and outside of the narrative. The space itself rejects both diegetic and non-diegetic formulations of society while emphasizing both interpersonal desire and the yearning for a better world.

Importantly, the past informs the utopic convent that Lady Happy creates. Muñoz explains that queer utopias (as a hopeful critical methodology) "can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (4). Lady Happy quite literally looks to the past to create her convent. The idea of monasteries throughout history helps her create a future vision of a utopia for women. She transforms the image of the isolated monastery into her own queer utopia, a space where only certain individuals (in this case, women) can gain access. Bonin signals to the retrospective elements of the convent as well, stating that "the convent's status as a separate, potentially oppositional space, combined with impressions dating back to the medieval period, made it a locus for fantasies, desires, and fears about female sexuality and power" (Bonin 347). In this historically informed space, Lady Happy and the women empower themselves and reclaim agency over their sexuality.

Despite Lady Happy's eventual marriage to the Prince(ss) and the lesbian couplings within the convent, I maintain that *The Convent of Pleasure* creates valid asexual subject positions. The ephemerality of these subject positions does not diminish their existence, impact, or value. Their transient nature epitomizes the subversive qualities of queer failures and queer utopias. Even if Lady Happy fails to maintain her status as non-married and as a member of the convent, she still *did* inhabit that role. Likewise, Muñoz offers the following on failure: "It is important not to be content to let failed revolutions by merely finite moments. Instead we should consider them to be the blueprints to a better world that queer utopian aesthetics supply" (146). Lady Happy did leave her utopia, so she failed in that regard, but her failure was generative. She created the convent, and it is still in operation at the play's close. Lady Happy fails productively, with her actions informing future generations.

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Three Sisters: Venus, Phillis, and Honorée

by Sherry Kolber

They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.
— Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

You have to git man off your eyeball, before you see anything a'tall.
— Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers initially set out to write a few poems about Phillis Wheatley Peters. While researching primary sources, it soon became clear to Jeffers that the existing scholarship on Wheatley had too many unfilled gaps and undocumented speculations to be reliable. Jeffers concluded that racial and gender bias affected how Wheatley's story was stitched together because "literary history had entrusted the story of Phillis Wheatley... to a White woman" (173). Jeffers's mission with regard to Wheatley changed then from academic to personal; inspired by a "loyalty to the race" (167),[1] *The Age of Phillis* is Jeffers's attempt to reclaim the caretaking of Wheatley's legacy from an inherently biased literary establishment. Jeffers insists that Wheatley cannot be defined solely by her race or enslavement, nor can her life be summarized by her published writings and the limited biographical information available. Motivated by love and an empathetic knowledge of the Black experience, Jeffers helps us see Wheatley as a whole, irreducible person.

Restoring Her Story

In "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," African American literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reflects on a need for Black scholarship about Black writers, asserting that "[W]e must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures" (*Writing Race* 13). Gates explains that since the Enlightenment, "because our life in the West has been one political struggle, followed by another, our literature has been defined...as primarily just one more polemic in these struggles" (*Criticism* 626). As a result, writers of African descent are denied the complexities of their full humanity because they

[1] All quotes from Jeffers are taken from *The Age of Phillis*, Wesleyan UP, 2020.

are only viewed as representatives of the oppressed, and Wheatley is one of the best examples of this. *The Age of Phillis* is Jeffers's interrogation of the racism and sexism that influenced reductive conclusions about Wheatley by the literary establishment. By challenging notions of benevolent enslavers, exposing Christianity's role in upholding the institution of slavery in the colonies, and focusing on Wheatley's relationships with other people of color, Jeffers offers a more expansive imagining of Phillis Wheatley's life.

With *The Age of Phillis*, Jeffers restores Wheatley's humanity by treating the fragments of discourse about Wheatley in the same way that Saidiya Hartman approaches the figure of "Venus."[2] In "Venus In Two Acts," Hartman describes a method called *critical fabulation*, the practice of fashioning a narrative based on archival research. Acknowledging the challenge of telling "an impossible story," Hartman labors to paint as full a picture of the lives of enslaved people as possible by "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities" (Hartman 11). Critical fabulation is Jeffers's methodology in *The Age of Phillis*. Vincent Carretta writes that Wheatley's biographers found it "particularly challenging…[to trace] her whereabouts" during the "lost years" between 1780 and 1784. Carretta adds, however, that "evidence of absence has proven not to have been the absence of evidence" (Carretta ix). Critical fabulation allows Jeffers to not only reconstruct what has been missing but also to produce "counter-history," a type of speculative fiction that opposes dominant narratives as well as methods of research that are tainted by bias (Hartman 12, emphasis added).

Jeffers writes a narrative for Wheatley that does not begin on the auction block in Boston's South End in 1761 when she is purchased by the Wheatleys. David Mazella calls *The Age of Phillis* an "antianthology," explaining how Jeffers takes "conflicting strands of biography, the key words and phrases of [Wheatley's] poems and letters [and detaches them]… from a sometimes lying historical context and muddled historical record" (Mazella). In her desire to right the record *if possible*, Jeffers moves away from the slave narrative in order to paint the picture of an extraordinary young woman who was more than an enslaved African girl who became a literary savant.

In this essay I will examine how Jeffers opens up new (and perhaps more accurate) possibilities and perspectives about Wheatley's life and legacy. I argue that she does this in two ways: *first*, she unpacks the production of "knowledge" about Wheatley, exploring available sources and lacunae about Wheatley's life. In an attempt to augment "what is unknowable," Jeffers writes Wheatley's origin story, enacting a "matriarchal reclamation" (Factor and Plasencia *Forms*) and establishing a "free lineage" (186) between African ancestors, Wheatley, writers of the African American literary tradition (especially poets), and herself. Jeffers's largely imagined, critically fabulated poetry effectively locates Wheatley's voice by dividing the book into sections that (a) illuminate the different facets of Wheatley's persona, and (b) chronologically explore the phases of her journey from childhood in Africa to a precarious adult freedom in America. Specifically, I will discuss how critical fabulation

[2]Venus is a Jane Doe moniker used for a ubiquitous figure who appears throughout the archives of Atlantic slavery. She represents anonymous enslaved Black women who were often victims of violence, about whom there is little to no identifying information.

is particularly effective in the epistolary poems and the poems that envision Wheatley's pre-American existence in Africa. *Second*, Jeffers uses critical fabulation to present counter-histories that offer compelling alternatives to the accepted narratives about (Phillis) Wheatley's relationships with Susannah and Nathaniel Wheatley, and with her husband John Peters. Through close readings of selected poems, I will show that what sets *The Age of Phillis* apart from previous Wheatley scholarship is that it is not a biography *per se*; with its restraint and technique, poetry packs an emotional punch that prose cannot. Fifteen years of rigorous archival research provide credibility to Jeffers's emotionally-charged creative thoughts. It is a collection that blends feelings and facts, and it is precisely this level of feeling that allows us to conceive of Wheatley in more personal detail than ever before.

Background of Wheatley Criticism: Too Black and Too White

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral was the first ever book of poetry written by a person of African descent, establishing Wheatley as the mother of African American literature. When it was published in 1773 to the astonishment and admiration of the American and English colonial world, it made Wheatley an international celebrity (Carretta xi). During the Enlightenment Era, *reason* was the most valuable of all human characteristics; the ability to write proved a person possessed reason, and reason made one human. Wheatley's lofty and deeply pious writing challenged White Supremacist notions about the intellectual and moral abilities of Black people. Opinions of Wheatley run the gamut from "genius in bondage" to race traitor, from innovator to imitator. To refute racist arguments and theories put forth by writers such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, and A. A. Long, abolitionists (opposed to the slave trade) and emancipationists (opposed to the institution of slavery) cited Wheatley as evidence of Black humanity and intellectual capability. General George Washington would not publish the poem she wrote about him in 1775, but he was cognizant of her celebrity and knew he had to respond. He wrote her back four months later, explaining that he did not share the poem publicly because he did not want to appear vain. Whether his apprehension was about seeming vain or being supportive of a "Negro poetess," his letter was nevertheless respectful and implies that he deemed her worthy of a response. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson contemptuously concluded that not even Christianity—with its dogma built on miracles—could produce a poet from the Black race. Whites on either side of the Atlantic did not know what to make of Wheatley because there was no precedent for an enslaved African (for whom English was a second language) to write poetry that could measure up to vaunted literary tradition. Jenny Factor and Sam Plasencia identify her as the "root to a powerful family tree" (Factor and Plasencia *Tradition* 31) of Black American authors whose writing stands in opposition to the racial and gender prejudices of their respective eras.

Such polarity of opinions diverted much of the study of Wheatley to focus on her life as a tragedy: she was kidnapped as a young child, enslaved, weakened by chronic illness, begrudgingly freed but left with no inheritance, married to an unambitious Black man who was saddled with debt, and eventually left to die impoverished and alone. Wheatley was hardly considered outside of her status as an enslaved Black woman; her writings were only analyzed within the scope of a typecast life in bondage. In 1967, Ralph Ellison asserted that African Americans can and should be seen outside of their racial suffering; Tara Bynum

writes that Wheatley's historical value should not be tied to her raced body or predicated on her suffering as a slave (Bynum 42). Wheatley's status as an enslaved woman conditioned her critics to view her writings only as a vessel that gave voice to her tragedy. By foregrounding Wheatley's enslavement, critics would either compare her to the classical poets because there was no other literary precedent for her, or they would examine her writing for messages of resistance that would be expected of a literate slave. Only two possibilities were allowed for Wheatley: that she was proof of either *exceptional* Black reason or a *unique* ascension from Black tragedy, with either possibility ostensibly perpetuating the pernicious view that Blacks are generally inferior. It would take centuries for literary critics to evolve past this binary approach.

If White critics could only see Wheatley as a tragic genius, then twentieth century Black critics dismissed her for not being what they thought she should be. Attention to Wheatley re-emerged during the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement, but Black writers disdained Wheatley for what they felt was an absence of resistance to her enslavement and the slave trade. They accused her of excessive assimilation and spineless loyalty to Whites, preferring the angry, unapologetic (and often male) voices of figures like Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin. James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1922, "[O]ne looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against bondage" in Wheatley's writing (Gates *New Yorker* 87), and in the 1960s Amiri Baraka denounced Wheatley's poetry as a "far and ludicrous departur[e] from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights" (Gates *New Yorker* 87). Wheatley became a pariah in Black literary circles because her work failed to voice anger, courage, and protest—implied requirements for Black writers of that era.

Furthermore, Wheatley was mocked for having a "White mind" and lacking kinship with other Black people. William Robinson reported that Wheatley was deemed "utterly irrelevant to the identification and liberation of the black man" and, in 2003, Gates went so far as to say that the Black literary establishment considered her a "race traitor" (Gates *Trials* 76). For Black critics, their point of departure was an indictment of Wheatley's alleged complicity with White Supremacy. To them, Wheatley was an example of how a Black writer can become absorbed by cultural hegemony in the absence of a strong sense of identity. It is important to note, however, that Wheatley's enslaved status is highlighted on the frontispiece of her book; the caption reads, "Phillis Wheatley, Negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New-England." Thus, the unspoken truth is that Wheatley was undoubtedly required to portray John Wheatley and his family in a positive light; he was her *de facto* censor, and thus any expressions of resistance had to be veiled within the constraints of poetic devices. As the first African American poet, there was no model for what would be accepted for publishing; in fact, a panel of incredulous judges convened to determine whether Wheatley truly authored her collection of poetry. Thus, the protest and resistance requirement foisted upon Wheatley by post-Jim Crow and Civil Rights-era Black critics was unreasonable and anachronistic at best. It is equally likely that such criticism of Wheatley was grounded in sexist expectations that a Black female author's voice and subject matter must be identical to those of Black male writers.

The approaches of Black and White critics alike have been equally oppressive, unjust, and incomplete. In the two centuries following her death, there was little Wheatley scholarship, with Margaretta M. Odell's unauthorized and questionable 1834 biography (fifty

years after Wheatley died) upheld as the primary authority on Wheatley. In 2011, Vincent Carretta's thoughtfully and rigorously researched biography *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of A Genius In Bondage* finally overtook Odell's as the most authoritative work of knowledge production about Wheatley. Since then, more recent scholarship by Black critics discredited the longstanding condemnations leveled against her: Gates argues that misreading Wheatley as a mimic of the classics "arise[s] from a blatant unfamiliarity with the conventions of neoclassical verse" (Riesing 79) and John Shields identifies fierce but coded political statements in Wheatley's writings, particularly in Wheatley's use of Biblical allusions.

Mother, Mercy, Child

When we read Wheatley's poems about *mercy*, what emerges is the possibility that she was fully aware of the complicated implications for herself as an abducted, enslaved, and converted African woman. Jeffers's interrogation of *mercy* at the very least compels us to question the assumption that Christian *mercy* is purely benevolent. Titled *Mother*/Muse, the prologue begins with a quote from Langston Hughes: "This is a song for the genius child. / Sing it softly, for the song is wild" (1). The prologue begins the task of restoring Wheatley's lost relationship with a mother who has been erased by the archives. It is also a powerful juxtaposition of two opposing concepts: "genius" and "wild." By using Hughes's quote, Jeffers challenges the narrative of Africa as wild and savage, implicitly asking *Can a "wild child" be a genius? Can "wild" and "genius" coexist?* The opening poem of the prologue, "An Issue of Mercy #1" (3–4), is the first of a set of three that explores the idea of *mercy*. In each version, *mercy* takes on a different meaning. Of course, the idea of *mercy* presented in these poems is an allusion to Wheatley's most famous and notorious[3] line, "Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land," from the 1768 poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America." If the function of *mercy* in the first poem is to shine a light on the ways in which religion is hypocritically weaponized to justify the practice of slavery, then *mercy* in the second poem is an expression of sorrowful disbelief at how *mercy* unravels paradoxically in the journey from physical freedom to corporal enslavement.

Jeffers also interweaves a mother's anguish over the kidnapping of her child with the hypocrisy of religious justification for the institution of slavery. In "An Issue of Mercy #1," the poem's speaker addresses their "Dear Brethren," urging them to question *what* mercy is, *whose* mercy was allegedly granted, and to *whom*. The child who would become Phillis Wheatley watches her mother as she performs a morning ritual honoring the life-giving sources of water and sun (Wheatley's only *admitted* memory of her mother is of her pouring water as the sun rose)—but Jeffers points to another life-giving source: *mother*. Words surrounding the mother figure evoke the senses; they are words of hearing, vision, and touch: "*God's milky sound,*" *a bowl dripping, light, treasure*. Such images bring forth associations of a mother's nourishing milk and the unique, nurturing maternal connection between a mother, a child, the earth, and the divine. In contrast, words connected with "the nice White lady" are

[3]Gates calls this poem "the most reviled poem in African-American literature" (Gates 83); taken alone (as it often appears in anthologies), critics either ignore or are unaware of her bitter (if sometimes veiled) commentary about the slave trade sprinkled throughout her works.

harsh and discomfiting. They are also things that one can see, hear, smell, and touch, but they are displeasing and unsavory: *madness, filth, rats, shards, dirty*.

"An Issue of Mercy #2" (16) appears in the first full section, titled *Book: Before*. It encompasses the next chapter of Wheatley's life—that of a kidnapped child, not yet claimed or purchased, but ripped away from her family. In this poem, the child who would become Phillis Wheatley Peters has been taken from the African motherland and is being transported on a slave ship. The descriptions of brutal suffering on the ship apply to *all* slave trade ships that carried human cargo during the Middle Passage. Jeffers summons another image of mothers, but this time in agony: "a woman or two giving birth," infants tossed to the sharks by sailors (literally and metaphorically), a "banquet of placenta" eaten by rats. Using unsettling images of disease and violence—*smallpox, rape, shackled, crowded, killed, germs, vomit, infected, shit, piss, death*—Jeffers forces the question "*Why* did this child survive" (emphasis added). The omitted question mark at the end of the line suggests that it is a statement of resilience rather than a question. It does not seek an unknowable explanation; it is an assertion of Wheatley's extraordinary resolve. The implied answer is that this child emerged from trauma because she was *already* strong; the Wheatleys did not imbue her with her remarkable character. The poem ends with the line "Lord   Lord have *mercy*," a phrase used either colloquially in moments of disbelief or exasperation, or in Christian prayer to ask God for forgiveness and compassion. Here, Jeffers invokes both usages of "Lord have mercy," exposing how *mercy* is not a source of compassion or salvation, but an unbearably cruel and oppressive system that allocates either status or suffering depending on one's race and gender.

"An Issue of Mercy #3" (144) appears in the penultimate book of poetry, titled *Catalog: Revolution*. The section is devoted to elevating Black revolutionaries such as Crispus Attucks, who was killed along with four others by British troops in the Boston Massacre of 1770, as well as Black soldiers who accepted Lord Dunmore's offer of freedom in exchange for their service in the British royal forces. Either way—whether they fought for the colonies or for the Crown—Jeffers honors the role African Americans played in the historic fight for freedom. The entire section is a collection of sonnets; the use of this classical technique lends dignity to the voices of the oppressed. In this third *mercy* poem, Jeffers invokes a physical and moral opposition between light and dark ("*black vessels*," "*light*," "*snow*," "*Africans*," "*black*") and she draws a connection between African bodies exploited both as slaves and soldiers. Jeffers's use of alliteration—*spit, slave, soldiers, survived, slipped; black, bones, brethren, breathing, bold*—and the repetition of each couplet ending in the word *mercy* again interrogates whether *mercy* is benevolent, and if so, who are its (alleged) beneficiaries. After challenging assumptions that a White mother and a Christian God have been exclusively benevolent in Wheatley's life, Jeffers provides contrast by exploring actual sources of strength and goodness—Wheatley's relationships with other people of color.

Wheatley's Relationships Revealed: You Are Who You Love

In the twenty-five epistolary poems titled "Lost Letters," Jeffers imagines Wheatley through correspondence with her colleagues and confidants. In these poems, Jeffers inserts italicized text to suggest what true thoughts Wheatley concealed under a veneer of courtesy, respect, and humility. The "Lost Letter" poems are another example of Hartman's

method of "critical fabulation." These poems speculate that the letters Wheatley wrote were performative acts of decorum on the surface but were brimming under the surface with rage, pain, hatred, and deep longing for freedom. "Lost Letter #1" is a fictionalized letter dated January 18, 1764 from (Phillis) Wheatley to Susannah (Wheatley). This letter would have been written three years after Phillis was purchased in 1761 and three years before her poems were published in 1767. The scene depicts Phillis—already literate, converted, and educated in the Classics—as she writes a letter to Susannah that functions similarly to a diary entry. Italicized lines read "*i will burn this letter in the hearth you are / watching me as I smile*" (46). Phillis never intends for Susannah to read it; she only writes to vent her hidden feelings. The language of coded resistance rests in the complimentary and formulaic close: she signs it, "Your servant and child." The two roles should preclude each other; they should not describe the same person. That Jeffers places "servant" before "child" exposes which position foregrounds the other. On one hand, the Wheatleys may have *said* that Phillis was *like* one of their children; Jeffers, on the other hand, implicitly asserts that Phillis by definition cannot be both. In "Lost Letter #2," an imagined letter from Wheatley to the Native American preacher Samson Occom, lines of religious praise are followed by italicized lines that read "*i write as i am instructed the White / lady's hand patting my shoulder*" (49). The lowercase "i" represents Wheatley's lower status in the family. Subsequent lines report to Occum that "the White lady" calls indigenous people "savages" and "tarnished," and tells Wheatley to consider herself "lucky" for being "saved" from parents who were "pagans." This letter is an example of how Jeffers builds a holistic view of Wheatley by looking at her close relationships with a chosen community of fellow Christians; it allows us to imagine how she related to other people (specifically Indigenous/Native Americans), not as an enslaved woman but from a common ground. "Lost Letter #2" imagines what Wheatley might have wanted to tell her friend about the two-faced "White lady."[4] Her continuing friendship with Occom considers a shared and complicated experience of being *othered* non-Whites, grateful for their conversion, but in an ambivalent position in relation to their "pagan" people.

This group of "Lost Letter" poems also highlights what few choices women had at that time. The threat of sexual violence is ever-present for women, and even a well-known Indigenous preacher such as Occom is vulnerable to fraud and deception by those with more power (generally White men). These poems highlight the varying intersections of marginalization for women and non-White men. In "Lost Letter #4" (54), Occom writes to Susannah of wicked hypocrisy and dishonesty by White preachers. Occom also suggests that Phillis should marry and become a missionary. In "Lost Letter #5" (55), Susannah rejects Occom's advice while in her thoughts she calls him a "drunk painted creature" and refers to Africa as a "black pagan pit." This reiterates what Wheatley thought but didn't say to Occom in "Lost Letter #2" (discussed above). Similarly, in "Lost Letter #18" (124) White preacher John Thornton also urges Wheatley to marry, while his concealed musings drip with racist undertones: "*foul black men seek a woman...you are a negress and given / to low appetites no matter*

[4] Furthermore, the implication that a "nice" slaveowner like Susannah Wheatley harbors deeply rooted, insidious racism towards Black and indigenous people is in keeping with critical race theory's assertion that the existence of racism must always be assumed (Delgado and Stefancic 21).

your knowledge / of latin I do not want your destruction." While his external words express humble concern, Jeffers fabulates the contempt and disdain Thornton hides within. In these lost letters, Jeffers reminds readers of the multiple layers of power and oppression that disadvantaged Wheatley.

Jeffers's courteous but firm language shows that Wheatley is aware of the "code-switching" required to navigate her world as a former enslaved woman. Jeffers blends available historical records with an unwillingness to accept artifacts as factual representations of the whole truth. Like Hartman, Jeffers insists on reading between the lines and maintaining a distrust of historical narratives *and* sources. In three themed poems titled "Fragment," Jeffers imagines *drafts* of extant letters that contain original text written by Wheatley, alongside struck-out text that, as in "Lost Letters," divulges Wheatley's inner voice. In "Fragment #1: First Draft of an Extant Letter, Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton" (126), her thoughts include "*~~as my body / is my own as my head is my own as my desire / is my own~~*" (126). The actual letter was written on October 30, 1774 after Susannah's death and Wheatley was freed by Nathaniel. In this letter, Wheatley politely—but in no uncertain terms—rejects Thornton's suggestion that she take as a husband one of two Black men whom she does not know, and return with him as missionaries to Africa. The extant letter also alludes to the former White patrons who no longer support her, either because Susannah has passed away, or because Wheatley's novelty has worn off. The insertions that Jeffers writes into the letter paint a picture of a woman who is self-possessed and in touch with her self-worth, unwilling to comply blindly with the directions of White people *or* Black men, despite the diminishing advocacy of White people.

In "Fragment #2" (137), the strikeouts in Abigail Adams's letter to her husband John challenges the folk tale that President Adams dotingly and without condescension called upon his wife for her sage advice. Abigail's internal, deleted thoughts read, "*~~you ignore my feelings / swatting needs to the skies I am taller / than wife.~~*" An impassioned though unvoiced statement that "*~~I / have some damned rights too~~*" draws a parallel between Wheatley and Adams; though their lives and circumstances are vastly different, they are conjoined by the same struggle against sexism and gender inequality that all women endure. By drawing a parallel between Occum's and Abigail's stories in the collection of lost letters, Jeffers connects the oppression and injustice experienced by enslaved Black people, women, and displaced Native Americans. Indeed, the deleted text of this lost letter suggests that First Lady Abigail Adams was callously dismissed by her husband in her call to end the practice of slavery. Since the slave trade did not end with President Adams, Jeffers's version put forth in this poem feels true and believable. Sexism and racism become intertwined, and Jeffers's critical fabulation here connects the experiences of Wheatley and Adams. Wheatley was an enslaved Black woman and Abigail was the First Lady of the United States—about as polar opposite as two women could be in seventeenth-century America. Nevertheless, the fact of their gender and the overwhelming powerlessness of women of any race against White men establishes common ground for Wheatley and Abigail.

Similarly, "Fragment #3" (139) represents the draft of Wheatley's famous 1775 letter to General George Washington. The extant letter is short and filled with the puffed-up language one would use to address someone of the highest stature; it in fact reads as

disingenuous and filled with subtle sarcasm. This allows us to consider how socially adept she must have been in order to “play the game”of racial power dynamics. In the Jeffers poem, Wheatley is aware of rampant hypocrisy among those who considered themselves Christian, and who used religion to justify enslavement. Stricken text includes an allusion to rumors that Washington “~~*behaves like / either a gentleman or a tyrant / depending on his moods or his money*~~” and references to his “~~*cruel aversion to Negro / men who fight for the indefensible.*~~” Here, Jeffers calls to the fore how the “great” General Washington’s White supremacy contributed to systemic and institutional racism in America because even as he fought against tyranny and oppression, he too was a slaveowner. If the fabled first President of the United States maintained such racist attitudes, then it follows that the nation was built on a foundation of White supremacy. Moreover, it is important to note how Wheatley took the initiative of writing a poem and letter to Washington in order to cultivate a relationship with a powerful man. This certainly took chutzpah on her part, and must challenge any accusation that she did nothing to oppose the colonies’ business of enslavement.

Critical Fabulation as Counter-History

Jeffers explains that in order to “acknowledge [Wheatley] as an African person...[we must stop] erasing her African parents and giving slave owners...the credit for everything that she did...[b]ecause it’s racist, it’s filled with lies” (Santos 3). By using critical fabulation, Jeffers’s poems offer a radical methodology that allows us to (1) expand our notions of *who* Wheatley was and *what* she represents, and (2) undo the damage to Wheatley’s legacy from misguided, prejudiced assessments of her work. This strategy is particularly effective in destabilizing the narratives about Phillis’s status in the Wheatley family and her marriage to John Peters.

Jeffers’s questioning of the myth of benevolence continues in “mothering #1” and “Mothering #2.” Taken together, the two poems work as counter-histories against the myth of “good” slaveowners and well-treated slaves. Jeffers writes a counter-history to the accepted narrative that Susannah was a kind, adoptive mother to Wheatley and that Wheatley was treated as one of the biological Wheatley children. Hartman describes a “founding violence” that “creates subjects and objects of power” (Hartman 10), and Jeffers exposes how much this violence is at play in the Susannah-Phillis storyline. For example, “mothering #1” (8) is about Wheatley’s birth mother. There is no recorded information about her in the archives beyond Wheatley’s faint memory of the morning sun/water ritual. The word “mother” is not capitalized because her name is unknown. Jeffers does not assign her a name, and instead uses the Wolof word *Yaay*. In so doing, Jeffers reminds the reader that Wheatley comes from a different place, people, and culture. The poem illustrates a scene of childbirth, the labor and breath, and the extreme physical and emotional pain that a woman experiences in the gestation and delivery of human life. Creating, giving, and birthing offspring becomes a divine act that demands blood, sweat, and suffering; it is the price a woman must pay to continue a lineage. Phrases such as “insanity pain,” “undeserved pain,” “*oh oh oh* pain,” and “living pain” humanize the faceless African woman whose baby would be taken from her a few years later. That the scene illustrated in this poem can represent any woman, regardless

of race, who has experienced childbirth is Jeffers appealing to readers' sense of empathy and connection with an African mother.

"Mothering #2" (41) is about Susannah Wheatley. In this poem, the word "Mother" is capitalized and does not appear anywhere outside of the title, suggesting that it is not about an actual *mother* at all. The poem describes how Wheatley was gained "for a *trifling,*" that Susannah "bought that child," and "took the child into her home." There is no tenderness or anything resembling a mother's love for her child. In contrast, "mothering #1" describes the throes of painful labor while bringing an infant into the world and the anguish of having that child ripped away. *Yaay* gives to the child in "mothering #1" and does not ask for gratitude or anything in return; her love is completely selfless. In "Mothering #2" Susannah gives the child a position of "gratitude and slavery" in her home. When Susannah "decipher[s]" the "naps on her head," Jeffers imagines that Susannah could not comprehend how to care for Black hair. Furthermore, by capitalizing "Mother," Jeffers turns it into a *proper* noun—a name more than an actual role or title. In other words, Susannah is called "Mother" but she does not behave like one to Wheatley—she does not even know what to do with the child's hair. By highlighting this detail, Jeffers destabilizes the sympathetic portrait of Susannah as a mother figure to Wheatley that has been perpetuated by writers such as Odell and Carretta; indeed, Carretta describes Wheatley not as an adopted child but "a minor investment for Susannah and John" (Carretta 16).[5] Jeffers's goal is not to vilify Susannah completely, but to challenge the notion that slavery was benevolent in any way and to question the *assumed* morality of Christian enslavers.

Moreover, the Wheatley family's relatively kind treatment of Phillis would have amplified their piety and philanthropic treatment of her. Carretta writes that the Wheatleys "used [Phillis] to display their commitment to evangelical Christianity" by sparing her from physically demanding manual labor, and instead granting her "leisure" time to write poetry (Carretta 23). Carretta explains further: "The religious training and extraordinary education they gave Phillis began to pay dividends surprisingly quickly...and she would soon publicly demonstrate her value as an item of conspicuous consumption" (Carretta 23–24).[6] We cannot definitively know what financial benefits, if any, the Wheatleys received in connection with Phillis's book, but Jeffers refuses to leave it at that, implicitly asking us to consider whether Wheatley was simply a source of income, a charity project who bolstered their reputation. Such forceful speculation disrupts "assumptions about knowability" and the "authorized account" (Hartman 11–12); here, Jeffers considers a historical record in which altruism was not, in fact, evident in the way the family treated Wheatley after her literary success. While it is impossible to know the true details of Wheatley's relationship with Susannah, Jeffers proffers alternate possibilities deduced from the absence of an inheritance upon Susannah's death, Wheatley's belated manumission, and the interconnected, lived experiences of all oppressed Black people at the hands of those in power.

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[5] Wheatley was not freed until after Susannah's death. In their wills, John and Susannah left Wheatley nothing.

[6] This echoes Derrick Bell's concept of "interest convergence" in which progress for the marginalized only occurs when it coincides with white self-interest (Delgado and Stefancic 22–24).

Furthermore, there are multiple poems in the collection that call into question the thoughts and motives of other members of the Wheatley family. In "Lost Letter #11" (110–11) Jeffers composes a letter to Obour Tanner in which Wheatley describes the excruciating experience of her time in Britain. During this trip, Wheatley was essentially "chained" to Nathaniel Wheatley's side while observing free, "prettily dressed Negroes" and learning news of "Brother Somerset who won freedom in court." Her italicized, concealed thoughts describe her agony that she "*cannot remain here free my mistress / is sick she snatches my arm from across the water.*" The *Somerset* decision[7] would have enabled Wheatley to remain in England as a self-emancipated woman, but she is told that a very ill Susannah requests her return to Boston.

In "Lost Letter #12" (112), Wheatley's inner thoughts between the lines of a letter to Susannah ask "*how long shall you keep me captive.*" In "Lost Letter #13" (113) an envious Nathaniel disdainfully writes "I am afraid Phillis grows too large / with the slathered praise of White men," while his thoughts reveal a prayer "*for her to be ruined and chastened.*" Nathaniel's black-hearted hope for Wheatley to be raped or assaulted, though speculative, is a reminder of the rampant sexual violence commonly committed against enslaved women. Furthermore, it echoes Hartman's Venus, who appears "as a *dead girl* named in a legal indictment against a slave ship captain tried for the murder of two Negro girls" (Hartman 1). Jeffers's speculation about the circumstances of Wheatley's trip to England is a reminder that even when after Wheatley became famous as the "celebrated young negro poetess" (Carretta 41), she remained extremely vulnerable because America had not yet outlawed slavery.

Like *mercy* and *mother* earlier in the collection, the final section of poetry titled *Book: Liberty* explores multiple manifestations of *liberty*. This section envisions Wheatley's life as an emancipated, freed woman. It begins with a quote from Wheatley's letter to John Thornton dated October 30, 1774 in which she confesses that "those who seem'd to respect me while under my mistresses [sic] patronage...have already put on a reserve" (149). This quote reiterates how interest convergence functioned in Wheatley's life; once the Wheatley family could no longer benefit from her celebrity, they essentially abandoned her, as did the erstwhile network of White patrons.

Hartman suggests that stories can act as "a form of compensation or even reparations" (Hartman 4); fantasizing about the conversations between two enslaved women bonded by a deep and abiding friendship is Jeffers's attempt to further humanize Wheatley and reclaim and repair the story of Wheatley's friendship and sisterhood with Obour Tanner. In "Lost Letter #21" to Obour Tanner (151), Wheatley's internal voice silently states, "*my master did not leave me a pound or a shilling*"; nevertheless, she asserts "*i am my own property...a woman of twenty-four with my own name.*" The epistolary poems in this section breathe more life into the imagined dynamics of Wheatley's relationships with Tanner and Peters; they are a counter-history to the accusations by critics such as Addison Gayle, Jr. (1966) who intimated that Wheatley lacked kinship with other Black people. Wheatley signs off in "Lost Letter #23" to Tanner with a warm expression of affection: "My stone, I am your kin from ever" (159). The loving sisterhood envisioned by Jeffers in the letters between Tanner and Wheatley speaks

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[7]In June 1772 Lord Chief Justice William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield, ruled that an enslaved person brought to England from the colonies could not legally be forced to return to the colonies as enslaved.

to the necessity of Black relationships to support and bolster one another in a White man's world. The term of endearment referring to Tanner as her "stone" evokes the idea of her as Wheatley's rock, comfort, and support.

Jeffers then turns to writing about Wheatley's experience of love, desire, and physical intimacy as an act of resistance to her enslavement. Jeffers's depiction of Black Love, granting Peters and Wheatley the ability to not just exist but to be overcome by passion and longing further highlights their humanity. Indeed, their relationship is not animalistic or instinctual; it is deeply romantic and emotional. In "Free Negro Courtship #2" (127), Wheatley is John's "black Phillis"; they share an imagined, tender and "careful kiss / between two sets of black lips," and "black separation [becomes] unthinkable." Their bond is not just physical or lustful; it is emotional, and they long for the *freedom* of being together. The separation between mother and child that appeared in earlier poems is echoed in the separation between Peters and Wheatley. Similar to the different types of *mercy* explored earlier, the idea of *separation* takes on different manifestations in "Free Negro Courtship." Whether between mother and child or two lovers, Wheatley experiences the same intensity of anguish and heartache when she is separated from a loved one. In this poem, Jeffers wrests possession of Wheatley's body from the control of her White enslavers by allowing Peters to claim possession of her, because she has won his heart. Likewise, her physical body is hers alone to give willingly to the man she loves. When Wheatley gives her body to Peters in an act of love and passion, it is a powerful repudiation of the ownership that occurs in the economic and political institution of slavery. Peters's and Wheatley's marriage is the conduit for their resistance because it leads to an existence in which they are not defined solely by their race or enslavement status. Both freed, they metaphorically belong to no one else but each other.[8] In finally having the liberty to give herself intimately and voluntarily to another person, she transforms her existence in a body that, up to that point, condemned her to life as an enslaved person.

At the end of "Free Negro Courtship #2," Jeffers writes into being a loving family bond between Peters, Wheatley, and "her black parents" that tethers them physically and metaphorically "over the water," transcending circumstance, time, and space. Peters recognizes Wheatley's origin story; he does not see her as an enslaved woman, and he feels love, longing, and desire for the "black daughter" of African parents. The recurrent appearance of "Black" is perhaps the most intentional and important element of this poem: *black* lips, *black* separation, and *black* daughter must be viewed as a powerful declaration of Black subjectivity and resistance. Hartman calls a declaration such as this "the afterlife of property" (Hartman 13). By attempting to tell their love story, Jeffers grants a reclamation of Wheatley's enslaved body, demanding that readers envision Wheatley as a beloved daughter, wife, and lover. A compelling narrative, even if Jeffers can only imagine it, can effect paradigm shifts and a process of correction (Delgado and Stefancic 51). This is a powerful counter-history to the one that limits the Black experience to one of suffering.

In "After Living Together for Several Months, Phillis Wheatley and John Peters, Free Negroes, Are Married by the Reverend John Lathrop, Widower of Mary Wheatley Lathrop" (154), Jeffers reminds readers that Wheatley was a human woman with physical impulses

[8]Although it is important to note that once married, women legally became their husbands' property.

and desires. In this poem, Wheatley and Peters walk home from church "naughty and able"; at home Peters can "worship / her exquisite body." As a married couple, they are free to make love "for the fiftieth or hundredth time" without the burden of worrying that it is sinful. This version of *liberty* is the freedom to love and be loved, and to experience physical love without the worry of bearing children born to a life of enslavement. Peters's final words to end the collection of poetry are, "My love, I need to know you are alive. / Your John." We can surmise at this point of Jeffers's poetic narrative that the absence of Wheatley's reply means that she has passed away. Rather than focus on feelings of loss, Jeffers features Peters's devotion to Wheatley; it is a victory over previous versions of their love story (especially the one put forth by Odell, who focuses on their financial struggles, poverty, and Peters's inability to succeed in any of his ventures—an implication that Peters is undeserving of Wheatley as his wife). Hartman claims that the counter-histories produced by critical fabulation cannot fill in the gaps, provide closure, or give voice to the slave (Hartman 8), but even the act of envisioning can be a form of resistance against the limits of what is thought to be possible. In Jeffers's counter-history, the Peters belong only to each other. Somewhere, Hartman's Venus feels a faint pulse.

The Age of Phillis is Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's reclamation of Wheatley's "courageous testimony" from the archive's silencing; it is a restoration of the family lineage that Wheatley lost to slavery. The collection is bracketed on one end by the prologue "Mother/Muse" who represents the past, the ancestor, the source: *Mother.* It concludes with the epilogue "Daughter/ Muse": she who is the present and future, the descendant, the reclaimed voice. Both Mother and Daughter are Muses, vessels, messengers. At the end of the book Jeffers notes, "Miss Phillis, this book is finished, but this is not the last gift I will place on your altar…I will continue to let the people know" (194). Then, in the single poem epilogue, Wheatley's spirit travels back "to that place" (165–66) across the water; at last, Wheatley is reunited with her African mother, her *Yaay.* The words are scattered across the page, resembling ocean currents that flow back and forth, receding to the unknowable past, and returning to the shores of the future. Her spirit expands over time and space, not just backwards to Africa, but to Black writers of the future who, like Jeffers, continue to "let the people know" that their stories are far more than what has been written.

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Transformative Approaches to New Media

The Moor of Stone Mountain: Examining Childish Gambino as an American Othello

by Alexander Williams

For Othello, his blackness is inescapable. It demarcates his sociopolitical positionality, brands him an animal, and binds him to a life of service and utility for the Venetian state. He is *seen* and *understood* by the other characters in the play as a “devil” and a beast coming for his bride Desdemona’s “beauty, wit, and fortunes,” and, by extension, the white hegemony’s purity (1.1.100, 1.1.150). Othello’s association with a Barbary horse, courser, “black ram,” and other animals are direct attacks on his humanity, exasperated by the fact that he is understood as a “stranger / Of here and everywhere” because of his blackness (1.1.97, 1.1.151–152). The union between Desdemona and Othello is seen as a “treason of the blood,” a firm reminder that the mixing of races would result in whiteness being forever tainted by the Black devil that stands against the holiness of white supremacy (1.1.191). Thus, a Black man’s (dis)alienation is not an *individual* question but a question of systematics. In this paper, I will synthesize Othello’s blackness with that of Childish Gambino, Donald Glover’s rap persona, as an attempt to demonstrate the (dis)alienation and existential deviation both entities endure from their blackness being weaponized against them by systems of antiblackness their white contemporaries perpetuate.[1] From this synthesis, I will then move to analyze Childish Gambino as an American “Othello,” investigating the two men’s shared experiences with the periphery, racialized violence, and the “making of Black subjecthood that is always tethered to that status of nonperson” (McKittrick 23). Both men present substantial threats towards the prevailing socioracial order and, because of this threat, are victims of psychological warfare specifically attuned to their ontologies. It is my goal to demonstrate

[1]There will be many cases in this text when I use “Black,” “black,” and “blackness” as specific terms. For the instances that I use the term “Black,” I am trying to signify the histography of the Black individual in the United States, their origin in the wake of slavery, the ethnic specificity that was stripped from them because of slavery, and those displaced within the African diaspora. When I use the term “black,” it is being quoted from an outside text and refers to the original author’s use. In the instances I use the term “blackness,” I am referring to the essence of a Black individual, the collective register of Black bodies, or a combination of the two within a spectral framework.

here how Childish Gambino and his music can be seen as a reparative autoethnography of *Othello*; that where Othello failed to withstand the forces leading him to ruin, Childish Gambino can provide an ontological alternative for the Black man grappling with the antiblack climate assailing him.

To understand Othello as a Black man, we must first discuss the gravity of his blackness and how he is *seen* by the play's other characters—that is, the classifications and imagery that are distributed and accepted as truth to Othello's being and how these classifications inform his positionality as an inherent other *of* Venice instead of him *being* Venetian. When Iago rouses Brabantio, Desdemona's father, from his slumber, Iago describes Othello as an "old black ram" and a "devil," images that situate Othello as a threat to the sanctity of Brabantio's bloodline and reputation (1.1.97, 1.1.100). After Brabantio discovers that Desdemona has left the estate and is supposedly with Othello, Brabantio brands Othello and Desdemona's marriage as "too true an evil" and a "treason of the blood" (1.1.178, 1.1.191). In these textual moments, black is being equated with that which is unholy, evil, and undesirable. We can also observe this dynamic in a moment when Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona are conversing about the agency of women: Desdemona asks Iago what options are available to a woman if she "be black and witty?" to which he replies "*If she be black, and thereto have a wit, / She'll find a white that shall her blackness <hit.>*" (2.1.146, 2.1.147–158) In this moment, these characters are not only operating with the definition that black is unholy, undesirable, and evil, but also that black is ugly and lacking in beauty and value. At this point of the play, it is clear that Iago, Desdemona, and the other white characters are perpetuating a value system where *fair* encompasses a zone of respectability and *black* is the zone of the *other*, wherein a body's agency, perceived qualities, and ability is based upon its position within this value system: are they fair or are they *other*? Despite all the inhuman qualities Black brings, the hypothetical Black woman Iago references can apparently rise above her blackness through her intelligence and find a "white" that her blackness can penetrate. This act of penetration further suggests that to be fair, or rather, to be white, is a fluid state that can be tarnished and ruined by an insertion of blackness, a la Othello and Desdemona's union. From the play's cultural undercurrents, it is evident that racism is the social unifier of *Othello*'s white characters who are willing participants of an antiblack system designed to establish and sustain a hierarchy with fair at the top and Black deep below. To invoke Christina Sharpe, racism is the engine of antiblackness that "cuts through all of our lives and deaths . . .in the wake of its purposeful flow" (3). If Othello must constantly navigate through a hierarchy specifically designed to disavow Black bodies, then the severity of such a hierarchy should demonstrate how pervasive the acts and rituals are that empower and sustain it. The Venetian antiblack system producing Othello's dilemma provides our heterochronous connection to Childish Gambino and how he, when read as a literary construct, avoids succumbing to Othello's fate.

According to Christina Sharpe, when antiblack acts and rituals reach a certain threshold they begin to create such a violent environment they morph into an all-encompassing climate. This devastating, pervasive environment produced what Sharpe calls a "violent breathlessness" intrinsically attached to the Black body's ontology. For

Othello, this violent breathlessness manifests in his inability to "speak" for himself outside of using violence:

> And little of this great world can I speak
> More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.
> And therefore little shall I grace my cause
> In speaking for myself. (1.3.101–104)

As a military officer with extensive experience, Othello seems to understand conflict and conversation through violence, but this "understanding" only complicates his construction. Firstly, as a Black character created by a writer who upholds the very system Othello is subjugated to, there is the dialectic concern that Shakespeare is reinforcing the "angry Black man" stereotype and thus reducing Othello only to his "feats of broil and battle" (1.3.102). Furthermore, it could be argued that Othello is *intentionally* not equipped with the capability or intelligence to express himself outside of violence, empowering the view of Iago and the others that Black is evil and barbaric. Outside of these concerns is the tragic interpretation that perhaps Othello cannot speak for himself because Venice's antiblack climate does not allow him to do so.

To keep their own imagery of purity intact, the Venetian court exploits Othello's feats for their own gain and then afterwards creates these conditions of violent breathlessness when they need to make use of the general again. In an environment that blatantly disregards and demonizes him for his skin color, Othello only knows how to "speak" through violence, a perfect example of his violent breathlessness. In the case of Childish Gambino, he articulates his "violent breathlessness" through rap and uses the artform to speak up against the white hegemony:

> My fear is dead, ambition drove the hearse
> But niggas got me feelin' I ain't black enough to go to church
> Culture shock at barber shops 'cause I ain't hood enough
> We all look the same to the cops, ain't that good enough?
> The black experience is black and serious
> 'Cause being black, my experience, is no one hearin' us
> White kids get to wear whatever hat they want
> When it comes to black kids, one size fits all ("Hold You Down" 1:12–1:34)

The empowerment Gambino receives through rap to enable his speech is but one avenue in which, as constructs, Gambino provides a reparative turn from Othello. When we couple the antiblack climate both men endure with the brutality of slavery, we enter a unique opportunity to analyze slavery's effects on both men: for Othello, we can analyze his past enslavement and for Gambino, his experience as the descendant of enslaved Africans.

As antiblack climates and their wakes become more and more pervasive, they converge with the brutality of slavery to form a singularity, from which the antiblack climate begins to create weather patterns. Sharpe describes a "singularity" as a "weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances," meaning the

antiblack singularity is a phenomenon occurring around the set of political, economic, and racial circumstances that dehumanize and violate Black bodies like Othello and Gambino (3). By Othello's own admission, we can observe the horrific circumstances that led to his enslavement and the trauma he endured on his road to freedom:

> Of moving accidents by flood and field,
> Of hairbreadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly
> breach,
> Of being taken by the insolent foe
> And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence (1.3.156–160)

By Othello's admission, this part of his life was marred by danger and trauma even before he became a slave, but he does not give many details about his life as slave; so, the reader is left to interpret what happened for themselves. The fact that he was taken by a "foe" the Venetian agents collectively recognize leads me to believe Othello's experience bordered on the sublime and horrific (1.3.159). I suspect his enslavement was the ontological point in which Othello most felt the antiblack singularity crushing him. When he was a slave, Othello suffered under the brutality of slavery on top of knowing that once he was freed, he would still be seen as less than human. In *Royalty*'s "We Ain't Them," Gambino details how his great-grandfather achieved the highest level of freedom a Black body can obtain within the economic constraints of slavery—"My great-granddad bought his own freedom / Walk barefoot to Virginia to start his own peanut farm" (1:36–1:41)—to reference the racial violence present in Sharpe and Katherine McKittrick's work. Amidst the antiblack singularity and ontological terror of slavery, Gambino's great-grandfather was able to ascend from the economic positionality of "object-commodity" into the fluid social positionality of "human." From members of his family, Gambino heard firsthand of his great-grandfather's subliminal existence as a slave and his transition from the designation of nonperson and property into a Black body with limited human and economic rights. Buying his freedom only meant Gambino's great-grandfather was safe from being enslaved by his previous master; so as he journeyed to Virginia, he did so knowing the ever-present danger that he could have been trapped, relocated, and sold into slavery in another location. Between the semiotics binding Black to unholy in Othello's time to those in Gambino's binding Black to commodity, the antiblack singularity pervading American and Venetian institutions meant Black bodies like Othello and Gambino are never safe and never fully human.

These tragic circumstances pushed both men deeper into a racial-social periphery, where they continuously experience what Fanon calls "the desperate struggles of a Negro who is driven to discover the meaning of black identity" (Fanon, trans. Philcox 6). A value system pitting fair against Black inherently creates alienation, and from this alienation we arrive at Fanon's "existential deviation": the psychological (dis)alienation the Black man develops in relation to his self, his body, and his ability to exercise agency within the socio-political systematics the white hegemony has designed to assail him (6). Othello's existential deviation can be found in Act 3, Scene 3 when he laments, "Haply, for I am black" (3.3.304). In this moment, Othello is accepting his place as Black, as the unholy, undesirable, and evil other

using the *language* of his psychological colonizers. Early in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asserts we attach a "fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language" because a man who "possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language" (8). Therefore, in a Fanonian reading, by calling himself "black," Othello reinforces the antiblackness expressed and implied by the hegemony responsible for this antiblackness (3.3.304): the language of Othello's colonizers not only determines the words uttered from his Black body, but also the language his Black body emits as a sociopolitical structure trying to define its existential deviation. This working in and out of language is just one of the symptoms revealing Othello is haunted by this antiblack system, bringing into question his level of agency and ability to navigate through an existential deviation constricted by both material and spectral forces.

As a Black body haunted by the prevailing antiblack climate, Othello's existential deviation is informed by his dynamic pathology: his experiences as a Black body shape his psycho-existential complex and thus the degree to which he is haunted. At the end of the play, Othello's internalized racism converges with his guilt and births a psychological break, illustrated by the line, "That's he that was Othello. Here I am" (5.2.334). Such a break is eerily reminiscent of the explorations into Black subjectivity and haunting that M. NourbeSe Philip conducts in her seminal text *Zong!*, specifically the interventions she produces between language, chronology, and personhood. Othello's use of the past tense reveals how haunting teaches the Black body to "read differently, bringing chaos into the language, or perhaps more accurately, revealing the chaos that is already there" (Philip and Boateng 205). For Othello, this language is the language of his psychological colonizers, wherein lies the "chaos" he must reconcile. In this moment, Othello's chronological schism is his haunting "working against meaning, working for meaning, [and] working in and out of meaning" (Philip and Boateng 204): Othello is trying to work into the meaning behind the loss of his identity because it is a site where he can psychologically probe into himself. This probing is but one way of haunting that alters the Black psychological experience of being in time—that is, how time is experienced within one's psychological interior alongside that of their external environment.

In the play, Othello's blackness shapes how the Venetian society understands his body as an object while his ethnic identity as a Moor aligns with colonial practices determining the bounds of his sociopolitical mobility. The title of the play itself is *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* instead of *The Tragedy of Othello, the Venetian Moor*, immediately signaling that Othello is not Venetian, but a visitor, an outsider temporarily occupying Venetian space. Throughout the entire play Othello is primarily referred to as "the Moor" instead of his name, an act that codifies Othello as a nameless Black body and alienates him from his subjectivity. These repeated acts are not isolated incidents unique to Othello, but a reflection of the prevailing culture forcing its "violent arithmetics of skin" onto Othello's body (McKittrick 23). When we discuss how Othello's blackness informs his social positionality, we need to keep in mind that Brabantio is a Venetian senator and Iago is Othello's ancient, two positions of sociopolitical influence and power. Both men are agents of the Venetian state whose political duties are to advance those of Venice, so if their antiblack acts are reflective of the prevailing culture, then their politics must not be far behind. It is here, in this conflation of the socioracial and political where we encounter the breathlessness

of Othello's dilemma: how a Black man can simultaneously exist as both object and subject under an antiblack system designed to weaponize his blackness against him all while his labor and utility ultimately serve the white hegemony responsible for this system. This twoness is then compounded when we consider Othello's psycho-existential complex: how, as an outcast, Othello is always looking at himself through the eyes of others and measures his "perfect soul" by the blackness of his "sooty" bosom and the whiteness forced upon him (1.2.36, 1.2.89) . To invoke Du Bois, within his psyche is a distinct "twoness . . . two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (4). Othello's fragmented bodily schema reveals his embodiment of division: to Fanon, the *self* is a dialectic composition of a "body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world," but disrupting this process of composition, as antiblack systems do, divides the Black body from itself and prevents the formation of a complete bodily schema (70). Due to this division, the Black man becomes a conjunction of social, phenomenological, and psychological division, behaving as an animated vessel containing internally opposing forces, also known as the "twoness" Du Bois attributes to the American Negro's consciousness. Gambino's experience with Stone Mountain's racial communities, as we shall see, is an expression of his existential deviation and subsequent double consciousness in America, "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 4).

Stone Mountain, Georgia, the setting to Gambino's childhood, is the geographic site of the Ku Klux Klan's rebirth and an area rife with racial wounds still fresh from slavery. Located deep in the heart of the South, Stone Mountain's racial divides started when the Civil War ended and the town was rebuilt from the aftermath of Union occupancy. Despite making up a significant part of the local quarry's labor force, African Americans were excluded from the housing areas of white families, leading to the creation of Shermantown, a shantytown. Ku Klux Klan rallies were held at the base of Stone Mountain from 1915, the year of the Klan's rebirth, to as recent as the 1980's (Powers). From the racial divide that led to Shermantown's creation to the threat of the Klan looming over its Black residents, Stone Mountain brandishes a palpable history and propensity for racial hatred. In *Camp's* "That Power," Childish Gambino provides a concrete profiling of his existential deviation within the geographical context of the American South:

> Lovin' white dudes who call me white and then try to hate
> When I wasn't white enough to use your pool when I was eight
> Stone Mountain, you raised me well
> I'm stared at by Confederates, but hard as hell. (0:57–1:08)

In this verse, we can observe Gambino's (dis)alienation as a negotiation between how a Black body is racialized and the subjectivity that is granted as an exterior effect instead of being an interior effect with an outward orientation. The "white dudes" Gambino refers to are malicious representations of the American hegemony willing and able to weaponize a Black body's blackness against itself. Calling Gambino white because of his personal demonstration of blackness while simultaneously discriminating against him because of

this same blackness reflects Gambino's (dis)alienation: such an attack uses the designation of white to subvert Gambino's identity as a Black man while also reinforcing Black as subhuman and worthy of violation. Gambino rapping he is being "stared at by Confederates" displays an awareness of the historical geopolitics of Stone Mountain, such as it being the site of the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and how many of the white people he encountered growing up are, in essence, political actors seeking to reinforce a Confederate agenda. These violent and discriminatory actions are not isolated incidents unique to Gambino but, instead, are reminiscent to the lynch mob ready to kill Othello. Despite the repeated attacks on his racial identity and social agency, Gambino is thankful for the heuristic lessons he gleaned from these experiences and their ability to expose the stark reality for Black individuals in Stone Mountain as he alludes with the line "Stone Mountain, you raised me well." He can use rap as a form of revenge against his haters and the Confederate legacy ingrained within the South. Rap, as an inherently Black traditional practice, is a practice unavailable to Othello, as the only 'reparative' practices he employs in the play are those given to him by his colonizers. The (dis)alienation and existential deviation both men exhibit are testaments to the depth of the psycho-existential complex produced by their respective systems of antiblackness and the ruin at the heart of their constructions. In a Romantic reading of this ruin, we can observe Byronic characteristics that reflect how both men are connected as Byronic Heroes operating within their respective chronological landscapes.

The Byronic Hero, named after Lord Byron, is a variant of the Romantic Hero whose features and characteristics are defined by those of Byron's characters and the writer himself. Byron's personal life and poetry shape the defining characteristics of the Byronic Hero archetype, so before we can use Byron as a mediating figure between Othello and Childish Gambino, we must spend some time discussing these defining characteristics and their applicability. In *Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, Peter L. Thorslev Jr. describes the Byronic Hero as "courteous toward women" and a lover of "music or poetry" with a "strong sense of honor, and carries about with him like the brand of Cain a deep sense of guilt" (8). Gambino's status as a rapper fulfills his love of both music and poetry, and I would argue, given its prevalence in his music and philosophy, his sense of duty and obligation to his family and the Black community reflects a Byronic sense of honor. Othello's devotion to Desdemona in the face of violence and his commitment to the Venetian state as a military officer fulfill some of Thorslev's requirements, but I would like to focus on the "deep sense of guilt" Thorslev attributes to the Byronic Hero because for Othello, this guilt manifests as his internalized racism. His Black skin is the "brand" he must carry, linking him to unholy and treasonous monsters like Cain. The guilt that Thorslev Jr. assigns to the Byronic Hero occurs within a moment in *Because the Internet's* "V. 3005" displaying Gambino's deep guilt and his thoughtful approach towards women:

> Assassins are stabbed in the back of my cabin
> Labrador yapping, I'm glad that it happened, I mean it
> Between us, I think there's something special, and if I lose my mental
> Just hold my hand, even if you don't understand, hold up. (2:31–2:42)

One key piece of knowledge to bring in here when we analyze the above passage is to know that Childish Gambino is part of the "assassins" being referenced here, as the word is reflecting Gambino's self-description in *Sick Boi's* "Assassins," when he raps, "Ah, ah, you can call me assassin" (1:59–2:00). In this passage, we can see Gambino is glad his killers stabbed him in the back of his cabin, but why? If he has such a special person in his life, why be at peace with losing that and being killed in such a treacherous manner? I suspect the answer is the guilt embedded within Gambino that he needs to release. The source of such guilt could be Gambino's inability to reconcile relationships with family members or the fleeting nature of his time here on Earth, a detail he makes multiple references to such as in *Culdesac's* "The Last," when he laments, "I'm here for a good, not a long, time" and in "Fuck it All," "Bright lights, they tend to burn out fast / So I shine bright, but I'm scared that it won't last" (2:41–2:43, 1:42–1:47). This guilt runs deep in Gambino, and while he may not explicitly state its origins, it does manifest itself in Gambino being a "fatal lover," another Byronic Hero characteristic Thorslev Jr. discusses in his text (8). Othello's murder of Desdemona and suicide demonstrate how he becomes a fatal lover, reflecting the fatalistic exchange pervading their union. Synthesizing the Byronic Hero's qualities reveals its embodiment of division: the Byronic Hero is divided from himself and society, by choice or by violence, and thereby occupies in some fashion the periphery. Both Gambino and Othello's twoness have forced them into the periphery, the metaphysical fringe of society where the *others* exist in socioracial purgatory, unable to be accepted into one social group or any other.

As an inhabitant of the periphery, Childish Gambino has the unique position to critically analyze the American social, cultural, and literary climate whilst still possessing innate traits, such as his new world blackness, intelligence, and affinity for "white culture," that allow him to traverse through the margins of different in-groups. *Culdesac's* opening track "Difference" is Gambino's reclamation of being called "different" and chronicles the evolution of his relationship with the periphery. The song's architecture is fundamentally built around the word and how it has affected Gambino: the hook, verses, and outro all feature "different" as the prevailing theme and spirit. Throughout the song, Gambino's narration oscillates between the past and the present to portray the exchange between interiority and exteriority. The song's somber piano intro pulls the listener into an introspective atmosphere before Gambino begins the first verse with the lyrics, "Niggas wanna have some, all I want's to have it all / They wanted something different, nigga, problem solved" ("Difference" 0:50–0:55). When he was a kid, Gambino just wanted to fit in and be accepted, but as an adult he cherishes the differences between him and society because that is what makes him Childish Gambino. Toward the middle of the same verse Gambino again uses this oscillation between past and present to detail the acceptance he now receives despite still being as different as he was before:

> Always do me like I love self portraits
> Now these fake niggas say "Hey" like horse shit
> People treat me different but I'm still the same person
> I don't know what it means, I just know that it's worth it
> I know I'm not perfect, but I am original ("Difference" 1:26–1:40)

Where before Gambino would find sorrow in the stark differences that kept him from being accepted by his peers and society, he now finds strength and belonging. The periphery has no judgment for Black bodies like Gambino that defy preconceived notions of blackness or are forced into this zone of *otherness*. Instead, it allows him the freedom to explore his identity and accept the integral parts of himself his peers would question and belittle. The reversal of favor Gambino references in the couplet “Now these fake niggas say ‘Hey’ like horse shit / People treat me different but I’m still the same person” raises profound concerns about the value society assigns to an individual and how success can validate the personal characteristics excluding an individual from social spaces. I say “can” because despite Othello’s decorated history as a military officer, he was not afforded such a luxury from the Venetian socioracial order recognizing him only as “Moor.” Gambino saying he does not know what this newfound recognition means shows he thinks about these concerns, but that he will not allow his differences to be used against him. Therein lies the lesson we can take from Gambino’s journey as a reparative departure from Othello: having the confidence to be who you are even when people refuse to see you is power.

Being different was haunting for Gambino as a child, but he can now use his voice and the power within his speech to right the wrongs that have been done to him. Gambino’s complex relationship with being different, and even with the word itself, should be at the forefront of our analysis when we think about the ontological division that has characterized his, and Othello’s, relationship with society. The lack of a place for Gambino and Othello has paradoxically created a place for them, a “no-place,” in which Gambino found a home and Othello found ruin. After years of being too Black for the white kids and too white for the Black kids, Gambino is comfortable with his place in the fringe, as he even stated in a 2014 interview with the Breakfast Club: “I’m out of place everywhere. I don’t think there’s a place where I really fit in” (“Breakfast Club Classic” 33:00). The outro of “Difference” reflects the resolution Gambino arrived to after questioning if he was going to allow his identity and blackness to be determined by society or himself:

> I am just different
> I am just different
> I’ve always been different
> I am just different (4:05–4:18)

By accepting his place in the periphery, Gambino found healing and the truth that was denied to him for so long. Despite the internal peace Gambino has cultivated as an inhabitant of the periphery, he now faces new challenges and criticisms from a society that cannot box him into any set definition. As a concrete example of a Black body that has transcended the brutalities of othering conducted by both white and Black bodies, Gambino now strives to empower those that defy stereotypical classification. He has become a champion of the periphery and, as such, must defend it from those that seek to dismantle the periphery’s safety.

The next track on *Culdesac*, “Hero,” details Gambino’s acceptance of his position as the periphery’s champion and acts as a treatise on how Gambino fulfills his obligations to

his constituents. In this song, Gambino recaptures the hero mantle from his Byronic Hero origins, conducting a reparative turn not just of Othello, but of himself as a figure destined for ruin. Gambino's faith in his purpose and abilities empowered his psychological impetus to fight back against his oppressors as seen in the song's first verse, "Ain't it funny? In a year, I went from different to special / Yeah I got it together, yeah, I took those chances" ("Hero" 0:38–0:44). Gambino's traumatic childhood and social alienation left him fragmented and alone, but once he "got it together," his modality shifted. In his childhood, he spent so much time putting the pieces together to try to assimilate and create a self-image that would be integrated into the social spheres he inhabited, but through a rearrangement of these same puzzle pieces, the right image revealed itself to him. Gambino's faith in himself is also at the crux of the song's chorus:

> Yeah, yes, I'm on top
> I'm going this hard, and no I won't stop
> Yeah, yes, I'm on top
> I'm going this hard, and no I won't stop ("Hero," chorus)

Gambino's rearrangement of the pieces to his identity show how he wields his power as a Black male rapper. In his childhood he did not have a way of managing the racial forces attacking his blackness and identity, but in adulthood, he found rap as the avenue to dispel the haunting and trauma that entrenched themselves into his psyche. Despite the internal focus this psychological process precipitates, Gambino still maintains the collective register at the forefront of his mission, saying, "Guess who's in the house and representing like a congressman" ("Hero" 2:56–2:59). The word "representing" in the lyric is imperative to note because it connects Glover's individual journey to those in the periphery. From Gambino's intimate relationship with Spider-Man, as demonstrated throughout his many allusions to the character, he knows with great power comes great responsibility, and the responsibility that has been assigned to him as a practitioner of the oral tradition is not one he takes lightly. He knows as a champion of the periphery he must fight for those without a voice and those who do not know, like Othello, the power of their speech or the magic that lay dormant in their spirit.

From their childhoods, both Gambino and Othello existed in a social space between Black and white, but as Gambino became more talented and emboldened to be himself, his relationship with the periphery changed. Where being called "different" before was used to marginalize and to other him, he now wears it like a badge. It is imperative to understand Gambino's relationship with the periphery if we are to extrapolate the heuristic lessons of his alienation and understand the social and racial critiques embedded within his lyrics. Othello and Gambino's existential deviation and disalienation are the results of their division from a state pushing towards Black death, a state where Black is "naturally malignant and therefore worthy of violation" (McKittrick 17). In a climate shaped by Iagos, Roderigos, and Brabantios, how might Black men resist Othello's fate, along with the constant auditioning and posturing to the white hegemony so that we remain true to ourselves as Black individuals? For Childish Gambino, that answer is found in rap, a Black tradition that allows its practitioners the

opportunity to revolt against their oppressors and empower Black bodies who would otherwise be destined for ruin and Black death.

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Fairy Tales and Memetics: Analyzing Cultural Transformation through Disney Retellings

by Matthew Tanner

While fairy tales were originally part of an oral storytelling tradition, contemporary fairy tales are mostly consumed through film. Today, Disney is the arbiter of fairy tales in pop culture. Fairy tales, in the way we understand them today, began as a literary genre when French fairy tale author Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy coined the phrase *contes de fèes* (fairy tales) in 1697 (Zipes 2). These stories were heavily influenced by the European tradition of courtly love, and often contained fairies, hence the name. It is important to note, however, that "fairy tales" trace their origins to well before the Greek storyteller Aesop in the sixth century and far beyond the boundaries of Europe. Fairy tales are grounded in humanity's cultural history, passing down core values or exploring current societal fears. While we cannot trace when humans began the common practice of telling fairy tales to children over fires or at bedtime, we can affirm that humans "began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity for speech" (Zipes 2). Perhaps the most unique aspect of fairy tales is that they are meant to be retold. As an originally oral tradition, fairy tales are rarely told the same way twice. As such fairy tales evolve according to the values of culture. Jack Zipes explains that fairy tales are "… constantly adapted to their changing environment" (1). Thus, unlike other literary genres, fairy tales uniquely mirror the culture and perspectives of the period. As fairy tales evolve with the culture, they provide a framework to assess changing cultural perspectives on crucial social issues such as race, gender, and class. How a character's role, description, and gender develop in fairy tales reflects the changing social perspectives towards women and gender roles. By comparing Disney's contemporary fairy tale retellings with past iterations, and highlighting current trends among other Disney fairy tale films, we can identify how American modern culture has evolved, but also critique areas where it has not.

The word "evolve" and the notion of evolution as used in the analysis of fairy tales by scholars such as Zipes refer to the ways in which certain ideas from fairy tales live on while others do not. Richard Dawkins's idea of memetics helps to quantify how the process of "evolution" occurs. Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, compares this to the ways in

which biological genes compete against each other for survival over time, hence the similar sounding word "memes"; as "genes" derives from "genetics," "memes" similarly derives from "memetics" (197). In terms of how this relates to cultural evolution, the *Stanford Encyclopedia* describes memes as "cultural inheritance" and explains that each idea

> acknowledge[s] multiple cultural 'parents' ... [that]...remain recognizably evolutionary in style, primarily because they seek to explain changes in populational trait frequencies over time. They do this by using broad assumptions about how individuals acquire cultural traits, and by assessing how these acquisition rules play out at the population-level. (Buskell and Lewens)

In this sense, ideas or "memes" are the "inheritance" that are passed down culturally and result in cultural traits being developed, such as certain understandings of gender roles or attitudes toward women.

While I would like to use this notion of memetics and its application to the cultural evolution of fairy tales, there is some contention regarding the use of memetics in literary analysis. Elliot Oring closely adheres to Dawkins's definition of memetics, describing memes as particularly successful if they "are attention grabbers, easy to imitate, and keep their hosts mentally engaged...are keyed to human biological dispositions—e.g. sex, food, or danger... make sense, seem familiar, involve faith and are evangelized" (11–12). As such, fairy tales that follow courtly love traditions of a princess who is rescued when a prince falls in love with her—such as "Sleeping Beauty," "Cinderella," and "Rapunzel"—endure because they follow familiar storylines, gender roles, character archetypes and are intricately tied to the human biological conflicts of sex and danger.

Oring also spends significant time criticizing Zipes's reading of "The Frog Prince." This fairy tale revolves around a king who weds his unwilling daughter to a prince. Zipes argues that because the tale "provides information vital to the process of sexual selection, reproduction, and the evolution of culture," the inherited meme is a lesson that women must subscribe to patriarchal authority (3–4). Oring, however, insists that patriarchal rule in matchmaking was something already acknowledged by the middle and upper classes in the early nineteenth-century; therefore, "[Zipes] would need to show that other tales and discourses about mating that do not contribute to reproductive success fail to be transmitted and disappear" (6, 8). Thus, Oring declares that Zipes's use of memetics in fairy tales is "disputable, contradictory, and often tautologous" because the meme does not provide cultural information necessary for the meme's survival. Oring interprets Zipes' view of fairy tales as having to provide some sort of unique cultural information that has survived over memes in other fairy tales, this time involving mating and reproduction practices (8). Zipes fails this in Oring's view because Zipes does not articulate how this story presents mating and reproductive practices that are different from other fairy tales involving the same themes. I argue that Oring misunderstands Zipes' view of memetics, as Zipes himself declares that his "definition of a folk or fairy tale as meme departs from the more orthodox and restricted definitions of the term" (3). Oring maintains a more traditional stance on memes: they are evolutionary because they must triumph over other memes to succeed. With Zipes however,

ideas in fairy tales that are successful more generally "form cultural patterns" (5). Therefore, Zipes's intention was not to argue that "The Frog Prince" is a successful fairy tale meme because it provides cultural information distinct from other stories, but that the cultural pattern of patriarchal power over women in the mating ritual is noticeable in this fairy tale and significant towards creating a trend that can be seen in other fairy tales that succeed it. I subscribe more to Zipes's nuanced use of memetics and how they represent cultural evolution. Because of the contention displayed in Oring's articles, using the term "cultural evolution" is too evocative of Charles Darwin's biological theories[1] for my purpose of analyzing how memes in fairy tales transform over time. Thus, instead of "cultural evolution," I will substitute the term "cultural transformation." In this way, the term still implies change or signifies a cultural pattern while not limited to a strict definition of cultural evolution in which ideas can only prevail in fairy tales when another one dies. Rather, I prefer a more nuanced perspective of memetics that interprets ideas as trends and patterns that, if compelling enough, are sustained through time.

Sometimes, ideas in fairy tales transform over time, changing until certain characteristics are removed entirely from popular retellings. For example, the "wicked stepmother" archetype, historically common in fairy tales such as "Hansel and Gretel," "Snow White," and "Cinderella" is now hardly seen in contemporary fairy tale retellings. However, while the "wicked stepmother" is now mostly obsolete, some resemblances to the original archetype appear in Disney retellings, such as in the film *Tangled* (2010). Although the character Gothel raises Rapunzel after stealing her from her crib, Gothel is not married to Rapunzel's father, nor does Rapunzel know that Gothel is not her real mother—she is, however, certainly wicked. Because *traces* of the "wicked stepmother" archetype remain, Gothel's portrayal in *Tangled* serves as a good example of a "cultural transformation" as opposed to a "cultural evolution."

Fairy tales are the most appropriate genre to analyze cultural transformation because they act within culture as a socializing agent for children and a reminder of cultural values for adults. Perhaps the most significant socializing aspect of fairy tales is the narrative conflict and the process the characters take to overcome it. In terms of adapting to the sociocultural environment, Zipes insists that "fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict" (2). Socially and psychologically, fairy tales help introduce children to conflict and provide for them a space to contemplate ways to overcome it. In fact, from a psychological standpoint, Koutsompou Violetta-Eirini points out that "children can learn [that] it is inevitable for one to fight against the difficulties of life and that these can be overcome" (3). These stories provide a way for children to explore and discover ways to face conflict and succeed. Thus, because fairy tales are deeply connected to the learning aspect of cultural inheritance and because of their simplicity and usefulness as a socializing agent for children, fairy tales are the most appropriate genre to analyze cultural transformation. Determining what cultural patterns (such as types of conflicts or villains) are developed through fairy tale retellings will allow us to gauge what memes are passed down; further, we can identify how our culture is changing.

[1]Particularly how different species' genetics change over time to better survive natural selection.

As the fairy tale genre progressed along with society, problems in fairy tales also became a way for re-tellers to subvert the dominant culture. The problems we face in fairy tales help us reflect on the issues we might face in reality, such as how versions of "Beauty and the Beast" in the Victorian Era explore young women's plight of arranged marriages to older men in which these "little girls are made to conform to the model of the sacrificial woman" (Talairach-Vielmas 3). While not all literary fairy tales were meant to subvert the dominant culture, it is noteworthy how a genre so connected to culture was used not just to reflect society, but also to critique it.

Zipes notes a fairy tale revolution occurred in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries due to significant fairy tale publications by writers such as Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. Nearly all of the tales published by these writers were adapted from the oral tradition; because they were published for the first time, these fairy tales—and by extension their memes—were solidified permanently into the public consciousness. Furthermore, they were "fueled by social and cultural references. Thus, hints at bourgeois mores and manners transfigure the discourse of the folktales in order to suit and to strengthen the rising power of the bourgeoisie" (Talairach-Vielmas 1). Around the time of the European Reformation when more people were becoming more educated and class-conscious, some fairy tales began to address the issue of class inequality. Women writers were especially outspoken. For example, Talairach-Vielmas contends "when Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont reworked Gabrielle Suzanne Barbot de Gallon de Villeneuve's 'Beauty and the Beast' in 1756, she manifestly changed the fairy tale into a moral lesson intended for a young, mainly female audience" (3); to be rewarded with marriage, happiness, and wealth, they must be submissive and hardworking. Specifically, critiques of the patriarchy such as this reflected the resistance of "second-class" citizens (including women) that led to the French Revolution, when women were granted full property rights. Napoleon later restored full legal authority to husbands over their wives and children in the 1804 Civil Code (Research Guides). Talairach-Vielmas argues that fairy tale retellings about beautiful maidens and hideous suitors, such as Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," "[deal] with the violence of male sexuality, which the heroine must learn to tame—and accept—and which marks the main stage of her education into womanhood" (4). These fairy tale retellings fit the period and expose sociocultural problems for women under patriarchal authority.

Zipes maintains: "...if [memes] succeed, those stories will stick in the minds of their listeners, who may tell these stories later and contribute to the replication of stories that form cultural patterns" (5). Regarding why the medieval setting of courtly love seems to have caught on in modern fairy tale retellings, Asma Ayob points to Disney's origin as the leader of contemporary fairy tale retellings:

> In 1937, Walt Disney fully appropriated the literary fairy tale in his version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and made his signature into a trademark for the most acceptable type of fairy tale in the 20th century. The success of the film led to further developments in the fairy tale genre and it was becoming clear that certain core elements, which include a faithfulness to "magic", "myth" and the "happily-ever-after" phenomenon, were resonating positively with both children and adults.

One might point towards the bleakness of the Great Depression to explain how a story that ends in "happily-ever-after" was so successful at the time. The film made $8 million in its initial release and went on to gross $1.5 billion, the highest grossing animated film by any company at the domestic box office (adjusted for inflation) (Guinness). The success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was nearly matched twice by other Disney princess films in a courtly love setting, *Frozen* (2013), and its sequel *Frozen II* (2019) (Gawaran). After *Snow White*, subsequent Disney fairy tale retellings continued with the courtly love setting involving a beautiful princess and a dashing knight. To consider how women are perceived in Western cultural consciousness, a closer look at Disney's adaptation of the courtly love setting and format could help define "Western culture." Disney's identity is originally built on princesses and romance, as evidenced by the prominent castle at the center of Disney's theme parks and in its logo. Ayob argues beyond the claim of American audiences accepting narratives containing magic, myth, and happy endings in the Great Depression (4). Ayob notes, "Disney's versions…remain loyal to the representation of the plight of the protagonists in the original Grimm Brothers' tales" (4). This suggests the cultural value of upward economic mobility, since the protagonist's position at the beginning of the tale without money or family echoes that in earlier fairy tales.

The foundations of fairy tale retellings from The Brothers Grimm resonate with modern American audiences because retellings contain memes that have adapted and survived in the cultural consciousness. Interpreting how Disney describes and uses traditional gender roles in its retellings reveals a familiarity and a romantic expectation of a nonexistent past. Oring's description of successful memes as attention-grabbing elements that are often keyed to biological instincts also supports Disney's fairy tale retellings that involve the "biological disposition" of danger and the "mating ritual" (11). Disney's adaptations of the Brothers Grimm's outdated fairy tales, however, also include sexist gender roles. Princesses are typically depicted as beautiful, passionate, and kind but also "passive, patient and hard working." Ayob notes that characteristics such as these are "stereotypical behavior patterns…dominant in the 18th and early 19th centuries" (4). Thus, another reason the medieval courtly love setting was a successful meme is that it presented familiar gender roles. Oring argues further, however, that it is because they are easy to imitate and engage the audience with plots centered around danger and sex. Either way, the representation of women in Disney's fairy tales reflects the current feminist cultural consciousness.

One way to determine how a culture progresses is by examining how fairy tales change over time. Specifically, to identify their treatment, analysis of the transformation of four versions of "Sleeping Beauty," including Charles Perrault's "La Belle Au Bois Dormant" (1697), the Brothers Grimm's "Little Briar Rose" (1812), Disney's animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and Disney's live-action *Maleficent* (2014) will reveal how descriptions of women, their roles in the story, and how they are treated, reflect the status of women at the time the film is produced. Each of these versions of "Sleeping Beauty" includes a plot where an older "evil" fairy curses a princess to prick her finger on a spindle, causing her to fall into a long, enchanted sleep from which she can only be awakened by a prince's kiss. In every retelling, the fairies who are invited to the king and queen's celebration of their new baby give gifts to the princess. From here, however, the details differ in each retelling.

In Perrault's version, the fairies gifted the princess the following traits: beauty, wit, grace, dancing prowess, and the ability to sing or play any kind of music. In the Brothers Grimm version, they spend less time detailing every gift, but merely explain: "the one promised her virtue, the second one gave beauty, and so on, each one offering something desirable and magnificent" (Ashliman). It is noteworthy that the gifts given by the fairies are traits specifically suited for the entertainment of men. The sexist expectation that a woman's value in society is to be attractive and entertaining is clearly represented in these gifts. Essentially, the Brothers Grimm suggest that Little Briar Rose's value is limited to her virtue and beauty. In Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, released a century and a half later in 1959, those gifts are not improved upon to represent the elevated status of women that occurred between these time periods. Between 1812, when the Brothers Grimm published *Little Briar Rose* and Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959, women's rights in America increased significantly.[2] While it is not a notable improvement, Disney changed the gifts from "virtue and beauty" in 1812 to "beauty and song" in 1959. Then, in the most contemporary retelling, however, the gifts change in *Maleficent* (2014) from "beauty and song" to "beauty and happiness." While beauty is still a shallow trait that hearkens back to outdated perspectives of women's value in society, the second gift of happiness at least centers the princess Aurora, rather than the external gaze and how others see her.

Descriptions of the relationship between the princess and her prince also reveal a changing cultural perspective of women. The plot of "Sleeping Beauty" sees a prince rescue the princess from her slumber, which Ayob notes is a trend in fairy tales that resonates with patriarchal culture. Princesses must "wait to be rescued by the male so that the social order can be restored" (5). The princess has no agency and no ability with which to fight her situation but must rely on a man to save her. In fact, in Perrault's, the Brothers Grimm's, and Disney's 1959 version of "Sleeping Beauty," despite being the title character, the princess's role is a passive one. She merely follows her cursed destiny, pricking her finger and falling asleep until the prince can save her. In Perrault's longer "La Belle Au Bois Dormant" (1697), the princess's role degenerates further; after she is saved by the prince, they marry, and the princess is forced to birth his children and live with his ogre mother, who actively tries to eat them while the prince leaves to pursue conquest. Where the prince's behavior in Perrault's version parallels France's imperialist motivations at the turn of the eighteenth century, the prince is only focused on saving Aurora in Disney's 1959 animated film. It is then that the princess must be saved by another man, the cook. In Disney's *Maleficent* (2014), however, the anti-hero Maleficent takes the prince's role as the one who wakes Princess Aurora from her curse with "true love's kiss." The film subverts the sexist trope of a man saving the princess with a comical scene that shows a prince stumbling into the princess's room and kissing her to no avail.

Maleficent demonstrates the greatest leap in cultural transformation regarding women. As the film's namesake, Maleficent is appropriately the protagonist of the plot but is far from being portrayed as the hero/ine. Instead, Maleficent is a complex character who struggles with her hatred for humanity after she is betrayed by a former lover who has ascended to

[2]For a complete timeline of significant improvements in Women's rights, see Milligan.

become ruler of the human kingdom. It is this hatred that leads her to curse the princess. Yet, quickly realizing that the three fairies who were instructed to raise Aurora were not up to the task, Maleficent secretly assists in raising the child. In the end, Maleficent saves Aurora from the very curse she gave the princess and defeats her nemesis—the king—in battle. Not only does Maleficent display agency in her choices, but she also can fight without the help of men. This fairy tale retelling demonstrates a significant leap in the cultural perspective of women. Whereas Perrault's version (1697) shows women as only having value as a sexual object and mother of children, *Maleficent* depicts a complex woman confronting the patriarchal kingdom of men and succeeding.

Even by the time of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959, the Equal Pay Act (1963) and Civil Rights Act (1964) were yet to be legislated, and Roe v. Wade was nearly a decade away. So, in the half century between *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*, the roles and actions of women characters in fairy tales mirrored the significant sociocultural transformations that occurred in that timespan. If what Ayob claims is true and "fairy tales in all forms…continue to play a crucial role in the socialization process," then while watching *Maleficent,* children might see the powerful fairy dressed in black and understand that women are strong and complex and do not require men to accomplish their quests. At the end of a line of "Sleeping Beauty" retellings which show women as having a limited social role with even less power, *Maleficent* breaks this cultural pattern.

Depictions of female characters in Disney films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Tangled* (2010), and *Frozen* (2013) further reveal changing sociocultural values and further demonstrate cultural transformation. Because fairy tales typically present simple plot structures, the "good" and "bad" characters are also usually clearly defined. In particular, the description of Disney's villains reveals how gender roles are perceived in our culture. In their first few major fairy tale retellings, Disney's female villains display far more agency and power than their princess counterparts. The meme of an evil female villain appears in Disney's first animated commercial success, *Snow White*, as well as in many of its successors such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Tangled*, and even *Maleficent* (albeit as an antihero with a postmodern twist). In its most basic form, this meme represents an aspect of the cultural patriarchy's subconscious that views women with power negatively. Certainly, the abating of this meme in Disney's fairy tale movies over time represents a changing attitude towards women with power; moreover, the gradual increase of positive, empowered women characters in Disney's fairy tale movies adds further evidence of a sociocultural shift. It is not until Disney's 2013 film *Frozen* that the central conflict of the film is an entire kingdom's fear of a morally good princess's power rather than that of an evil villainess.

Nada Ramadan Elnahla notes that since the success of *Snow White*, Disney's foundation is "a successful formula of incorporating patriarchy into classic fairy tales by eliminating or down-playing, female characters' self-empowerment and foregrounding male power…" (5). Indeed, most of Disney's retellings after *Snow White* reflect this, with most of the stories presenting a powerless and meek princess who must be rescued or otherwise chosen by a "prince," even in films as contemporary as 2010's *Tangled*. In this film, Rapunzel displays more agency, motivation, personality, and ability than her predecessors; however, she

still does not leave her tower until Ryder Flynn (not a prince but a dashing male character nonetheless) "rescues" her and saves the day by neutralizing the magic keeping Mother Gothel alive.

Natalie Wellman observes that many of the female villains in Disney's fairy tale retellings display masculine physical traits, which are often equated with evil behavior (4). With this, Disney reinforces stereotypical gender roles first displayed in *Snow White*. Where princesses often embody beauty and purity, many of the female villains present masculine traits such as nontraditional beauty standards, stiff posture and unexpressive features, and physically dominant gestures. The gender stereotypes shown in these fairy tale retellings express cultural expectations for women. Virtuous women exhibit traditional beauty standards—a slim waist, long hair, and expressive features—while "evil" women appear masculine and create conflict. This meme seems to be growing obsolete, however, as more recent retellings such as *Frozen* and *Maleficent* present the reverse, where male villains act out of jealousy for the women's power. Their changing roles in these fairy tale retellings reflect cultural transformation regarding how women are perceived in society.

It must be noted that the protagonists in these films still adhere to traditional beauty standards; even worse, although the male villains in the films are presented as "evil," they are only revealed to be evil towards the middle of the film and are given more widely developed motivations for their villainy. In *Frozen,* Prince Hans is thirteenth in line for the throne, thus motivated to seek power elsewhere—and in *Maleficent*, King Stefan is driven nearly to madness out of his fear of Maleficent, the death of his wife and the loss of his daughter. Meanwhile, the female villains in Disney's previous retellings almost always covet the beauty and youth of the princess like in *Snow White*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Tangled*. This meme affirms the stereotypical patriarchal cultural perspective that men naturally seek power while women naturally seek beauty and youth.

While the earlier Disney retellings, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid* reinforce culturally patriarchal stereotypes of women—such as having beauty and the ability to sing while also enjoying cleaning—new retellings largely reject these stereotypes, reflecting the progressing perspective of women beyond traditional gender roles. The protagonists in *Tangled*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent* all display complex personalities with many interests beyond the domestic sphere. Further, they all show care for others beyond their own personal interests. In earlier retellings, the princesses "perceive the world in a naïve way which allows them to continue with blind hope" (Wellman 8). This affects how they react to the conflict in their tales. Rather than actively planning a solution to overcome their problems, the princesses are shown waiting for a man to save them. Sometimes, the princesses are kept oblivious to the conflict altogether due to the decisions of parents or other caretakers. Snow White, Princess Aurora, and the mermaid Ariel all await "true love's kiss" and must be saved from danger by a prince. However, even in the most contemporary of the three films, *The Little Mermaid* sees Ariel using her agency to take up the challenge of making a prince kiss her. Thus, although Ariel still needs her father King Triton and the human Prince Eric to save her from the evil sea witch Ursula, Ariel still displays a progression of agency formerly unseen in *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty*. Despite Ariel's agency, however, it seems that the message is nevertheless that young women cannot be trusted to solve problems and must be protected.

Newer retellings, on the other hand, show the princesses having much more agency in their conflicts. Interestingly, the “oldest” of these three retellings, *Tangled*, retains the meme of a “prince” saving the princess, while in *Frozen* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014), the respective female protagonists Anna and Maleficent are directly responsible for defeating their foes. And while Rapunzel is not the one who defeats Mother Gothel in *Tangled*, she is seen throughout the film fighting with “villains” and making independent choices that the previous retellings did not feature. This clearly demonstrates a cultural transformation regarding gender roles.

In a historically patriarchal culture, fairy tales reflected certain expectations of gender roles. Women were designated for the domestic sphere and their values were limited to how well they could entertain men with their beauty, voice, and wit. Over time, these memes transform to mirror the changing cultural values regarding women. New contemporary retellings feature complex, powerful women characters who have agency and adhere less to culturally patriarchal roles. If the pattern within this cultural transformation holds, then future retellings should not only continue a cultural pattern of further rejecting patriarchal rules, but also begin to address and challenge cultural norms regarding race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and disability.

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The Laugh of Lilico: Using Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" to Analyze the Rhetoric of *Helter Skelter* (2012)

by Victoria Tran

The Japanese film *Helter Skelter* (2012) provides an unfiltered and chaotic womanly viewpoint as its supermodel female protagonist descends into madness under the constant pressures of the patriarchy. Although the film does not directly reference Hélène Cixous, it embodies the rhetoric of her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" since both the film and the Japanese comic (manga) were written and directed by women. Cixous's essay encourages women to empower themselves by writing about their bodies and sharing their experiences without being silenced by male writers or tainted by the patriarchy. *Helter Skelter*, in its distinctly female perspective and voice, has been through the hands of multiple women in order for it to become a reality. The entire film works as a critique of societal misogynistic ideas with regard to unattainable beauty standards and the pain felt by women trapped in a vicious cycle of receiving praise when they're dolled up, but receiving disdain when they are less than perfect.

Historical Background

In order to contextualize the climate of feminism in Japan, I feel that it is crucial to provide some historical background. The early periods of Japan were initially a matriarchal society. However, the influence of China and Confucianism shifted social beliefs, ultimately funneling Japan into a patriarchal society and stripping women of their rights. Eventually, Japanese women would slowly regain their rights with the adoption of the Constitution of 1947. Drafted by the U.S. General Douglas MacArthur, the constitution directly aimed to "[abolish] the repressive features of the feudal period" (Grosjean 172).

In order to move towards a more equitable society, Japan now had to let women speak their stories of suffering under the traditional patriarchal structure of society. Yasuko Morihara Grosjean sheds light on Japanese women's storytelling through books and television, observing that "these stories portray women determined to become persons, to break with the traditional family structure which caused them so much suffering and

unhappiness" (176). Japanese women writing about their own experiences thus became a form of feminist activism that realizes Cixous's rhetoric, as they have found a way to give themselves a voice and agency after being silenced for so long.

A type of Japanese female storytelling is the "shojo," a subgenre of manga that is primarily written for a female audience. Rie Karatsu defines *shojo manga* as "a genre in which women could present their thoughts and express themselves...[and] their intensely emotional, psychologically complex stories" (969). These manga allowed the female readers to embody the female protagonist as the stories are depicted from their points of view, and oftentimes included thought bubbles that allowed the audience to see into their mind. Karatsu goes on to state that "the exoticization of Western culture in *shojo manga* allows Japanese girls and women to not only free themselves from the confines of their own patriarchal culture but also to reverse the dominant discourse of Orientalism that exoticizes and objectifies the East" (970).

However, Occidentalism was not necessarily the most perfect form of rehabilitation for Japanese women. It further contributed to the objectification and infantilization of women as it "has also been seen to limit women to a state of powerlessness by reinforcing sexist ideology...the adoration of the large-eyed, fair-skinned, and slender Western standard of beauty in its characters motivates Japanese women to emulate impossible standards" (Karatsu 970). *Shojo manga* worked as a double-edged sword that gave Japanese women a voice and place of identification in literary media, while reinforcing misogynistic narratives of a damsel-in-distress and introducing unattainable Western beauty standards into the feminine sphere.

A major critic of this genre is the female manga artist and writer Kyoko Okazaki, who initially worked as an illustrator for an erotic manga magazine aimed for male readers. She eventually progressed to writing serious manga intended for a mature female audience, touching on heavier topics such as sexuality and drugs (Karatsu 971). Her works oftentimes parody *shojo manga*, as does one of her most famous works, *Helter Skelter* (1995). Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "In disordered haste, confusedly tumultuously, pell-mell," the title "Helter Skelter" is fitting. *Helter Skelter* portrays the dark life of a glamorous supermodel named Lilico[1], an idealized woman who exemplifies the new Western inspired standard of Japanese beauty. Okazaki parodies European fairytales, subverting expectations by placing the evil queen as the main character while discouraging female audiences from identifying with her. The audience is further distanced from her as the readers are given multiple viewpoints, which serves to "encourage the readers to critically reflect on the narrative as they find themselves in a net of opposing emotions and multiple perspectives" (Karatsu 975). Okazaki critiques *shojo manga* by showing a less idealized female experience and tapping into the history of feminine anguish and pain, the frustrations of endless objectification and expectations the patriarchy has forced upon women.

The rest of this essay will explore the rhetoric of Mika Ninagawa's 2012 film adaptation of *Helter Skelter*. In an interview with Sam Wigley for the *British Film Institute*, Ninagawa once stated in an interview that she "strived to keep the original's female perspective, to fully express those senses that are unique to women that are not necessarily logical and sometimes

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[1] Her name is also written as "Liliko."

difficult to explain." Evidently, Ninagawa, as a woman herself, wanted to write and portray women in a deliberate fashion. Her sentiment reflects Cixous's urging of women to "put herself into the text—into the world and into history—by her own movement" (1539).

The Logos of *Helter Skelter* (2012) and "The Laugh of the Medusa"

In Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," there may appear to be less emphasis on logos, as it mainly discusses the emotional turmoil women face at the hands of an oppressive and restrictive patriarchal society. As a result, Cixous's essay appeals to the emotional and ethical dimensions of the mistreatment of women. However, I want to suggest that there is a logic present in these feminist arguments that strengthens the emotional appeal and calls to ethical equality. Cixous insists that men have abused their positions of power to groom girls into believing they are lesser beings and deserving of silence. She passionately states, "[Women] have wandered in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they've been given a deadly brainwashing…As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black" (1540). The metaphor is short and simple: not only are girls forced to adopt an internalized misogynistic logic, their original voices are silenced and replaced with a masculine voice. Cixous's message aligns with the logical aspects of *Helter Skelter* (2012) since Lilico tries so hard to achieve and maintain an image as Japan's top supermodel while also succumbing to harsh societal beauty standards of a misogynistic world.

Lilico is the representation of the exact "New Woman" that Cixous urges women to become as they break away from the misogynistic ideas of the past. From the beginning of her essay, she claims that there needs to be a "time during which the new breaks away from the old, and more precisely the (feminine) new from the old" (1539). The "New Woman" is a reaction to the centuries-long oppression that women have faced at the hands of men; the decision to have Lilico as the protagonist thus enhances the logic of the film's rhetoric. Although she is Japan's top supermodel and the epitome of what Japanese men would consider physical perfection, she does not completely abide by patriarchal standards. Rather, it is her embrace of her feminine madness and defiance of gender expectations that makes her the "New Woman" severing herself from the patriarchal past.

The Ethos of *Helter Skelter* (2012)

From the outset of the film, Lilico is shown to be at the zenith of her career. She is a beautiful, glamorous, and immensely popular supermodel. Lilico's actress, Erika Sawajiri, is half-Algerian and half-Japanese, emphasizing Lilico's status as an ideal model as her mixed ethnicity exemplifies some of Japan's beauty standards that were influenced by the West. Her overwhelming success and conventional attractiveness imply that she is living a female dream as others praise her for her perfect body (00:00:39—00:04:10). However, the façade lifts as Lilico is shown in her apartment admiring herself in the mirror before lifting up her hair and revealing a large dark bruise on her forehead. She screams hysterically, then the scene cuts abruptly to Lilico's manager, whom she calls "Mama." While talking to her male stylist Mama reveals that the bruising has been caused by her full body cosmetic surgery. Mama tells him, "All that are hers…is her eyeballs, her ears, her fingernails…and her pussy. The rest

is fake" (00:16:05—00:16:55). The film offers a negotiated reading by showing the audience that Lilico's success as the most beautiful supermodel in Japan is only perfect to a superficial degree – that underneath her glitz and glamour is an emotionally pained and neurotic woman that had to undergo extensive and dangerous surgery to achieve her fame.

The film highlights the oppressive nature of the patriarchy that encourages unethical acts towards women through its equation of women's worth with their level of conventional attractiveness. One of the most controlling people towards Lilico in the film is Mama who helped Lilico undergo the dangerous cosmetic surgery. Mama uses Lilico for monetary profit without regard for her safety. She encourages Lilico to sleep with a married male producer for more screen time in a movie and sedates Lilico after pretending to give her a comforting hug during a mental breakdown (00:11:32—00:15:07, 00:53:10—00:54:26). Karatsu analyzes Mama's behavior from a Japanese cultural perspective, explaining that it "highlights Japanese female hierarchy in which the older women teach younger women to self-objectify" (977). For Ninagawa's intentions, it may appear counterintuitive to portray a selfish older woman controlling a younger woman. However, this dynamic exemplifies Cixous's assertion that while women in the past have literally written text, these texts does not "[inscribe] femininity" (1451). Cixous further criticizes past women writers by stating that "this is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women" (1451). Cixous believes that it is crucial for women to not emulate the dominant and masculine way of writing to represent themselves and to be mindful in writing their bodies in ways that will empower them. Mama serves as a representation of the "Old Woman" who is following the dominant ideals that oppress women. She appears distasteful and immoral to the viewers as she is selfish and encourages Lilico's self-destruction for her own gain.

Similarly, the director and a female doctor of the Platina Clinic, Hisako Wachi, preys on Japanese women's insecurities by providing illegal and dangerous cosmetic surgery for monetary gain. She serves as a representation of the "Old Woman." The clinic is under investigation by authorities due to an increasing number of young women mysteriously dying, and Platina Clinic prescription pills were found at all crime scenes. It is revealed that the clinic has been illegally obtaining organs, skin, bones, and muscle to transplant into young women for cosmetic surgeries. Hisako's manipulative nature and the usage of illegal means for life-threatening cosmetic surgeries portrays her as an incredibly unethical and patriarchal force against Lilico. As another example of the "Old Woman," she perpetuates the misogynistic idea that women are only worthy if they are beautiful, even if it means going to dangerous extremes to do so.

Interestingly enough, there are few reoccurring male characters in the film. But instead of serving as active antagonists, they all serve passive roles in Lilico's story. One of the reoccurring men is her stylist, Kinji Sawanabe. Kinji serves as a contradictory figure in his subservience to her as her stylist while shaping her to the conventions of beauty created by men. When he is asked about Lilico during an interview, he calls her his "pride and joy," implying a paradoxical relationship with Lilico in which she is simultaneously his employer and a product for him to assume ownership of (01:47:17—01:47:19). Kinji represents what

Cixous identifies as “male writing” that “has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy” (1541). Kinji inscribes that “libidinal and cultural” economy onto Lilico, but Lilico’s status as top supermodel undercuts his credibility.

Another reoccurring male character is Lilico’s secret boyfriend and heir to the Nanbu Holdings fortune, Takao Nanbu. Unlike Kinji who is in the position of servitude, Takao is of higher status as a man of wealth. Their relationship is portrayed as superficial and unhealthy, evidenced by the first scene that Takao appears in. In this scene, he surprises Lilico with roses in her dressing room and the two immediately begin having sex, implying that Takao mainly desires Lilico for her body (00:07:19—00:11:32). The audience is shown intimate shots of Lilico, such as seeing her bare breasts or a close-up shot of her face indicating to the viewer that we are seeing Lilico through the “male gaze” (Mulvey 236). However, Ninagawa subverts the gaze as Lilico stares directly at herself in the mirror during this sexual encounter, admiring herself instead of showing submissive desire for her boyfriend. This subtle move of self-admiration defies “the greatest crime” that men have committed against women, which is that “they have made for women an antinarcissism!” (Cixous 1541). If men desire to possess women as an object while conditioning them to internalize patriarchal standards, then Lilico’s gaining of sexual pleasure from her boyfriend while only admiring herself establishes her feminine power over them.

The most “active” of all the men is Makoto Asada, the prosecutor who has been investigating Platina Clinic’s alleged illegal activities, including Lilico’s own cosmetic surgeries. Makoto wields power over Lilico, not only as a man working as a prosecutor, but also as someone who has uncovered secrets about her life pre-surgeries as an unconventional looking and overweight woman. However, he does not ever directly use his authority over her, but desires her aid as a credible witness against the clinic. He likely views her as one of the most credible witnesses due to her popularity as a supermodel. Despite his knowledge of Lilico’s past life, Makoto is not the one to out her secret. Lilico’s resentful female assistant is the one who exposes her by mailing photos of Lilico pre-operations to various news outlets. In this instance, the male is once again rendered passive as all he did was provide information to Lilico. It is a woman who controls this information and reveals Lilico’s secret past to the public (01:35:53—01:36:23).

The last time Makoto sees Lilico in person is right before she is about to publicly address her connection to Platina Clinic. He tells her that he is surprised she will do this and that there is no need to hurt herself any more for the public. Lilico simply responds by telling him that he is right, and that no one loves her or needs her. She states, “So I decide, and I destroy myself” (01:49:02—01:50:05). Their final interaction together emphasizes his passivity as a spectator to Lilico’s story, reinforcing that women control the story and men will be silent in this narrative.

The Sympathetic Pathos of Lilico’s Madness

Lilico is the epitome of Japan’s beauty standards for women. She elicits feelings of desire, envy, and admiration all at the same time. Teenage girls desire to be her, and make up the bulk of her adoring fan-base; the only times the viewer sees Lilico’s fans, they are teenage girls screaming about her (00:00:39—00:04:10). Meanwhile, men desire her sexually, but are

simultaneously afraid of her, as exemplified in the scenes where Lilico is with her female assistant's boyfriend, Shin Okumura. When Lilico first encounters Shin, he is taken aback by her overwhelming beauty, and then proceeds to have sex with her while Lilico's assistant cries (00:58:10—01:01:09). Shin is attracted to Lilico, but instead of him confidently initiating sex, it is Lilico who gives him the opportunity to sleep with her while her assistant cries with jealousy at the monstrous behavior of Lilico and Shin's unfaithfulness. This scene diminishes Lilico's own ethics by highlighting her traits as a "possessed" monstrous-feminine. Her unbecoming behavior is "legitimized" with her declining mental state possessing her, emphasizing the damage caused by her dependency on suppressants and her fear of being forgotten and alone after her time in the limelight.

As defined by Barbara Creed, the conceptualization of the monstrous-feminine identifies the female reproductive body as the source of terror of female monsters. Creed explains that "woman terrifies because she is…already constituted as a victim. Such a position only serves to reinforce patriarchal definitions of woman which represent and reinforce the essentialist view that woman, by nature, is a victim (20). Creed's usage draws on Freud's idea of castration, in which women are terrifying because they are castrated and therefore remind men of the threat of castration (20).

This concept echoes Cixous's claim that "flying is a woman's gesture" as she explains there is a double-meaning with the French word "voler," as it could mean both "to fly" or "to steal" (1547). Both claim that women embody the threat of stealing and the fear of unknown or absent elements. Cixous also asserts that women are chaotic and disrupt the patriarchy in the way they "fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space…dislocating things and values" (1547). Lilico is seen as a monster in the ways that she continually threatens gender norms and expectations and defies the masculine world with her feminine rebellion and unruly behavior. As a monstrous-feminine character, Lilico has the most complex credibility of all the characters. She is a woman with flaws, insecurities, and moments of intense emotional instability. She has many moments of being morally questionable to morally wrong. Because of such, her ethos cannot be written without her pathos first. She is rehabilitated through emotionally raw scenes that provide explanation for her morally corrupt actions and paint her as a much more sympathetic figure than the antagonistic like Mama or Hisako. Lilico's actions appear monstrous and villainous, however by Creed's definition, she is also a victim by nature.

While Lilico's descent into madness shows more traits of Lilico's monstrous-femininity while evoking sympathy, her relationship with her female assistant, Michiko Hada, is likewise complex due to its queer and sadomasochistic nature. It also provides more context as to why her sexual encounter with Shin is less anti-feminist than it seems. Hada shows the most kindness to Lilico and is completely submissive to her. Even during Lilico's lowest points of madness, Hada tries her best to comfort her, giving her a tight hug during a mental breakdown to which she is forcefully shoved away while Lilico runs out of her apartment (01:31:04-01:32:06). The pair's relationship shows more of Lilico's monstrous-femininity in that Lilico has a twisted sexually dominant control over Hada, having sex with her on two separate times. The second time occurs the morning after she has sex with Shin when she is shown to have a naked Hada tied up in her bed (01:01:55-01:02:58). The scene's placement

directly after Lilico's sexual affair with Shin builds credibility back up for Lilico. Hada cries, likely out of jealousy and sexual desire for Lilico, but her cries also show that Hada remains submissive and loyal to Lilico all the way until the end of the film. This queer sadomasochistic relationship actively works against traditional Japanese patriarchal standards due to the lesbian nature of the dynamic and its inclusion of a sexually dominant and demanding woman. Their rejection of tradition reflects Creed's sentiment that "the possessed female subject is one who refuses to take up her proper place in the symbolic order…Abjection is constructed as rebellion, filthy, lustful, carnal, and female flesh" (57). Furthermore, as Cixous has stated, "women are body. More body, hence more writing" (1547). The amount of physical body that is shown with Lilico and her assistant and their queer sadomasochistic relationship echo both Cixous and Creed, actively working against the patriarchy by disrupting the norms with queer women and their bodies that are for the pleasure of each other, and not men.

Hada is involved in both of Lilico's most monstrous-feminine acts. The first occurs when her madness pushes her to tell Hada to physically harm other women whom she perceives as threats, namely Kozue and her boyfriend's public girlfriend, a politician's daughter. After sleeping with Shin and Hada, she convinces them to find the politician's daughter on a walk and throw acid onto her face. Shin goes through with the deed with Hada as the driver. However, when news breaks out that someone had assaulted the politician's daughter, Lilico teasingly mocks the pair, telling them that she didn't technically do anything and threatening to get them in a lot of trouble. She then proceeds to drug the pair and watch them have sex under the influence, watching with a disgusted look on her face, muttering that they should they should "fall apart" (01:02:59–01:07:17). As one of Lilico's most despicable acts, she has finally stooped to the point of trying to harm her "competition" in order to secure her spot as Takao's only lover. She also uses the power of her sexuality against Hada and Shin to get them to act out the heinous crime. As Creed explains, "Woman is constructed as possessed when she attacks the symbolic order, highlights its weaknesses, and plays on its vulnerabilities" (60). Lilico's attack on a politician's daughter—a woman of higher status—disrupts society's obsession with female beauty by having her face disfigured through acid. Although Lilico shows signs of her monstrousness, her acts come from a place of fear and demonstrate how male society has groomed her to be an antinarcissist to fellow women. Her behavior is "validated" by being both affected by the patriarchy while also showcasing its vulnerabilities.

In the instance of her hostility against Kozue, she once again calls to Hada for her aid. Lilico tells Hada that if she loves her, she should be willing to cut Kozue's face up (01:20:54–01:22:22). Hada complies. The scenes where Hada attempts to cut Kozue's face up is intercut with Lilico's public descent into madness on live TV. Hada eventually finds Kozue alone at the amusement park. Kozue challenges her to attempt the assault, but Hada cannot bring herself to do it (01:23:10–01:28:48). The alternation between Hada's attempted assault and Lilico's public meltdown evokes sympathy and understanding for Lilico. The audience witnesses the extent of her mental unwellness and understands how she has pushed her over the edge, to the point where her perfect appearance is disrupted.

Lilico's anguish about her body is further materialized through her physical body. Early in the film, Lilico discovers bruising on her forehead underneath her bangs causing her to

scream. These bruises are a result of the extensive illegal surgeries performed by the Platina Clinic. Although this may appear to be contradicting to Cixous's celebration of women and their bodies because of the focus on Lilico's decaying body, but it is crucial to remember that Lilico is entirely constructed and put together by Platina Clinic, and her artificial body made up of all of the patriarchal beauty standards that are enforced by male expectations. Her mental decay, on the other hand, is framed by what Creed calls the "possessed" woman, in which "possession" is defined as "the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject—and perversely appealing" (48). However, rather than being possessed by a supernatural threat, Lilico is possessed by her own mental anguish that comes from a misogynistic society that continually demands perfection from her, and in turn, makes her mental decay and actions evoke sympathy from the viewer. The film is not condemning the female body, but rather the patriarchal beauty standards that decay women's self-esteem and agency.

The film strategically employs chaotic montages to show the mental decline of Lilico under the pressure of being Japan's top supermodel. In the first montage, the camera pans quickly and shots abruptly cut off to the next, evoking a sense of anxiety and stress. Teenage girls cheer for Lilico, intensifying the existing raucous from the orchestral music. The flashes of off-screen cameras invade the mise-en-scène as Lilico sits at home looking at her own magazine covers. At the end of the scene, the music fades away and Lilico tells her stylist, Kinji, that even though she is so tired, she cannot bring herself to fall asleep (00:21:17—00:24:39). Although Lilico is established as the most successful model in Japan, she evokes sympathy as she is stressed to the point of being unable to sleep under the constant camera flashes.

The second chaotic montage comes immediately after Lilico is introduced to an up-and-coming model named Kozue, an eighteen-year-old whose minimalist, natural style contrasts Lilico's. The same loud orchestral music plays. But unlike the first montage where Lilico models alone, Lilico now must model alongside Kozue, marking the beginning of Lilico's decline as the current it-girl of Japan. The voices of teenage girls reappear, except now they praise Kozue's beauty. While Lilico looks through magazines, she sees more shots of Kozue than herself. The camera is shaking and unstable, showing the build-up of her stress and indicating a loss of control. Lilico runs to the bathroom, pukes into the toilet, and stares at herself in the mirror as the music continues to play over (00:49:21—00:52:44). The deflation of Lilico's ego in this scene draws sympathy as it suggests a fall back into the patriarchy's expectations of female self-hatred, and a return to the antinarcissism that Cixous hoped to combat.

The scene that immediately follows the montage shows Lilico crying hysterically at the top of the building because Kozue was chosen over her for a modelling gig. The only other people that are there to witness her meltdown are Mama, Kinji, and her woman assistant. This pivotal scene in Lilico's life is the first "public" meltdown that she has outside of the privacy of her own room. She expresses to three of her "closest" connections that she does not wish to keep destroying herself for others' consumptions. A large part of Lilico's story is being a "giver," a woman as spectacle for all of Japan to watch and adore. Linking dominant masculine society to capitalism control, and dominance, Cixous asserts that women contradict this by having nothing to lose and being "givers" (1548). In this scene, Lilico is not

losing her ability to "give,", but rather she is taking on the burden of the patriarchy that steals her dignity and agency.

One of the most emotionally painful scenes is the climax of the film, in which Lilico appears on a talk show to celebrate her birthday. Prior to going on set, she administers a suppressant shot for herself in a restroom, spotting a blue butterfly on her shoulder in the mirror. But when she glances at her actual shoulder, the butterfly is nowhere to be found. This hallucination indicates the decline of Lilico's mental state and instills a sense of worry that she will display signs of mental unwellness on television. In this scene, Lilico is the sole guest on a talk show, but her scenes are occasionally interrupted by scenes of Kozue's photoshoot at an amusement park. Kozue's calmness in the open air contrasts Lilico's disordered state inside a stuffy, gaudy, baroque room. After the host gives her a birthday cake, Lilico hallucinates butterflies attacking her, implying that she is growing older and less relevant and beautiful by the day. Everyone on set silently stares at her, and the film crew continues to film as she starts panicking and screaming. One of the decorations becomes a little person wearing a circus-like outfit who terrifies Lilico as they slowly move towards her. Loud music plays and mixes in with her screams, and her once perfect hair has now become messy and out of control. At the end of her episode, she faints and falls onto the floor. She is alone and cross-eyed, mumbling "more beautiful" over and over (01:23:10—01:28:43). Cixous claims that it is a "great transgression" for women to speak, and "even just open her mouth—in public," and Lilico's public fall is a radical turn for society's status quo (1543). Lilico's devastating public display of mental health degradation serves as a message to Japan for what is to come. Even though the hallucinations were not done by her own accord, her public undoing challenges the patriarchal standard that women must be silently suffering, and the viewers feel sympathy to see her finally fall apart in the open.

Lilico's Alternative History for Women and the Conclusion

Being away from the public eye has not made Lilico's adoring fanbase of teenage girls forget her, and the result of her public self-stabbing has cemented her into the alternative history for Japanese women. The last time the viewers hear the teenage girls talking is after the self-stabbing. They speak of Lilico as if she were an idea or legend, saying such things as, "Put a picture of her on your phone while you sleep, and you will get bigger eyes" (01:55:13—01:55:17). The teenage girls return to viewing her as one of their idols, however she has now become a symbol of hope after discovering the truth about her constructed beauty. Even Makoto makes a remark after seeing a bunch of stylish girls around him, calling them "Little Tiger Lilies," and as he looks upon a giant poster advertising a documentary about Lilico, he says, "Tiger Lily...your adventure goes on...forever" (01:59:27—01:59:33). It is this scene that perfectly exemplifies Cixous's desire for women's own alternate history, as she states, "we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another...in woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" (1544). Lilico has transcended the male space, and taken on a lovely home in the space of female history, where her story inspires other girls on a deep and personal level.

Helter Skelter does not shy away from the usage of female bodies on display. Its story of an alternative feminine history draws on Cixousian rhetoric and does not replicate dominant male discourse for the male gaze's consumption. Lilico's monstrous-femininity is a display of tragedy, as it is the society that pushes her into doing heinous acts. But she is rehabilitated through her sympathetic story, and ultimately empowered by taking her feminine monstrosities and turning them into a symbol of hope. Her story does not simply end when she stabs herself in the eye. Because she wrote her body into the New Women's history, she will transcend time and place.

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Translating Alterity Within the Embodied Text

"Further Away Than Crazy": Darl's Posthuman Madness in *As I Lay Dying*

by Randy Reynaga

Near the end of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Darl Bundren's family turns against him, eagerly assisting in his apprehension and removal to the Mississippi State Insane Asylum in Jackson. His sister Dewey Dell's enthusiasm is such that she's held back, "scratching and clawing like a wild cat" while their brother Jewel says, "Kill him. Kill the son of a bitch" (140). When Darl asks Cash, the brother closest to him, "Do you want me to go?" Cash responds, in an act of fraternal betrayal, "It'll be better for you" (140). In this moment, Darl begins to *perform* the part of an insane person–"he begun to laugh" (140). Besides laughter, most of Darl's vocalizations from this point consist of the palilalic, "[y]es yes yes yes yes yes," a progression of the same word that through repetition loses its meaning as an affirmative statement and becomes a sound, a signifier that no longer corresponds to the signified traditionally referred to by the word "yes" (149). Just as Darl's mother Addie repeatedly thinks of the names "*Cash* and *Darl*" until they "die and solidify into a shape and fade away," Darl's "yes" becomes a sound that voices a wordless affect, like the cry of an animal in pain (103). In this conversion of *logos* to affect, Darl becomes-animal in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense. He does not become animal in the sense of a biological transformation, or even become *like* an animal in the sense of an imitation, but so much as his inarticulate yet affectively charged vocalizations carry the inhuman resonance of an animal's cry, he engages in what Deleuze and Guattari call "corpuscular emission," meaning that he "emits the particles of" an animal (275). In other words, Darl occupies, in these moments of vocalization, the subject position of an animal, affecting others (emitting particles) as an animal would. In his becoming-animal, Darl presents himself as an affective posthuman subject that defies the anthropocentric norms of the traditional "human" in favor of molecularity and multiplicity.

This inhumanness is what necessitates Darl's incarceration in the asylum; his fluid humanity threatens the reproducibility of the human subject. In line with this thought, Marybeth Southard argues that Darl's madness is the social consequence of his unclear gender performance and unstable sense of self, which pose threats to the cultural hegemony of the South, rendering him "queer." She further argues that Darl's "penetrative" consciousness, portrayed in his apparent ability to witness and at times invade other characters' internal

thoughts, threatens the South's sense of individuality and independence, and gives his queerness a "sexual" valence (49). Notably, for Southard, "Darl's queerness" is defined by his "continual supersession of boundaries and his refusal to perform within socially *constructed* norms, as he questions the limits of the gender binary, of physical bodies, of individual identity, and of privacy and autonomy" (49). This "continual supersession of boundaries" suggests an active state of being, a state of always *becoming* rather than *being* – what Deleuze and Guattari call "molecular" rather than "molar" (275). Darl's self is not determined independently; it is always contingent on his environment.

Stacy Rule and Christopher T. White have examined Darl's usage of the novel's nonhuman fauna as nodes of affectual understanding and self-representation. In this becoming-animal, and in becoming-others via his intrusion into foreign consciousnesses, Darl is understood through his orientation to, and understanding of both human and inhuman others; he is understood in multiplicity. Darl's existence is a rejection of solipsism; instead of "*I think therefore I am,*" for him it's "*others are, therefore I am.*"[1] As Southard suggests, "[Darl's] queering threatens to dissolve historically and culturally constructed boundaries that were never stable to begin with" (49). By dissolving these unstable boundaries of gender, self, and body, Darl dissolves the boundaries of the *human form*, which are demarcated by language. Psychoanalytical readings of the novel have shown that Darl's incompatibility with Symbolic language is a consequence of his mother's rejection. I will build on these readings using Julia Kristeva's theory of the Semiotic to explain Darl's elision of Symbolic language. In his defiance of *logos*, Darl cannot *be* human, so instead he becomes-animal—a new, affective subject who moves beyond conventional interhuman boundaries; he becomes *post*human.

The Unsymbolic Subject

Darl's posthumanism is rooted in his treatment of language. Darl, like any other subject recruited into the Symbolic, cannot fully escape *logos* because the nuances of his social existence are defined by discourse; however, he is not the typical subject of language—he has not been properly assumed into the order of the Symbolic. Doreen Fowler writes that "[t]he speaking subject defines itself as separate from the repressed other, the mother who is identified with the body and the world. Patriarchal identity depends on this separation and negation to assert difference. Without a mother to deny Darl is unbounded, fluid; he flows into others, invading their secret selves" (298). She alludes to Darl's filial disavowal, where he states, "I have no mother" (Faulkner 58). Darl, "without a mother to deny," cannot assert enough difference to define himself and fully-integrate into the patriarchal realm of the Symbolic, into conventional language, or *logos*. Michelle Delville argues, similarly, that "Darl, as a speaking and thinking subject, constitutes the Lacanian notion of *lack*. His mother's death is an avatar of the irremediable loss of imaginary plentitude and unity, the primordial lack of origin and being which may only be represented through (Symbolic) language, in which the subject subsists as a construct of words" (64). If people, as patriarchal subjects fully situated in the order of the Symbolic, exist only as "construct[s] of words," then Darl, in his

[1] I refer here to a rejection of the Cartesian element of Enlightenment thought; the valuation of self and reason over experience.

failure to be assumed and represented by *logos*, becomes not-a-person, a lack that desires the wholeness of non-symbolic being. Fowler argues that Darl's siblings have "severed the bond to the mother and covered the gap with a symbol"; however, in Darl's case, "long before he could renounce his mother, [she] renounced him" (298). Lacking a mother to replace, and in fact, never having had a mother, Darl has no clear path to the Symbolic. Delville further argues that "Darl's language—an endless, vertical craving for essences and final, signified certainties points at the realism of the Lacanian "Real," an inaccessible order beyond the Symbolic and, consequently, beyond language and the signifying chain. . ." (67).[2] Darl is aware of the slipperiness and uncertainty of *logos*, where for him, meaning is always deferred in the Derridean sense. Like Addie, he realizes that "words are no good; that words dont ever fit what they are trying to say at" (Faulkner 101). He cannot determine himself through *logos,* so he craves the primordial sense of certainty that precedes language: the Real.

The novel, while questioning Darl's symbolic integration, also shows that whatever inhuman form he *does* occupy is more than just "crazy." Cash notably questions the use of "crazy" as a determinate identity. He says to himself, "I aint so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what aint. It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment" (140). In this statement, by recognizing that "a man" *can* "say what is crazy," Cash privately acknowledges the arbitrary nature of madness. As Southard duly notes, "Cash suggests that the label of madness is less determined by an unstable psyche and instead by an inability or a refusal to conform to socially prescribed norms" (59). So, Cash recognizes that Darl's "unstable psyche" is not in and of itself something that is "crazy," but rather, it's something labeled as crazy. It is, as Southard says, "no longer a psychological illness but a social one" (59). Cash suggests that each person has an inner self, or "fellow," that regards both "sane" and "insane" doings with the "same horror and the same astonishment," making no *a priori* distinction between the two; the distinction happens externally. By referring to this inner self as "a fellow," he suggests a separation, a distinction between an inner-self that perceives without bias, and an outer-self, a social identity that perceives according to convention and social standards. This unbiased inner "fellow," who watches with affect (which Cash qualifies as "horror" and "astonishment") instead of judgment, can only be the untouched, primordial self within us, the Real self not incorporated into Lacan's Symbolic order. Hence, this "fellow" is someone like Darl, someone who cannot exist in a world of language, the realm of the Southern state apparatus that demands his incarceration.

Kristeva's theory of the Semiotic offers us a way to understand how Darl elides language and makes meaning via affect. I use *affect* to refer to a pre-emotional state of feeling that belongs to the Real, what Brian Massumi calls an "unqualified intensity" (88). If the emotions of love, fear, and pride are each according to Addie, "just a shape to fill a lack," then an affect

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[2] Delville refers to Jacques Lacan's theorization of the major structures of the psyche: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, often illustrated as a Borromean knot, and roughly corresponding to the pre-linguistic drives and senses (the Real), the formation of the ego and fantasy of self-identity (the Imaginary), and language and signification (the Symbolic).

unnamed is the feeling, the intensity that "you wouldn't need a word for" (101). An emotion is affect that has been given language. Affect is the thing signified by an emotion, a form of communication sans *logos* that can take Darl further from the Symbolic, and closer to the Real. Kristeva posits the Semiotic as a new order in Lacan's otherwise triadic structure of the psyche, situated somewhere between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Judith Butler provides an excellent synthesis of Kristeva's otherwise expansive psychoanalytical theory, noting that "the 'semiotic' is a dimension of language occasioned by that primary maternal body which not only refutes Lacan's primary premise, but which serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the symbolic" (105). The semiotic is both *pre*-symbolic, "as when a child begins to vocalize, or 'after' meaning as when a psychotic no longer uses words to signify" (107). Darl, lacking a mother and thus unable to deny the maternal body, must *become* that maternal body or remain within it. Butler notes that "because the maternal body signifies the loss of coherent and discrete identity" the kind of semiotic language used by Darl "verges on psychosis" (109). Darl's unsignifying language does verge on psychosis, with his laughing and repetitive "yes" warranting his delivery to an insane asylum; as observed by Southard, Darl certainly qualifies as a subject lacking in "coherent and discrete identity." His inability to self-identify within the Symbolic renders his identity incoherent, and his penetrative consciousness proves its indiscretion. We can see Darl's struggle with identity in his self-contemplation: "How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls" (122). The "hand" and "string" invoke imagery of puppets. The "dead gestures of dolls" indicate that the movement of the puppets originates externally, that they are "dead" or immobile of their own accord. If the doll is understood to be a Real person, and Symbolic language the "compulsions with no-hand on no-strings," then this imagery of puppets speaks to Darl's lack of self and represents his struggle to re-presence himself through the Symbolic. Darl is a doll that cannot be given movement or life; he cannot be animated by the Symbolic, only perceived. Darl, uniquely aware of the strings of language that animate the socially perceived self, and still craving the Lacanian Real, defers to animal-language, which, affectual and situated in the Semiotic, expresses Darl's subjectivity without *logos*.

Becoming-animal

Darl's semiotic style of meaning-making is closely tied to the affectations of various animals described throughout the novel. For Deleuze and Guattari, to become-animal is to emit particles of animal, or to occupy momentarily the subject position of an animal, affecting others as an animal would.[3] When Darl positions himself as a node in the novel's network of animal affect, he is becoming-animal, occupying the affective position of an animal, or giving off particles of animal. Erin Edwards observes the novel's readiness to be read in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, noting Addie's posthumous influence on the Bundren family, or "becoming-corpse" (405). She explores how the novel's bodies "materialize in the

[3] Following Deleuze and Guattari, I use the term "become-animal" to refer to a state of "becoming-animal" where it makes sense syntactically.

form of molecular, mutational effects through which the human and the nonhuman enter into compositional assemblage and exchange with one another" (409). By the exchange of "molecular, mutational effects," Edwards refers to Deleuze and Guattari's idea that "all becomings are molecular" (they emit molecules, or particles that affect others) rather than "molar subjects, objects, or forms that we know from the outside and recognize from experience, through science, or by habit" (Deleuze and Guattari 275). The bodies that Edward describes are no longer those of the "molar" (specific, identifiable) human, but are "molecular" bodies that interact with others, exchanging corpuscles—and affects. Although Edwards briefly explores the becoming-animal in relation to Darl, Jewel, and his horse, the significance of the novel's animality is overshadowed by her analysis of Addie's corpse. Moreover, though Edwards recognizes the posthuman implications of the novel's becomings, Darl's particular posthuman significance is diluted in her general attribution of posthumanism to the Bundrens. I will refine the focus of Edwards's observations to highlight Darl's exceptional posthumanism and the significance of his becoming-animal.

To understand himself and his environment, Darl must enter a network of animal particles, engaging with and emitting the molecular animal: he must *become*-animal. Christopher T. White writes that, "[t]hroughout the novel, characters use animal *signs*—analogies, similes, metaphors—to convey meanings and affect. . ." (81). He describes this as "zoosemiotics," stating that "[a]Animals in *As I Lay Dying* expose the limitations of *logos*, and the insufficiency of a philosophical tradition, going back to Aristotle, that aims to secure the purity and privilege of the (human) subject" (82). White's description of animal language suggests the decentering of *logos* as the *prima facie* mode of communication, but in countering the centricity of Symbolic language, zoosemiotics also has the potential to destabilize the human primacy of anthropocentrism. Although for White, the "semiotic" in zoosemiotic refers to language in the Saussurean sense of signs;, it also echoes back to the subversive potential of Kristeva's Semiotic. Darl is not the only character to use this animal-language, but his rejection of and by the Symbolic, and his desire for incorporation into the Real, makes his use of "zoosemiotics" especially noteworthy. As White says, "animals operate as originary metaphors, the most 'natural' means of making sense out of the surrounding chaos" (83). This language is the best tool Darl has for imagining, or "making sense" of the Real. In the "originary" language of animals, affect is conveyed directly, bypassing the deferred meaning of *logos*. White also notes that "[i]nstances of animal communication occur in critical moments in the text, particularly those in which a central character's identity and self-coherence are at stake" (86). He identifies the river scene as one such moment of "self-coherence," presumably due to the effort on Darl's part to discern himself against, and avoid elision into, the chaos of his surroundings. With Addie's coffin-enclosed corpse in tow, the Bundrens attempt to ford the flooded Yoknapatawpha river, its bridge long-since washed away; however, a passing log destabilizes their mule-drawn wagon, thrusting Cash, Darl, the mules, and Addie's coffin into the whirling waters. White observes that "[i]n order to represent the full force of the unfolding events Darl is compelled to turn to the voiceless body language of animals, whose wordless 'gaze' is made to convey the exact 'shape of the disaster' confronting the Bundren family" (87). This suggests that Darl cannot comprehend the intensity of the situation without becoming-animal, that to understand the affective

gravity of the scene, he must enter into "a relation of movement and rest" or an interactive molecularity with the animals around him (Deleuze and Guattari 274).

Darl's becoming-animal is best exemplified by his empathy with Jewel's horse, or his momentary re-imagining of himself as the horse: his becoming-horse. White, however, principally looks at Darl's depictions of the drowning mules, especially when "[t]he head of one mule appears, its eyes wide; it looks back at us for an instant, making a sound almost human. The head vanishes again" (Faulkner 88). He argues that the mule's cry, the "sound almost human" is an expression that "derives from the other side of language; it is a language of the body rather than the mind. The mule introduces an immediate force of affect into an otherwise detached, almost contemplative, representation of catastrophe" (87–8). Though White does not examine Darl's portrayal of Jewel's horse, it too introduces equestrian affect into the scene—affect otherwise unvoiced by Darl. When the characters are looking for a place to ford the river, Darl observes "the horse…trembling, its eye rolling wild and baby-blue in its long pink face, its breathing stertorous like groaning" (84). The horse's shaking, its "eye rolling wild" with the unnatural hue of "baby-blue," all indicate distress. Darl does not describe his own affect, does not voice it into emotion, but instead focuses his gaze on the horse that he perceives as presenting the same affective state that he cannot describe in himself. Rule calls this "interspecies empathy" (319). The horse conveys the feeling of anxiety or distress that Darl feels and perceives his family to feel, even as Jewel "sits erect, poised, looking quietly and steadily and quickly this way and that, his face calm, a little pale, alert" (84). Jewel's fear is imperceptible if not for its reflection in his horse. In a rhizomatic perpetuation of interspecies empathy, the horse becomes-Jewel, mirroring his fear as Darl becomes-horse, incorporating the horse's affective state that is at once Jewel's; they become molecular.

Darl's affective perceptiveness disrespects the boundaries not only between human individuals, but also between humans and nonhumans. Darl's self-understanding is reliant on his empathizing with animals, or his re-imagining of their affective state as his own. This becoming-animal invokes the Semiotic's intrusion into the Symbolic, which as Butler says, "suggests a dissolution of the coherent, signifying subject into the primary continuity which is the maternal body" (108). Because he relies on interspecific affect as a default means of making meaning, Darl disrespects the primacy of "human" communication, of *logos*, subverting the logocentric hierarchy and eliding all communication into that "primary continuity," or molecular multiplicity, of animals and humans. Rule notes that "[s]uch reshuffling decenters humans as the sole bodies from which affective forces emanate, instead regarding affect as both extra-human and collectively produced" (322). By equating the nonhuman animal body with the human-body as mutual affective receptors and conveyors, Darl threatens the integrity of the distinctive "human" body. As Rule astutely notes, "Darl also is keenly sensitive to the body language of animals, their communicative signaling. This is particularly true in his descriptions of Jewel's horse" (86). Darl not only uses the horse to precipitate his discomfort when approaching the river crossing, but he is also the one who tells the story of how Jewel gets his horse, recounting Jewel's sleepless nights working, his days falling asleep, and his hiding it from everyone; Darl is fascinated by Jewel's horse. This is likely because Darl is obsessed with Jewel – someone who is stoic, who does not show any discernible emotions aside from anger, who is loved by Addie. The opening page of the novel

features Darl's description of Jewel: "[s]till staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian" (7). Darl shows no affectual value in this description of Jewel, rather Jewel is "rigid," "wooden," almost mechanical. His eyes betray nothing, looking "straight ahead" as if inanimate. Darl cannot read into Jewel's consciousness as he can other characters', so he looks to Jewel's horse for affective information.

Jewel's horse is a nexus through which Darl can perceive the nuances of Jewel's emotions, allowing him to empathize with his otherwise stoic brother. Jewel's interactions with the horse are always presented through others, especially through Darl. In fact, Jewel narrates only one chapter, and in it, he does not mention the horse. We can see Darl's affective usage of the horse when he narrates his family's arrival at Armstid's house, post-river crossing. This narrative features eight italicized portions, ranging from fragments of sentences to paragraphs. Italics intermittently interrupt an otherwise quaint and straightforward scene, and each scene shows Jewel and his horse together. Notably, Darl never refers to Jewel by name, only as "*he*." For instance, Darl says, "We drove on, Dewey Dell and I sitting beside Cash to steady him *and he riding ahead on the horse*. Vernon stood watching us for a while" (107). The dialogue pauses suddenly, shifting from a general description to a pointed, specific description of Jewel and his horse, as if it were a separate train of thought. Darl again describes Jewel in mechanical terms: "He had that wooden look on his face again; that bold, surly, high-colored rigid look like his face and eyes were two colors of wood, the wrong one pale and the wrong one dark" (107). This description again demonstrates Darl's inability to perforate Jewel's affectual state. Jewel appears "wooden," and "rigid," betraying no discernable emotion, no state other than mechanical impenetrability. It is not until Darl describes Jewel's interactions with his horse that he begins to piece together Jewel's emotional state: "*. . . he returns and slips quickly past the single crashing thump. He applies the curry-comb . . . curing the horse in a whisper of obscene caress. Its head flashes back, tooth-cropped; its eyes roll in the dusk like marbles on a gaudy velvet cloth as he strikes it upon the face with the back of the curry-comb*" (108). Here we see the tension between Jewel and his horse; the horse attempts to attack Jewel with a "single crashing thump," but Jewel evades, and retaliates with an "obscene caress," indicating a loving strike that is both angry and affectionate, frustrated and vulnerable. As he "strikes it upon the face" it conveys its distress; its "eyes roll in the dusk," the white of its eyes apparently so stark against the dim light that they force the viewer to gaze into the horse's state of pain. Jewel asserts his affect through the horse, forcing it to convey his own discomfort, but at the same time Jewel betrays his otherwise hidden sensibility in the "caress" of his strikes. Jewel is unable to assert his feelings and Darl is unable to understand the nuances of his brother's emotions any other way, so they communicate through the intermediary of Jewel's horse.

Another important interaction between Jewel, Darl, and the horse, happens in the novel's third chapter. This is Darl's second monologue, with Darl still trying to understand Jewel. Anse asks Darl, "Where's Jewel?" Darl responds several paragraphs later, after a digression in which he talks about "how much better water tastes when it has set a while in a cedar bucket," and another in which he notes that "Pa's feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped. . ." (11). Darl again fails to directly describe anyone's affectual state—they are for the reader to conjecture based on the imagery supplied. The cedar water

could be read to reflect Darl's youthful calm, or contentedness, and Anse's feet may invoke a sense of spiritual erosion, a sense of tiredness and injustice brought on by years of manual labor and inescapable poverty. Regardless of the emotions signified by Darl's narrative deviations, time is compressed here; it's unlikely that Darl *actually* spent two paragraphs in silent reminiscence before finally responding to Anse.; somehow all this retrospective imagery occurs instantaneously, in flashes of memories compressed and un-commentated. Eventually, Darl responds to Anse's inquiry; "Down to the barn," he says, "[h]arnessing the team" (11). He then switches to describing, not to Anse, but to himself, Jewel's experience down at the barn, despite not being there to observe it; "Down there fooling with that horse. He will go on through the barn, into the pasture. The horse will not be in sight: he is up there among the pine seedlings, in the cool" (11). Darl offers convincing conjecture that the audience does not question as adequate narration. His imagery of the horse provides us with actual affectual conveyance; "Jewel whistles again; the horse comes dropping down the slope, stiff-legged, his ears cocking and flicking, his mismatched eyes rolling, and fetches up twenty feet away, broadside on, watching Jewel over his shoulder in an attitude kittenish and alert" (11–12). Rule describes the affect of this scene as humorous and playful, this indicated by the attentiveness of the horse's ears and the suggestiveness of its movements. She remarks that the horse and Jewel are engaging in a playful game, and that, "[p]eople who play chase with their companion animals will likely recognize this standoff" (328). This playfulness is rarely shown in Jewel and shows a sensitive side to him – rather, Darl *imagines* this playful side to him. At the end of the chapter, "Jewel strikes [the horse] in the stomach; the horse arches his neck back, crop-toothed; Jewel strikes him across the face with his fist and slides on to the trough and mounts upon it" (12). In constructing this scene, Darl is attuned to the same affect that Jewel feels. So, when Jewel's affective playfulness ends and his behavior turns to aggression, his pain resonates in Darl as much as in the "crop-toothed" horse.

Darl is occasionally able to imagine Jewel's affect more explicitly. When Jewel single-handedly "sloughs" Addie's coffin "into the wagon bed," post-funeral, Darl describes his face as "suffused with fury and despair," but these verbalized emotions are still framed and facilitated by Darl's understanding of Jewel's relationship to his horse (60). This moment of rage occurs several chapters after Darl's observations of Jewel playing with, and beating, his horse. Darl has recently taunted Jewel, saying "it's not your horse that's dead" and thinking to himself that "Jewel's mother is a horse" (58). This elicits Jewel's anger, expressed in his repetition of the phrase "Goddamn you" (58). So, when Darl qualifies Jewel's affect as "fury and despair," he does so by imagining Jewel's reaction to Addie's death as a reaction to his horse's death. Jewel's mother is substituted with his horse, the pain of maternal loss understood *through* his horse, even when his horse is not physically present. Rule mentions that "taking Darl's statement that Jewel's mother is a horse at face value, most read the animal as a more or less successful surrogate for Addie. By relegating the animal to the realm of symbol, such scholarship repeats the anthropomorphic bias Faulkner consistently works against" (325). Jewel's horse works not as a symbol, which would convey *logos*, but as a translocatable, Semiotic nexus that conveys molecular affect. This affect is *sometimes* qualified into words as emotion, but because the horse does not represent fixed meaning, because the affect it conveys is situational and does not always refer to Addie, the horse

cannot be adequately understood as a symbol. The horse's significance is better understood in the context of Darl's becoming-horse.

The Posthuman

The groundwork for Darl's posthumanism is set by his multiplicity, by his inability to form a distinctive identity. In defining the normative human, Rosi Braidotti suggests that the "Eurocentric paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for the cultural logic of universal Humanism" (2332). Darl subverts the "European paradigm" by refusing to see himself as a "self" and those around him as distinct "others." We can see evidence of Darl's unstable sense-of-self in his ruminations on self and sleep: "In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not" (49). Although this passage has the potential to be read as metaphor, it can also be read as not signifying anything, as serving the base function of representing Darl's inability to assert his own identity through language, through *logos* or the Symbolic. He switches subjects, starting out with "you," referring to people in general. In switching to "I," which assumes his own identity even while asserting "I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not," he questions the subject-state that he speaks from. He eventually concludes,; "I am *is*," (50) which implies a sense of external identification (as someone else that *is*) rather than a sense of localizing identity (I am myself).

Darl's indistinctness blurs the lines between his own identity and the identity of others. Braidotti proposes that we replace the "unitary subject of Humanism" with "a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities" (2337). Darl's desire manifests in his craving for the Real, and his sexuality is implicit in his penetrative consciousness, which is a mechanism of his reliance on embodiment, affectivity, and empathy as nonlinguistic means of understanding the Realness of his environment. The novel portrays empathy as a mirroring of affect, not just with animals, but also as when Darl imagines himself as someone else by identifying and mimicking their affectual state. We can see Darl's empathy at play when he narrates Dewey Dell's experience immediately after Addie's death: "*You could do so much for me if you just would. If you just knew. I am I and you are you and I know it and you don't know it and you could do so much for me if you just would and if you just would then I could tell you and then nobody would have to know it except you and me and Darl*" (33). Here, Darl shows his capacity to empathize. In this scene, Dewey Dell voicelessly addresses Peabody, but Darl is notably not present; he has gone to town with Jewel to earn three dollars, yet he believably reconstructs Dewey Dell's experience. Peabody figures Dewey Dell wants comfort for Addie's death, but what she really wants is for him to help her resolve her pregnancy. By being sensitive to Dewey Dell's affectual state, in which he senses both her unstated pregnancy, and her concern for her pregnancy, Darl reliably recreates her mental dialogue based on his assumption of her internal, sub-linguistic state of being; he *becomes* Dewey Dell.

Through this process of assuming another's affectual identity, the boundaries that delineate the human form of Darl's body become permeable. Southard determines that this

violation of selfhood contributes to Darl being labeled as "queer" throughout the novel, which "is a marker of Darl's difference, his lack of a solid identity, his inability to fit within the limits of his family and surrounding Southern society" (48—49). Darl, says Southard, threatens the "gender binary" as much as he threatens "physical bodies" (49). She recognizes that Darl fails to perform masculinity, in the sense of Butler's gender performativity, "at a historical moment when gender and regional autonomy were essential to the New South's reputation and progress" (49). Darl is queer, not only because he fails to perform his gender role, but also because he fails to perform the human norms essential to the determination of interbody boundaries. As Southard also notes "his queerness is necessarily sexual without referring to sexual intercourse or homosexuality; instead, Darl's queerness is sexualized through his forced penetrations into others' consciousnesses" (49). Darl, by penetrating the consciousness of others, opens the borders of the human form, making the body permeable to the affective selves of other bodies and rendering individuals indistinct from each other. Rule, in describing how anxiety is the primary affect of the novel, comments on this permeability of bodies via affect – observing that "[w]orry in the novel operates as a collective force moving through human bodies but also between and outside of them" (323). Darl is conscious of this interspecific permeation of affect and uses it to perceive himself as a subject outside of *logos*. The permeability that Darl embraces is a threat to the workforce because it threatens the socially constructed delineation of the body, the treatment of thoughts and feelings as private and independent. Darl's destabilizing of the body's boundaries is posthuman because it deconstructs the boundaries of the "human," and reconstructs them as sites of permeability, sites of affectual transference and interconnection. He becomes "a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (Braidotti 2352). Darl not only challenges the boundaries of humanism, but he also posits a transformation, a becoming of something more-than, or *post*human.

At least one other critic has identified Darl's madness as a social determination: Homer B. Pettey's approach to Darl's relationship with *logos* deconstructs his subject position without offering him an alternative means of being. Pettey recognizes that for Cash, "the concept of insanity is merely a social construct," but this point is only peripheral to his argument (43). His is more concerned with Darl's sense of perception, and how his "world is constituted in terms of the presence of others" (41). For Pettey, Darl's sense of being is contingent on his perceptions, which are distinct from the Real world and haunted by recollections of his family: "Darl's world is not the result of a subject visualizing objects, but of a subject deeply and profoundly affected by the perceptions and presence of others" (41). This does speak to Darl's sense of intersubjectivity, but Pettey ultimately regards Darl's perceptions as a "network of symbols that do not convey reality, but displace and negate it" (27). This position, because it equates his perceptions to symbols—a mechanic of the language he rejects, does not allow for an unsymbolic Darl to be defined as anything *but* mad. As Pettey concludes, "Darl laughs because he lacks words to express his being" (45). This is true, but what remains unstated is that Darl's laughter, despite its wordlessness, *is* still an expression of his being. Darl's perception and expression of affect offers him an alternative to logocentric means of being; Darl still *is*, but what he *is* is an interspecific, affective, posthuman subject. Darl's awareness of this affective self becomes apparent in the train scene towards the end of the

novel. Southard argues that "[o]n the train to Jackson, he cannot contain his own identity—just as he disrupted the limits of others' identities by penetrating the boundaries of their minds and bodies" (61). It is true that Darl separates into two voices: third-person, "Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing"; and first person, "'What are you laughing at' I said" (149). He also re-presences himself as his siblings, offering more voices to the mix: "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson . . . looking out he foams. 'Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes'" (149). At this moment, Darl's multiple perspectives are not because he "cannot contain" his identity; he has no discernable identity to contain. Rather, Darl is recognizing the distinction between his extrinsic self – the "I" – and his intrinsic, Real self—the self he addresses as Darl. He is realizing (becoming aware of, but also, making-real) the fact that he cannot adequately assert his Real self within the Symbolic, and in response, he reverts to animal language: he laughs. Darl laughs because laughter is a *sound*, an original, animal mode of communication. The "yes," by repetition becomes a sound to complement the laughter. Both are sublinguistic expressions reflective of his becoming-animal. White describes an "animal cry" as "*in*articulate, yet communicative" (88), furthering that "animals signal their fear without restraint . . . its disturbing *inarticulateness*, derives from the other side of language; it is a language of the body rather than the mind (88, 87). In this final moment, Darl voices directly from the "other side of language." His voice becomes a signless expression of affect. By disavowing the Symbolic, Darl does not become-nothing; he becomes-animal.

Foucault argues that in recent history, "it was the departure from the norm, the anomaly… . . . that haunted the school, the court, the asylum or the prison" (1414). Darl's inhuman body is the "anomaly" that merits his confinement in "the asylum," making him what Foucault calls a "deviant" (1415). Darl differs from the Southern, productive human norm, and so he must be isolated, the virile communicability of his deviancy unknown. Furthermore, the description of Darl as "queer" by the townsfolk watching the Bundrens, as well as from Darl's own family, attests to their recognition of his deviance. For instance, Cash remarks, "I see all the while how folks could say he was queer, but that was the very reason couldn't nobody hold it personal. It was like he was outside of it too, same as you, and getting mad at it would be kind of like getting mad at a mud-puddle that splashed you when you stepped in it" (139). Cash's remark that Darl is "outside of it," implies that Darl is "outside" of the discussion that labels him as queer. This suggests that queerness is not intrinsic to Darl; he is outside of queerness and it is outside of him. Queerness is simply attributed to him, etched into the surface of his body. Just like a "mud-puddle" is inert and harmless until stepped in, Darl's deviance only becomes "real" and harmful once "stepped in" or acted on by outside forces.

Darl's subversion of humanism by redefining the boundaries of the bodyboyd and becoming-animal is what makes him crazy. Darl's becoming-animal makes him "queer," but he doesn't explicitly become "crazy" until he is apprehended—the overt madness of laughing and palilalia are produced by his apprehension. As Vardaman says, "*My brother went crazy and he went to Jackson too. Jackson is further away than crazy*" (148). Vardaman, in trying to comprehend the situation, reasons that if Jackson is far away, and Darl is still nearby (on the train), and if Darl *is* crazy, then "*Jackson is further away than crazy*," or farther away than Darl. For Vardaman, the word "crazy" replaces the word "Darl." Darl's social persona, his

Symbolic self, is no longer recognized as "Darl," instead it's identified as *crazy*. Darl's queer posthumanism is the linguistic delinquency that subverts humanity. He is a threat to the reproducibility of the human form, in a sense that is at once biological and ideological, and that makes him *crazy*.

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Useful Politeness: Manipulation of Grief in "The Lament of Mary"

by TJ Advincula De Los Angeles

The concept of the "Virgin Mary" is used to impress unrealistic expectations on mothers and women within stories written in Middle English. Some works use very explicit images of the holy mother of Jesus, using her to show how "good" a woman is or as a direct comparison to show how dissimilar a female character is to her. In doing so, authors can achieve the dual effect of showing how women are expected to perform and how women underperform. "The Lament of Mary" in *Codex Ashmole 61* contains an example of the aforementioned "explicit image" of Mary with this version of her using graphic imagery to detail the death of her son. As she does this, she is seen changing between a sympathetic tone for the mothers who are in a similar position of having to grieve their late sons and a chastising tone for their inability to react with the grace she did since her son's death was far worse than anything their sons could have experienced. To fully achieve the dual identity of a sympathetic woman and a chastising mentor, this "Mary" implements a very intentional switching between formal and informal pronouns. This caricature of Mary from "The Lament of Mary" strategically switches between pronouns in pursuit of manipulating the mournful mothers of the text into performing grief the way she believes they should. She does this by coercing the women through her specific word choices into trying their best to mimic her and to attempt to achieve the impossible, unrealistic standard of perfection she sets for mothers.

There is a subtle, yet purposeful, difference between the use of "T" and "Y" when one person addresses another in Middle English texts. Irma Taavitsainen and Andreas H. Jucker discuss this difference, quoting William Walter Skeat about how "*thou* is the language of the lord to a servant, of an equal, and expresses companionship, love, permission, defiance, scorn, threatening; whilst *ye* is the language of a servant to a lord, and of compliment, and further expresses honour, submission, or entreaty" (12). However, the two pronouns are nuanced, as "Middle English… had retractable address pronoun systems… two interlocutors could switch their pronoun usage depending on the current situation, on discourse status and on emotion" (15). These observations support the conclusions that Minna Nevala draws in her research on pronoun usage private correspondence, as she notes that "social superiority plays an important role: members of a higher rank receive YOU from their inferiors, who are

addressed with THOU in return" (Nevala 137). Not only was pronoun usage important to keep in mind in general speech, the adherence to pronoun rules even extended to communication done in private. As the specific situations in which specific pronouns were rather stringent, Mary's utilization of varying pronouns cannot be overlooked as unimportant. Despite the knowledge that Mary would always be regarded in a position of superiority to anyone that she would be addressing, she changes from formal to informal pronouns so consistently. This pronoun oscillation would insinuate that there are instances where Mary views herself as inferior to the grieving mothers. However, the way her pronoun choices change depending on what she is saying reflects an intentionality to her actions. It is not a matter of her viewing herself as below the grieving mothers, but it is a subtle appeal to the behavior of the mothers and how they should change their displays of grief.

While the situation in which formal or informal pronouns are used appear to be set and strict, there are instances where the pronouns that are used shift and evolve with the speaker's perspective on who they are addressing. Gabriele Knappe looks at the changing of pronouns in *Canterbury Tales,* analyzing why switches between the two would occur in Middle English texts. They posit the argument that "developments in the attitude of the speaker towards the addressee in the course of the text have repeatedly been claimed as the motivating factor for the changes" (Knappe 214). As Taavitsainen drew conclusions about Middle English pronouns being dependent on situation, Knappe expands on the school of thought with their "collocational phraseological hypothesis." This idea claims that "certain lexical cotexts may trigger the choice of pronoun" (217). This hypothesis insinuates that the pronouns being used are dependent on the conversation which is being had between the addresser and addressee. Similar to pronouns being dependent on the words that accompany it in a sentence, pronouns can be used with intention in order to establish a different meaning from those same surrounding words. When addressing the mothers, Mary first uses formal language: "Behold and se, / And make ye no mone for your chyld, / Of Godys sond if it dede be. For if ye do, ye be not wyse / To se my sone as he lyghet here" ("The Lament…" lines 11–14). Given the co-text of these lines, there is no particular reason as to why she would address the women so formally with her as the addresser to her addressees. Despite the lack of explicit reasoning, this choice to use formal pronouns appears to be done in an attempt to address and change the undesirable reactions of the mothers, keeping in mind the position she's in as she mentions her son is also God's son. If her son can suffer in such horrific ways and she can control her grief and emotions, then other mothers should have no problem doing the same. She continues, stating that "for thi sone dyghed my dere don dere" (line 16). She now reverts to using the informal pronoun, insinuating familiarity. The different co-text has initiated this change, since she is talking about both her grief and the grief of the mothers that are not her. They are similar in the loss of their sons; Mary, who is a mother of higher social standing, can relate to the other mothers through grief. She honors and respects the mothers through their shared experience of grief, but she makes sure to reestablish their different social ranks as she reminds them of whose son is the one who suffered the most.

There exists a pattern for which pronoun Mary decides to use and this pattern correlates with the co- text of the sentence. Each stanza ends with her addressing the mothers with the "th" pronoun as she reminds them that her son died for theirs. Given the large use of

these “th” pronouns, her use of the “y” pronouns appears quite calculated. When she is talking about her son in the words surrounding the pronoun she chooses to use, she addresses the mothers with this “y.” This displays their sense of mutual suffering in this experience of grief, creating a scenario where the women could be addressed respectfully by the holy mother herself. Yet, these pronouns become a tool to manipulate the grieving mothers as she continues to shift between them. When she uses the “y” pronoun, she validates their grief and allows them to feel as though they are suffering just as much, if not more, than Mary. She then grounds them back in reality as she switches back to “th” pronouns, reminding the mothers that they may share this grief but that they should not forget their place in relation to her. She will always be above them and they can only ever have these handpicked moments of feigned equality through Mary’s acknowledgement that yes, she and the rest of the mothers have experienced grief.

The decision to use Mary as a character to manipulate the grieving mothers highlights the unrealistic expectations of mothers in general in medieval England. Their grief was to be contained, and their standard was a woman who was not only the mother of God but both a virgin and a mother, an act that is quite literally impossible. As Mary Beth Long analyzes the development of maternity through loss and grief, she states how “medieval people understood, thanks largely to horrifying perinatal and child mortality rates, that to give birth was also to create a death, be it imminent or distant, and possibly to hasten one’s own” (Long 329). Long provides the setting for how mothers were expected to operate in this time period: always expect death and don’t be surprised by it. This practice ignores the possibility that women could be upset by the loss of a child, since “even with its relative awareness of pregnancy- related losses and child mortality, medieval literary England doesn’t quite have the capacity for so much maternal sorrow” (330). Death and loss were happening in excess, and yet mothers were expected to keep their emotions in check. In looking at how Mary is being used to enforce this reaction to grief, Long states how “maternal lamentation should be framed as empathy for Mary or sorrow for Christ rather than personal sorrow… ‘women’s displays of grief disturbed peace and order’” (337–39). This suggests that this Mary was simply doing her charitable duty of ensuring that the mothers in “The Lament of Mary” were acting in a suitable manner by not only emulating her likeness, but also by keeping the peace in public where visible presentations of their grief would be disturbing to onlookers. If they can remember the moments where she addresses them so formally with her rare “y” pronouns, then they can remember all the times she scolded them using the “th” pronoun as she reminds them of why they are beneath her in performance as a mother.

The purpose for Mary’s reinforcement of how women are supposed to grieve is to establish Mary as the sole standard for the performance of grief. Judith Butler’s theory on gender performance can be greatly useful in understanding the compulsion of these mothers to mimic Mary, especially when thinking of how “acts, gestures, enactment, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 2384). Mary is enacting a sort of maternal performance, serving as an adequate parallel between the performance of motherhood in this story and the performance of gender that Butler has established. The mothers in “The Lament of Mary” are expected to emulate Mary herself, resulting in a partial rendition of the holy mother

since they can attempt to "perform" her but never actually be her. When discussing the art of drag as gender parody, Butler says that "the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy… gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (2385–86). This is the parody of Mary's lamentations: she's manipulating these mothers to live up to her "original" definition of motherhood with gentle and understanding words to make these women feel seen, yet she's setting these socialized expectations of how mothers should be acting. Just as Long was arguing, the women of this Mary's time were expected to keep their emotions hidden from the public. Even if they were enduring immense grief and sorrow, they were expected to not disturb anyone else with it. This is the action of medieval motherhood, an action which is expected to be repeated so these mothers can live up to that unrealistic standard of Mary. To entice them to stay accommodating, Mary used coaxing language to make them feel like they would be successful in their steps to becoming more like her. If they kept performing the actions of Mary's form of motherhood, then they would surely become women whom others would need to use "ye" to address.

While it may seem inconsequential initially, there appears to be purpose behind Mary's particular usage of either the "Y" or "T" pronouns in "The Lament of Mary." This subtle decision of the unnamed author creates an environment of absurdity: Mary is an unattainable example, and yet she expects other mothers to perform in her likeness. She creates a social divide, and yet she appeals to the women who are categorically beneath her through similar experiences. She is supposed to represent piety and mercy, and yet her invalidation of the grieving women is expected to be accepted. This Mary attempted to make these women feel comfort through the familiarity of "ye," only for her to reaffirm that there will be no familiarity between her and them once they finish listening to her lament and she returns to her use of "thy." In using "ye" to place the other women above her socially, she is fulfilling her role of the humble, holy mother who is selfless. And yet, it juxtaposes with her intent. When she uses "ye," it presents itself as emotional manipulation through relating to people who are devoted to her to get them to react how she wants them to. "Y" is being used when she's actively telling them to do something, "th" is used when she's passively trying to show them how wrong their reactions are. She places these women above her when she appeals to their behavior, and she discontinues that pattern when she brings up whatever she can to prove her unreachable performance as "Mary." This separation is ironic since her use of "ye" to address the mothers who are socially beneath her puts her in higher regard since she is being so humble as to refer to the common women so politely. She is the mother of Christ, and yet she uses elevated pronouns when telling the women how they should behave. This Mary is aware that her use of these pronouns would make these women more inclined to obey, since someone who is of a clearly higher status is addressing them in such a way while appealing to them. She is deliberate and manipulative, and she is aware that her language has the authority to alter the behaviors of these mothers with one simple pronoun switch. As an impossible standard, her actions in "The Lament of Mary" display the merciless environment that mothers existed in during the text's creation; just as it is impossible to be both a virgin and a

mother, it is impossible to be a mother who can react perfectly and mildly when faced with the death of her child.

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Retaining Sovereignty through Gaze Reversals: Politics of Race and Gender in *Oroonoko*

by Aachal Patel

The royal youth appeared in spite of the slave.
–Aphra Behn

Behn's *Oroonoko* relies heavily on visualization and the concept of gaze, which complicates the imperial hierarchies and implies that race is gendered. By that, I mean that there is an intrinsic relationship between race and gender that affects the perception of and interaction with racialized people. The British are representatives of patriarchism, while the Africans are othered and feminized due to racial differences. I will argue that despite the contrast in the gaze relationships between the British and Oroonoko and the British and Imoinda, Oroonoko asserts his differential position through his complex gaze relationships. The British characters threaten their royal status through several racial and gender constructions that partly undermine their authority but are unable to completely assimilate the African royals with the other slaves on the plantation. Hence, both are alienated from their Royal African identity as well as their identity as African slaves in Surinam. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* will be instrumental in understanding the space that Oroonoko and Imoinda occupy within the colonial structure that blurs their concrete African identity, for they no longer belong to either Coramantien or Surinam. Hence, the African characters occupy a space that exists somewhere between the two lands due to the interweaving of their royal Coramantien and slavish Surinam identities.

Critical debates on *Oronooko* have often focused on the racial difference in the text, and several scholars have regarded it as an abolitionist text. There is an intrinsic relationship between race and gender that affects the perception of and interaction with racialized people in the text. Kelly Wezner explores the concept of gaze relationships between Oroonoko and the Narrator through eyewitness accounts to establish the accuracy of her account. By relying on the gaze relationships introduced by Wezner, I will navigate the consequences of engaging in a gendered and racial relationship within a colonial setup. The interactions between the marginalized gender position of the female narrator and the racially marginal position of the African male protagonist present a set of complex questions that may offer a variety

of implications. Through the lens of spectacle and spectator, Ramesh Mallipeddi explores the commodification of Oroonoko's black body, which presents important insights into the shifting power dynamics between the narrator and Oroonoko. Both critics focus on the visuals of Oroonoko and the relationships that stem from such visualization. On the other hand, Susan Andrade uses the proximity between the narrator and Oroonoko to justify his change from a noble prince to a savage. She also focuses on the hidden sexual relationship between the narrator and Oroonoko by using Imoinda to define their relationship, as her role is primarily passive throughout the narrative.

An essential aspect that Megan Griffin observes is the death scene in *Oroonoko*, which, according to her, complicates the discourses on Royalism and the violent establishment of English colonialism and the slave trade. Oroonoko's passiveness initially with the boat captain and then with the deputy governor is discussed by Corrinne Harol, who gives essential insight into the functioning of the gaze relationships between Oroonoko and the British men. Though passive, Oroonoko expresses his disapproval and contempt through his firm and disdainful gaze and remains courteous and honorable, which connects to Anita Pacheco's emphasis on the discourse of religion in the novella, in which she differentiates between the overweighing honor of Oroonoko and a firm critique of English through Christianity which presents them to be unreliable and un-honorable. Sarah Marsh focuses on the colonial racialization and the ancient constitution of Coramantien, which has a pre-slavery history, mapping the role of Imoinda in the rebellion against "the chattel-slavery of the colony's developing racial regime, which deprives Africans of legal protections and creates Africans as heritable English property" (641). She discusses her important role in the slave rebellion and as a formidable companion to Oroonoko; she matches his valor and dies to protect her dignity and her child from being born into slavery, hence saving it from colonial ownership.

As Oroonoko's identity and position in Surinam is complex, it allows him to return the gaze of his white counterparts as he occupies the dominant gender position along with his royalty, which enhances his social position in comparison to other African slaves. The gaze relationship between the boat captain and Oroonoko is the first one that the narrator dictates by presenting an Englishman who, according to her, is well-bred but commits a treacherous act which she refuses to comment upon as it would put her in jeopardy due to her status as a white woman. Wezner focuses on the eyewitness accounts of the narrator and her proxies to discuss the gaze relationship and reversal between Oroonoko and the narrator but has not explored the other gaze relationships. The gaze relationships that I establish will provide an understanding of the complex position both Oroonoko and Imoinda occupy. The boat captain is described as a man "never to have been bred out of a court, then almost all his life at sea" (Behn 63), depicting the narrator's thoughts of him. However, his actions are not synonymous with his reputation. When he restrains Oroonoko and his company on the ship, they refuse to eat, and at that moment, he is 'looking' at them while stating, "the loss of so many brave soldiers, so tall and goodly to behold" (63). This visual representation places the captured black men as objects since they are being beheld, which suggests a white gaze on the black people who have been captured to be sold as slaves. Mallipeddi asserts the commodification of Oroonoko's body in the later part of the novella once he has been enslaved (476). Since the

black hostages are healthy, tall, and handsome, they will make good commodities that are to be sold; the captain's gaze on them is both objectifying and exoticizing. Oroonoko's dominant gender position is reduced to a lower one due to his race, which is the defining characteristic of the power dynamics in the imperial structure of the transatlantic slave trade. Oroonoko is unlike the slaves he is sold with; he is a Coramantien royal. Being on the cusp of being sold into slavery, his princely status is challenged. He fits neither a royal nor a slave and is stranded in the borderlands, where he embodies both identities.

Oroonoko utilizes the codes of honor and morality to rebel against the corruption and inability of Christianity to tether the captain to maintain his virtue through his fear of God. Nevertheless, the gaze relationship is further complicated when Oroonoko, despite being passive, returns the gaze of the boat captain, which is powerful and patronizing. When the captain does not keep his word, and Oroonoko discovers that he is being sold, he "beheld the captain with a look all fierce and disdainful, upbraiding him with eyes, that forced blushes on his guilty cheeks" (Behn 65). Here, the same word "beheld" is used, which insinuates 'looking' or 'gazing,' which reverses the gaze relationship. This places the boat captain in the object position and Oroonoko in the active-subject position through his defiant and critiquing gaze. Oroonoko provides a harsh critique of the Christian faith. The narrator states, "he was very sorry to hear that the captain pretended to the knowledge and worship of any gods who had taught him no better principles than not to credit as he would be credited" (64). Here, he attacks the captain's deceit to keep his word by rendering religion useless since he lacks morals or honor. According to Pacheco, Oroonoko's ability to keep his word and the fear of the inability to do so can govern the practice of virtue better than "the ability of the Christian church to guarantee the good conduct of the vulgar," which she states is the idea Behn seems to be advocating in the novella. The boat captain is not the first Christian in the narrative to not follow through with his word. There are other Christians, like the deputy governor and even the narrator, who fail to keep their word and deliberately deceive Oroonoko.

Oroonoko retains his dignity through the critique of the values and religion of the boat captain, along with his gaze reversal, which, despite not doing anything to free him, allows his royalty and high moral values to shine through. The reversal in the imperial power structure occurs here due to the "forced blushes on his guilty cheeks" (65), presents the idea that the captain is ashamed of his tactics despite committing them. Earlier, he was uncaring of what he was doing to someone he called a friend, but now that Oroonoko is returning that gaze, he feels the shame of betrayal. Furthermore, the captain's behavior resembles the narrator's shifting views of Oroonoko once he is in Surinam. Corrinne Harol's argument of the instrumentality of passiveness in *Oroonoko* is visible in the African prince's subtle and passive acts of dominance and rebuke towards the white English characters who repeatedly fail to keep their word. Instead of using his military valor in a place where he is subordinated due to his inferior race, he uses passive tactics to balance the power relations between the superior colonial forces of the English and his own mixed identity.

The narrator's initial description of Oroonoko at the beginning of the novella is charged with the intricacies of the white gaze, racialized language, and her attempt to assimilate him with Europeans. Wezner presents a detailed study of the first actual encounter between Oroonoko and the narrator, pointing to his objectification and commodification. She states,

"She [Behn] aligns Oroonoko's romanticized and objectified description with his value as a commodity" (17). Mallipeddi refers to the complicated relationship between the spectacle (Oroonoko) and the spectator (the narrator) and the resulting commodification of Oroonoko's royal enslaved body (476). The very first glance into the narrator's mind regarding Oroonoko is revealed at the beginning of the novella. She describes him as "adorned with a native beauty transcending all those of his gloomy race...as he did in me, who beheld him with surprise and wonder" (Behn 51). These lines portray exceptionalism and differentiate Oroonoko from the rest of his race. She used racialized terms like "native" (51), "gloomy" (51), and "moor" (51). These words adhere to the racial difference between Oroonoko and the English people, making the attempts to glorify and assimilate Oroonoko futile. This line also depicts the clear racial difference between the narrator and Oroonoko by exoticizing him, i.e., the other in the power relationship. Despite the narrator's marginalized gender position, she is the dominant power force due to the negation of Oroonoko's dominant gender due to his inferior race. This reveals a very nuanced colonial power structure that emerged with the establishment and development of the colonial slave trade.

The gaze relationship between the white female narrator and the black African prince is complicated because of their respective race and gender, which further complicates the imperial power structure. The power in the gaze relationship oscillates between the two, depending on their situation. Wezner and Mallipeddi examine this relationship in depth through visual aspects of the novella. While Wezner defines and explores their relationship through the gaze, Mallipeddi focuses on Oroonoko's body as a spectacle and the narrator's relationship to Oroonoko's commodified body. These arguments prove helpful in establishing Oroonoko as an exotic African slave whose identity is unstable and indecipherable due to his royal status. The concept of gaze is instrumental in attempting to define the space occupied by Oroonoko between his two identities, which remains a complex subject throughout the narrative. Wezner refers to the reversal in power dynamics based on gender, as the narrator can be the active subject, while Oroonoko is the observed object (17). Hence, the narrator has complete power over Oroonoko. As the narrator, she retains complete control of Oroonoko's image. As a white female and a part of the institution of the British plantations, she is superior to Oroonoko in terms of race. This becomes clearer when she reveals Oroonoko's address as "Great Mistress" for her and how her "word would go a great way with him" (Behn 69), which depicts not only her influence on him but also the clear imperial hierarchy. He may be superior in gender, but in Surinam, that is negated due to his race. In her reading of this scene, Andrade suggests that this is her verbal acceptance of the "explicit difference in their status as well as of an implied sexual relation" (199). However, I must depart from that view due to the unbalanced power dynamics involved in their relationship. The word "mistress" may have a sexual connotation. Still, Behn uses that term here to assert the racial and social difference between the narrator and Oroonoko and to portray the impossibility of an equal friendship between them.

However, Oroonoko reverses the gaze relationships between him and his white counterparts, along with portraying his obvious imperial gaze over the slaves that he had sold. His enslavement places him in an interesting position where he suffers the consequences of being the object of sale rather than the subject who does the selling. In this way, he, too,

occupies a space between being a seller of slaves and being a slave. Marsh notes the shift in Oroonoko's position by highlighting the difference between "royal sovereignty and racial slavery," suggesting that Oroonoko oscillates between the two and his identity becomes blurred due to the continuous change and ambiguity in Oroonoko's position from being a slave trader, a slave, and a prince (641–42). Once in Surinam, Oroonoko is treated as an enslaver and king by his fellow Africans but is ambivalently treated as a royal slave by the English. This ambivalence, paired with the impossibility of separating Oroonoko's royal identity from his identity as a slave, places him in what Anzaldua terms "the borderlands." In trying to fight against the dominant colonial and racial forces, *Oroonoko* presents a discourse on religion that critiques Christian beliefs to assert his moral and noble superiority. Pacheco notes that, according to Oroonoko, Christianity offers no aftermath in the real world and threatens punishment in the afterlife, which provides no incentive to be honest. At the same time, his codes of honor and morals have real consequences that affect him and all those around him immediately (256). This sets him apart from the Englishmen on another level, as despite being non-Christian, he is initially portrayed as an ideal man due to the morality and honesty that his Christian counterparts fail to uphold.

Oroonoko portrays the ability of Englishmen and women for betrayal and, in turn, elevates Oroonoko and Imoinda in terms of morals, depicting them in a more positive light despite their allegedly inferior race. This further distorts their fixed identity as they are neither entirely African royals nor African slaves once in Surinam. The deputy governor—Byam, is one of the cruelest people in the play, through which Behn portrays the cruelty and force of the slave traders and British officials involved in it during the beginning of the institution of the plantations. He is very similar to the boat captain who pretends to be friends with Caesar but betrays him by selling him as a slave. Like the captain, Byam acts to mean well to Caesar, promises him and Imoinda their freedom, and betrays them on multiple occasions. He is dishonorable and unashamed, using low tactics and conspiring to keep Oroonoko enslaved. When the uprising fails, and Byam captures Oroonoko along with Tuscan to be whipped, Oroonoko "who was not perceived to make any moan, or to alter his face, only to roll his eyes…with fierceness and indignation" (Behn 78). These lines portray two gaze relationships. The first one positions Oroonoko as the object and his aggressors as the subject, as they "perceive" him. He is stubborn and does not give them the satisfaction of seeing him in pain. This invokes the second gaze relationship that arises as a reaction to his betrayal by the deputy governor as well as the other slaves and his brutal beating. In this gaze relationship, he is the subject who gazes at his punishers and the slaves who betrayed him. He conveys his emotions through his gaze, which has proven powerful before when he deals with the boat captain. Though passive, he subjects the deputy governor to be the object of his furious gaze and inverts the power positions of the colonial power structure. Here, he is separated from his white enslavers and his fellow African slaves due to his non-conformity towards the imperial codes of racial hierarchy, which places him in a unique position.

The most apparent subversion in gaze relationships occurs when the narrator, Oroonoko, and several others visit the native Indian inhabitants. Through the inversion of the subject-object relationship, Behn reveals the fascination with the 'other' through the lens of a marginalized community. Oroonoko, like his English counterparts, is an observer

who is neither a native inhabitant nor the English. He is merely an observer who watches the interaction between the two races, yet again occupying a space in the middle. He does not belong to either race or hold either the dominant or marginalized positions. The narrator describes the contrasts between the native inhabitants and the English in detail to highlight the disparity between the morals and cultures and to objectify and exoticize the native Indian inhabitants. The Indians took the hands of the English people and "looked on us roundabout, calling still for more company" (73). This clearly suggests the subversion of the subject-object gaze relationship. The English have been reduced to objects of wonder to the inhabitants who occupy the curious subject position. Not only that, but the inhabitants also push the boundaries of this subversion further as they "grew more bold, and from gazing upon us round, they touched us" (73). So far, in all the gaze relationships I have discussed, the subject has not reached beyond gazing. All feelings and actions are conveyed through the gaze and the legitimacy of the gaze. Here, the English are thoroughly and literally objectified and touched by the native inhabitants. Through this scene, Behn portrays curiosity and anxieties regarding race that the early moderns faced due to Britain's increasing trade and colonial expansion. However, instead of being the subject of such observations, they become the object of the observations. Though Imoinda's honor is threatened due to the fear of potential rape, there is no such touching of her or Oroonoko by the English. Only gazes are exchanged between Oroonoko and his English counterparts. Possibly, the reason for no touching to be involved here is due to their unfixed and unstable identities that place them in a position higher than that of African slaves. The English are subjected to objectification by Oroonoko, as well through his passive gaze that shames the English more than the touching they are subjected to by the native inhabitants.

However, the inhabitants are not free from scrutiny and are subjected to the white gaze of the narrator and her white counterparts. Though she praises their race for certain practices, she also subjects their war captains to a negative gaze and likens them to "hobgoblins" and "fiends" in look but commends "their souls very humane and noble" (74). Yet again, this ambivalence, which also appears in her perception of Oroonoko, complicates the gaze relationship. The war captains are good and noble like Oroonoko but, unlike him, lack the outer beauty and "European traits" that likens them to the English. In attributing European traits to Oroonoko along with the telling Roman name Caesar, the narrator alienates Oroonoko from the rest of his African population and later the African slaves. She sets him apart not only in his values and knowledge of French and English (53) but also for having "ebony" colored skin instead of "that brown, rusty black" (53). By framing Oroonoko as a European in morals and knowledge but not in color, she separates him based on color and principles, completely isolating him from his race. This complete isolation is due to the difference she points out in his skin color, insinuating that he was unlike most of his race. She does not let him fit in with his people in Surinam and then later in Surinam amongst the African slaves. Hence, he must oscillate and navigate the two identities ascribed to him, one by his birth and the other when he is sold into the plantation.

Trefry embodies the amiable characteristics of the female narrator while being male, like the boat captain and the deputy governor, presenting another reaction to the unstable identities of the two protagonists that further reveals the complexity of the gaze relationships

that the characters participate in. By presenting both characteristics, Trefry represents a mix of the white male and female gaze. However, it is essential to remember that his position changes completely when his white male gaze is on Imoinda. When Trefry encounters Oroonoko for the first time, terms like "beholding" and "fixed his eyes on him" are used to put forth the explicit nature of his white gaze on Oroonoko (65). Despite the text being mediated by the narrator, she clarifies that her thoughts are Trefry's. By describing Oroonoko as having "something so extraordinary in his face, his shape and mien, a greatness of look" (65), Trefry assimilates himself to the views of the narrator as she similarly introduces Oroonoko by using language that describes his looks, stating that "his mouth, finest shaped" (52). Not only that, he also comments upon Oroonoko's ability to speak English (65), yet again similar to the narrator's fascination with the "European traits" he possesses. Trefry sets Oroonoko apart from the common enslaved people, making an exception solely for him, and "loved him as his dearest brother" (65) due to his looks and the rich vest he was dressed in. Much like the narrator, by gazing at Oroonoko, Trefry makes several assumptions about him relating to his class and manners and treats him not according to the code of the imperial power structure but as an equal. Trefry's reaction to the royal African changes depending on whether it is the male—Oroonoko or the female—Imoinda. However, the narrator does not treat Oroonoko as an equal; sometimes, she presents him as the most remarkable man, and on other occasions, she places herself above him.

The dynamics between Trefry and Imoinda are based on the imperial code of power, and she is a commodity that he owns, though he refuses to take her over completely. When first describing Imoinda, he states that "they had the most charming black that ever was beheld on their plantation" and "he had done nothing but sigh for her" (67). The use of the word "beheld" yet again presents Trefry's racialized and gendered gaze on Imoinda. It is full of desire but also loaded with racial language, such as his describing her as "black." Not only that, but he also admits that he does not find white women attractive anymore, which presents an issue of fetishizing and exoticizing the other (67). Here, his treatment of Imoinda is similar and dissimilar to that of Oroonoko. While he treats him as his brother (65), he treats Imoinda as an object of sexual desire and has often "transported with [his] passion, even above decency" (67). This marks a difference in Trefry's white gaze on Imoinda as opposed to his white gaze on Imoinda. In Imoinda's case, Trefry is dominant in terms of both gender and race, along with his ownership of her, which subjugates her. Meanwhile, in his gaze on Oroonoko, he is equal to him in gender but dominant in race. However, Oroonoko's noble birth and personality make up for his marginal position in terms of race, so Trefry makes an exception and treats him better.

Trefry's dominant position in the gaze relationship does not stop him from being amiable to the African royals and treating them respectfully, embodying a distinct view of their inferior and confused position in Surinam. Trefry is male and white, hence occupying the same dominant position that both the deputy governor and boat captain hold, yet treats Oroonoko differently, aligning more with the gaze relationship that the narrator has with the African prince. However, he does not have the same views as them. Pacheco aligns Trefry's moral code to be based upon honor, stating that "The promise on honor, not God, identifies Trefry as a member of the exclusive club of honorable men" (265). Religion is an important

aspect that sets him apart from his white male counterparts who rely on making promises through God and Christianity that have no real repercussions. Like the white males in the novella, he does portray the desire to sexually "own" Imoinda (67). However, his inaction on his desires sets him apart from his cruel, promise-breaking counterparts. Despite being Imoinda's owner and superior, he refuses to force himself and his desire on her. Caesar applauds him, i.e., Oroonoko, who shares a similar moral set (67). Here, Trefry's virtues and morals appear closer to Oroonoko than his people. This raises many questions regarding the intention behind Trefry's empathy and genuine care for Oroonoko and Imoinda.

Imoinda is subject to the imperial gaze of the English, Oroonoko, and his grandfather, revealing her nuanced occupation of a gendered identity that is further distorted after being reunited with Oroonoko in Surinam. After the heroic yet sad love story in Coramantien, Imoinda is absent for most of the novel, only reappearing again when Oroonoko is in Surinam. However, due to her beauty, the narrator portrays her objectification early on when Oroonoko is still in Coramantien. The relationship between Oroonoko and Imoinda is based on the traditional set of gender and imperial roles. Her objectification is significant because she is objectified on two fronts: one by Oroonoko and his grandfather, where she is in a marginal gender position, and then by the English in Surinam, where both her race and gender are inferior. She is Oroonoko's subordinate and is often depicted as his property. According to the narrator, Imoinda's "face and person was so exceeding all he had ever beheld" (53), which suggests a gaze relationship as Oroonoko is looking at her. It is her beauty that first enamors him. Another thing worth noting is that Oroonoko gifts her a hundred and fifty slaves, which makes their fate ironic (53). Oroonoko and Imoinda go from belonging to a noble family to being slaves, the very thing Oroonoko had initially gifted her. Oroonoko's imperial nature remains, but his imperial superiority fails due to his race. Similarly, the beauty of Imoinda bewitches everyone around her, even the white Trefry, who is unable to pursue his desires due to Imoinda's earnestness (67), very much like the same pleading and tactics she uses to negotiate her forced sexual relationship with the old Coramantien king at the beginning. However, with Oroonoko, she submits completely and marries him.

Imoinda is subjected to the imperial gaze of the King of Coramantien, placing her in a subjugated position that forces her to bend to his perverted and cruel wishes, causing problems between her and Oroonoko. The king is curious about her because his courtiers praise her beauty, which suggests a visual aspect of their relationship. However, her summoning to the palace before the king solidifies the gaze relationship between them. The first time he lays his eyes on her, "the old monarch saw and burnt; he found her all he had heard" (54). His "seeing" her and her matching what he had "heard" about her suggests that there was truth in what he had heard about her beauty. Her beauty was so enchanting that he "burnt" for her. The king uses all means possible to have Imoinda to himself. He presents her with the royal veil, which she cannot refuse because the penalty for refusing the veil is death (54). Imoinda is utterly helpless in this imperial structure because she deals with a man and the king, who hold all power over her and the rest of the nation and its people. The king is so taken by the beauty of Imoinda that he disregards his grandson, who is in love with her and forces Imoinda to be with him. He is cruel to the point where he forces Oroonoko to watch him and Imoinda together at the Otan. This reveals the misogyny of the African king and

underscores Imoinda's subservient class and gender position. She is a subject of the king and, hence, is bound to follow his orders despite being Oroonoko's lover.

The tumultuous position occupied by the two African royals in the borderlands is resolved through their death scenes as they are both reduced to objects through which power is negotiated. First, Oroonoko asserts his power and control over his property, Imoinda, and the unborn child. Then, the English make an example out of Oroonoko due to his disobedience and unwillingness to remain enslaved. The death scenes present a contrast in which Imoinda's death is only seen by Oroonoko since he is her husband, and his death is seen by his owners—the British, who make a spectacle of him, possibly to warn the other slaves of his fate of those who oppose them. The cruelty of both the death scenes is shocking but also necessary to reveal the larger implications of the growing institution of slavery, the treatment of the slaves and the people involved in the trade, as well as those who owned slaves and plantations. Imoinda's death is necessary due to the need to preserve her honor and to protect both her and his child from being victims to the British. However, according to Megan Griffin, "within the text, Oroonoko's death does nothing for his wife and child, who are already dead; he provides no inspiring figure to the other slaves" (108), which is true, but there are more significant implications at work. I contend that through his death, Behn addresses the cruelty of the British plantations and slave trade along with the impossibility of being free. The only way to escape slavery and the British officials is death. Oroonoko kills Imoinda in fear of not being able to escape as he might be killed; he is aware of this impossibility of escape and her more brutal commodification through their child, who, instead of being born in royalty, will be born in slavery.

Oroonoko takes control and sovereignty over his property, this being his wife, as he kills her by slicing her throat open despite her being with a child (Behn 80). He separates her head from the body that is "yet smiling" (80) and lays "the body decently on leaves and flowers, of which he made a bed, and concealed it under the same coverlid of nature, only her face left yet bare to look on" (80). These lines depict the reverence Oroonoko had for his wife but also reveal the brutality and violence of the scene. Imoinda's body, enslaved, is now hidden from the sight of his enemies because they cannot claim it anymore. By killing her, Oroonoko had essentially asserted the last bits of power and sovereignty to protect his wife and their unborn child. He only leaves her face uncovered, suggesting that he does want to leave something that can reveal Imoinda's identity to show the deputy governor and other people that they can no longer control him. This is an indication of Oroonoko's transformation from an amiable African Prince to the stereotypical image of racialized others, depicting him as immoral and savage. However, this also proves that Oroonoko has broken away from the control of the English and has taken matters into his own hands after the disappointments that he faces due to the Englishmen failing to keep their word. This causes a problem for the English deputy governor since Oroonoko becomes the very savage the narrator and the rest on Oroonoko's side initially do not believe he could be. When the English "behold" the brutal way in which Oroonoko had murdered her, they call him a "monster" (81), completely overlooking the fact that they were the ones who had pushed him to commit such a heinous crime. Their endless lies and promises of freedom penetrated Oroonoko's soul, making him wholly hopeless, cruel, and savage. He rebukes the governor yet again for his treachery and returns their gaze with a

defiant one that is scornful (81). The governor has pushed him to the point of no return, and he has become a monster by murdering his wife and unborn child.

Before his death, Oroonoko attempts to kill himself by self-mutilation and save his dignity by committing suicide. However, he is unable to retain his sovereignty and dignity as a royal as he is captured, maimed, and treated inhumanly. He is killed by the English, who were initially threatened by the slave rebellion and then by his unhinged murder of his wife. However, the brutality of his execution surpasses that of Imoinda. While Imoinda's death takes place in private, as expected for a woman and her body during the early modern period, her dignity is protected by her husband. However, Oroonoko's execution is public and extremely barbaric and cruel. The executioner cuts off his limbs one by one, but Oroonoko, being the brave military general, does not let out a single sound (83). They cut him part by part and even go so far as to send out his body parts to other plantations (83). Through the brutality and distribution of the "quarters of a mangled king" (83), Behn portrays the cruelty and un-arbitrariness of the English colonial system and their treatment of the slaves. Though Griffin argues that Oroonoko's death does nothing for the novella, I contend that through his brutal death, he is essentially eternalized through the narrator's pen as she aims "to make his glorious name to survive to all ages" (237). Hence, Behn attempts to rework the morals and virtues of the early modern period by revealing the complicated imperial and colonial power structures along with the stubbornness of an African prince to give into the patriarchal forces of the English. She questions the moral values of Christianity and portrays their failure through Byam and the boat captain and the catastrophic consequences of a developing commercial colonial institution of slavery.

The relationship between Oroonoko and the narrator, as well as between Oroonoko and Imoinda, reveals complicated power structures that prevailed during the advent of colonization in the early modern period. By analyzing these complex and gendered relationships, the political and social implications of the novel and the period can be understood. The contrast in the gaze relationships also reveals the treatment of women, especially those of color, in the early modern period. Here, the military hero is deprived of his most prized assets—his arms and legs, which are the most useful in battle, and his nose and ears. Imoinda, on the other hand, is described to be better than an Englishwoman and is regarded with respect and dies a private death to save her honor along with that of her royal-blooded child. But most importantly, her death protects the property of Oroonoko, who, according to the English customs of marriage, essentially owns Imoinda. Their position within the complex colonial framework of slave trade and plantation remains ambiguous as both do not fit either their past African royal identity or their current identity as slaves. Death is the only way for them to return to their original identities and to reclaim their sovereignty over their bodies that had been otherwise commodified and objectified by the treacherous colonial English officers and the others involved in the verdict of their fate. Hence, through a thorough focus on the gaze relationships involving Imoinda and Oroonoko, we see the nuances and complexities of the positions they occupy in the borderlands, i.e., neither African royalty nor colonial slaves.

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"A Hungry War-Song on Her Head": Queer Translations of Monstrous Bodies in *Beowulf* and *Judith*

by Shannen Escote

In *The Source of Self-Regard*, Toni Morrison writes "there are two human responses to the perception of chaos: naming and violence" (205). She defines naming as the necessary language that tames the "so-called unnamed" even if this requires "forcible renaming." In tandem with this destructive language, violence forms the "inevitable response to chaos—the untamed, the wild, the savage…its point is to control by reshaping, moving, cutting it down or through." Both methods of control and classification are instrumental to Morrison's own discussion of *Beowulf*, where we encounter Grendel's mother whose name is as "unspeakable as she is unspeaking" (255). Because she is an "unintelligible, wanton, and undecipherable" character, the Mother (as I will refer to her) becomes the target of violence as retribution for the chaos she wreaks. Ultimately, this cycle of naming and violence within *Beowulf* relies on anxieties surrounding difference, non-normative gender performance, and unstable signifying language.

The riddle presented by the Mother's inconclusiveness is reflected in the ever-shifting scholarly reception of her character: she has been read as inhuman chimera, as a failed woman, and as a masculinized killer. This study seeks to respond to these characterizations and interrogate the recurring need to categorize the Mother's troubled identity into a coherent gender binary. Drawing inspiration from Morrison's essay, this inquiry will be split into two parts: identifying the issues of naming via gendered signifying language describing the Mother, and an exploration of the language of violence spoken by and inflicted upon her. I also propose that *Beowulf* bears a striking resemblance to *Judith*—the subsequent tale in the composite manuscript—in similar depictions of terror-inducing, transgressive "warrior women." However, I consider the question as to why the biblical Judith is regaled as a heroine, while Grendel's mother is relegated to the role of the monster. In response, I pursue a comparative reading of the Mother and Judith's weaponization of bodies to argue that they both exact masculine-coded corporeal violence in order to subvert and queer patriarchal martial hierarchies. From this comparison, I seek to push the conversation forward and reconfigure the Mother's non-normative position and behavior through a more nuanced

lens while inviting readers to question our own perceptions of what makes certain bodies monstrous and "unreadable."

We begin with a review of scholarship that persists in attempting to make the Mother's gender less chaotic and more coherent for modern readers. Jane Chance's article "The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother" is one especially influential example, wherein she introduces the Mother's gender as a problem to be solved and her identity as a conundrum that defies any singular explanation. Chance describes the Mother as an "aggressive and sword-greedy" woman and the anti-thesis to the trope of the peace-weaving queen who behaves as animalistically and psychoanalytically id-driven as her son Grendel (295—97).

Additionally, Chance relies on translations where the Mother is labelled as "*wif unhyre*… a 'monstrous woman,'" as well as "*ides aglaecwif,* a 'monster-woman" (288). However, Chance and other scholars often highlight the "warrior words" and masculine nouns in their translations to bolster a definition of "monstrosity" that conflates violence and aggression with hypermasculinity. In contrast, Chance and other early postmodern theorists like Mary Dockray-Miller seem content to laud Judith as a model "maternal figure" and archetype of femininity despite the character's own aggressive and "masculine" acts of violence (Dockray-Miller 166). While there is no indication of Judith's intentions to bear children, and no description of past familial attachments apart from her widowhood, it seems strange that the reception of Judith often seeks to feminize her and limit her visceral beheading of Holofernes as only some "maternal" defense instinct to protect her countrymen. In contrast, Grendel's mother's violent behavior is viewed as a failed performance of motherhood. Her inevitable death serves as her punishment for bearing a monstrous son, a familial tie which mars social perceptions of her gendered role and her "devil-shaped body." She is unable to escape the citation of her body as "Grendel's kinswoman" (1387) nor can she wash herself of her blood ties to the betrayer Cain (10), which has often led contemporary readers to view the Mother as a machine of monstrosity.

M. Wendy Hennequin, on the other hand, is more concerned with the historical, grammatical, and cultural contexts informing the gendered language in Beowulf. Hennequin also strives to extract a more accurate translation of *aglaecwif*, finding that "it is not a word that separates man from monster, human from inhuman." Rather, it more closely resembles "great warrior or formidable one," or 'female warrior, fearsome woman'" (510). We might note the similarities between this descriptor used for the Mother with the image of Judith as the warrior "noblewoman" and "bold-minded maid" who rallies her warriors to arms: "The men of the nation had acquired all that by force, stoics under standards in pitched battle, through the wise instruction of Judith, that brave young woman" (330–34). However, our "fearsome woman" of *Beowulf* is despised and exists on the periphery of the martial community of Heorot. We are given no description of any "cleverness," "wisdom," or "bravery" which propels the Mother's silent-but-deadly actions, and yet these are the values attributed to Judith's gruesome murder of Holofernes which endears the widow to her kinsmen (141).

To draw another distinction, Fulk translates *ides aglaecwif* as "lady, female troublemaker" (1259), a somewhat tamer derivative that places more emphasis on the

"womanly" connotation. The Mother in this translation is physically ambiguous, whose only bodily description is limited to "one of them was, as plainly as they could tell, the likeness of a lady" (1347). It could be posited that both Fulk and Hennequin prefer translations that simplify the Mother's gender into womanliness, a recurring distillation we encountered with the interpretation of Judith as a martial mother. In the case of Hennequin, this restraint seeks to mitigate modern translations that portray the Mother as more monstrous than she is originally written in Old English. What I propose instead is that the fluidity of the gender pronouns and gendered language suggests that the poet and the medieval audience are aware of complex variations and expressions of gender intertwined with identity and power. This also suggests that the Mother's intentional anonymity and alienated position outside of Heorot's patriarchal community feeds into presupposed notions of what Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler call the "unnameability" of femininity, the exclusion of women from accessing the constructed "reciprocal exchange between men" (Butler 53). Because the world of Beowulf is poised on a system that oscillates between community and exclusion, the name-less Mother's gender is thus named and forcibly assigned *for* her. Her re-naming as a dangerous monster functions as both the violent re-definition of her gender and the stripping of her identity, leaving behind a "frontier-less… outlawed and illicit" specter who haunts Heorot's wild territories (Morrison 207). Like her raging son, her body is isolated as a primary threat and over-written with the anxiety of an outsider who destroys and devours the masculine, heroic collective.

This coincides with James Paz's "Unreadable Things in Beowulf," wherein he argues that the Mother's ambiguity provokes anxieties "about 'things' that resist human interpretation and the way they unsettle human reliance upon legibility" (245). I argue that this underlying anxiety directly connects to how the Mother's illegible gender reinforces her position as a marginalized subject, and why her alienation is stressed by the poet to affect dread and fear of social exclusion from the "matrix of intelligibility" in the Butlerian sense (99). This reading helps us to redefine the Mother as a character whose gender and actions consistently resist the constraints which seek to define and control her through language.

Unlike her son who commits random, non-premeditated mass-murder, the Mother carefully selects her victim: the *rædan*, counselor, and rune-knower Æschere.[1] Paz translates the Old English *rædan* as: "to give advice or counsel," "to explain something obscure," and "to exercise control over something." By murdering Æschere, she succeeds in killing Hrothgar's "reader," thereby erasing a personified gloss and unsettling Heorot's system of "literacy" based on exile and control (Paz 241). Thus, the Mother reclaims her agency by *refusing* to be read. This perspective could help to mobilize our "warrior woman" away from criticism that scrutinizes her inexplicable identity and misdiagnoses her perceived masculinity as a symptom of monstrosity. What if instead of a "lady troublemaker," we were to view the Mother as a *gender trouble-maker* who resists and queers any attempted normative reading of her?

In his article examining queer readings and criticism of Beowulf, Basil A. Price engages Teresa de Lauretis' definition of "queer theory" as a methodology that seeks to transgress,

[1] "A rædbora such as Æschere held a key role as an individual that 'reads' publicly on behalf of his community and indeed creates that very community by so doing" (Paz 241).

transcend, problematize, and "avoid normative, discursive distinctions of identity" (401–2). From Price's article, one can glean that critics are clearly concerned with the Mother's transgression of gender roles, but few writing exists on her queer potentiality. Nevertheless, at its core, queer methodology is advantageous for our discussion because it "encourages investigating and questioning categorical conventions, oppositions, or equations, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality" (Price 402). To put this model into practice, we shall apply a queer inquiry to the warrior-women-equals-monster equation in criticisms of *Beowulf* and *Judith*.

To do this investigation, we can refer to Gillian R. Overing's *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*—a crucial work praised by Price that foreshadows this shift in the trajectory of queer scholarship on Grendel's mother. I echo Overing's application of Irigaray's theory to argue that for unreadable, marginal women like the Mother, these characters "must be continually translated by and into the binary language of the prevailing (patriarchal) symbolic order" (74). In comparison, Hennequin's translations sees the Mother slipping into masculine pronouns: Hrothgar calls the Mother "secg" (1379), a masculine noun meaning "warrior" and "man." Additionally, "Grendel's mother is…denoted by the masculine demonstrative pronoun '*se ðe*,' reminding us that ruling is generally performed by men" (Hennequin 511). While trans theorists do well to remind us that gender pronouns can be variable linguistic signifiers of one's experienced identity, these translations nevertheless exemplify a scholarly curiosity about the Mother's gender and possible queer-coding in connection to her alterity.

One such observation is made in earlier feminist criticism: Chance notably argues that the Mother appropriates "kingly" language, power, and behavior. The application of "masculine" pronouns to the Mother becomes more fluid and subversive in this case, if we consider the Mother as an individual who crosses linguistic gender borders and intentionally "performs the functions of warrior, avenger, and king, all generally associated only with men" (Chance 504). This is also supported in Fulk's translation, where the Mother is described as "the one who ruled the expanse of the flood for a hundred seasons, bloodthirsty, unyielding and greedy" (1495–97), indicating that she has ruled over her domain as long as Hrothgar while matching his warriors' caliber for fighting. She can "rule in her own right, as Hrothgar, Heremod, and Beowulf do" (Hennequin 510). Evidently, the Mother's gender permeability allows her to partake in and usurp hegemonic and patriarchal forms of hierarchy and control. She adopts the role of a "powerful criminal attacker," seeking to "avenge her kin, and to be sure, has gone far toward avenging the offense—as it must seem to many a thane who weeps in his soul for his treasure-giver" (Fulk 1337–44). Her display of grief through violence is directly compared to the loss of a king, a *sinc-gyfan* or "giver of treasure" (1337). As I will continue to discuss, the Mother enacts warrior vigilante justice to affect the masculine, communal relationships which tie Heorot's feudal culture together while mirroring the sacrificial cycle of glory won through gore. Her brutality serves not only as an imitation, but as a subversion and queering of warrior culture, which provides a more layered characterization of her vengeance that extends beyond her assigned role and perceived identity as the monstrous mother.

It is certainly plausible that Beowulf's poet uses gender-fluid diction for figurative effect, to course-correct the Mother for veering too far away from the medieval normative

gender at the time. However, we find that the Mother possesses a terrifying strength and a "battle-intimidation… in comparison to males" (Fulk 1283), which could be read as a form of gender drag that subverts normative masculinity. Butler describes how the art of drag "imitates gender" and "implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (174). From a queer reading, then, the Mother performs and resists the conventions of both gendered, performative language and the norms of gendered behavior. As a further example of drag in action, we should revisit Judith's dressing in hyper-feminine apparel, where she, like the Mother, must perform and "pass"[2] in order to infiltrate and disrupt a masculine economy of feud.

Like various readings of the Mother, Judith has been interpreted by scholars as androgynous, masking her gender-fluidity beneath a veneer of hyper-femininity despite her participation in the hyper-masculine spaces of Heorot's feudal culture. However, when exploring Judith's queerness, I take issue with recurring attempts to divide her personality traits into binary (and sometimes bio-essentialist) separations of "masculine" and "feminine." Caryn Tamber-Rosenau shares this position, noting a lack of consideration of the cultural nuances of gender and gender presentation within the historical context of the Book of Judith (179). Instead, Tamber-Rosenau proposes that Judith performs in high-femme drag which elevates the feminine presentation "to a spectacular effect, through her outward appearance, clothing, perfume, and jewelry" (180). I would push this further and argue that Judith uses this battle-amor to her advantage, weaponizing this costume to associate her body with seductive objects of wealth to appeal to Holofernes' gold-lust. Judith fashions her body into a war trophy and convincing portrait of a bride, signposting an exaggerated performance of femininity that resists masculine control and consumption and ironizes perceived gender binaries. Tamber-Rosenau also interprets Judith's non-normative decision to remain a child-less widow—traits which the Mother shares after Grendel's death—as queering biblical conventions of begetting sons and the continuation of hierarchical bloodlines (191). Thus, Judith and the Mother both employ practices of parody, drag, and non-normative behavior that undermine the fragile margins between what is "natural" or "real" (Butler 186). Additionally, I resonate with Tamber-Rosenau's wariness of scholarship that attempts to vilify any "lethal women" who display an "alternative model of womanhood" (193–94). Instead, we might further interrogate criticism aimed at rescuing or rehabilitating Judith from her gender-transgressive acts of violence, while demonizing the Mother for similar behaviors. Moving forward, we will continue to analyze these "lethal women" and how they vocalize their marginalization through violence and vengeance.

For unspeaking, peripheral women like the Mother, perhaps the only mode of achieving agency is by performing the dominant, masculine language: the language of heroism and of violence. As Overing clarifies: "in the masculine, heroic mode, words must translate into actions, the hero's spoken boast achieves signification only in literal, or bodily, inscription" (90). This becomes applicable to the Mother's own corporeal manner of speech—her adoption of the language of violence to seek vengeance for the murder of her kin. In her power-siege of

[2] "Passing" here refers to a convincing performance of gendered behavior that an audience might "read" as "real," terminology that originates from and intersects with discussions on racial passing (Butler 174).

Heorot through her murder of Æschere, Mother *forces* a violent response from Beowulf, as seen in his citation of the code of feud in his pledge to Hrothgar: "It is always better for each that he avenge his friend than that he lament much… Stand up, guardian of the realm, let us go at once to scout out the route of Grendel's kinswoman. I swear to you, she will not escape under cover, neither in the bosom of the earth nor in mountain forests nor on the ocean floor, go where she will" (1383–96). This speech once more underscores how the Mother parodies the trope of the archetypical masculine hero and matches the dominant language of violence by imitating it as the fated *wrecend*, the "avenger" of her kinsman (1255) who takes her own "vengeance in the feud" (1333). This is intensified with the Mother's decision to stage Æschere's head to directly affect horror in Hrothgar's men:

> For all the Danes, friends of Scyldings, it was painful to endure in their hearts, for many a thane, a distress to each of the men, when on the water-cliff they encountered Æschere's head. The flood seethed with blood—the people looked on—with hot gore (1419–24).

The silent Mother finds her "voice" in the language of vengeance, in the hyper-visible violence that demands to be seen. In "The Role of Æschere's Head," Dr. Helen Appleton underscores the significance of the visceral and visual message sent through this decapitation. Through her insertion in the cycle of the "tit-for-tat exchange of body parts" (431), the "abominable female" (2123) finally speaks by satirizing the legal language[3] of Heorot's violent feud system. Appleton writes, "Although the killings committed by her son are without just cause and are therefore kept concealed, her slaying of Æschere is—at least from her perspective—a legitimate requital of her own son's death" (32). Thus, the Mother's act of revenge imitates and queers heroic language by exposing "where violence breaks the linguistic social contract, where the connection of language to reality is shown to be tenuous, fragile, and fraught with complexity" (Overing 93). Moreover, because the Mother claims her vengeance with precision rather than resorting to random killing, this might lend itself to a more sympathetic reading of the Mother's actions as motivated by humanized anger and grief at the unjust murder of her kin. Just as the men of Heorot celebrate the cannibalistic Grendel's death, so too does the Mother seem to revel in her own private participation in the tournament of bodies where the "triumph of (good over evil) is earned, justified, and delicious" (Morrison 255). Unable to mourn her son's body butchered at the hands of Beowulf, she denies Hrothgar's men the option to cremate Æschere's intact body or perform the funeral rites as an act of retribution (2125). Consequently, Hrothgar, Beowulf and his men, and we as readers all become recipients of the Mother's message, inscribed with the language of strewn body parts that lays bare the instability and brutality of "heroic" feudal culture.

This shared language of violence that takes heads as "bloody tokens" is also seen in Judith's navigation of—and participation in—ruthless systems of feud-making and vengeance-seeking. This is evident in the poet's attention to the unflinching body horror and graphicness of Judith's actions:

[3] "For the Anglo-Saxons… Heads on stakes, placed at prominent locations, served as a powerful warning against transgression of both law and territory in the landscape" (Appleton 435).

> The bound-haired one then struck the rancorous, destructive adversary with a decorated sword, so that she carved halfway through his neck, so that he lay in a stupor, drunk and severely wounded. He was not yet dead, completely soulless; the courageous lady then struck the heathen dog smartly for the second time, so that his head rolled away onto the floor. (Fulk 103–11)

Like Æschere, Holofernes's body is reduced to a fragmented, lifeless corpse whose head— the locus of language, control, and understanding—is silenced. The seemingly stable body is abruptly reduced to *thing*-ness, and speech is severed from the soul. In her comparison of

Beowulf and Judith, Mary Flavia Godfrey considers these gory actions a viable expression of Judith's grief and revenge for her kinspeople (20). Godfrey also resists Chance's and Dockray-Miller's bio-essentialist readings of Judith as a woman defined by her exemplary "maternal power" and untainted chastity, who only resorts to messy, "masculine" violence through God's paternal approval. Instead, Godfrey reminds us that Judith is also complicit in monstrous behavior, going as far as to argue that Judith's destruction of Holofernes's body could be read as extreme as Beowulf stealing Grendel's severed head as a war spoil (17). This is demonstrated in Fulk's translation of Judith: "the sage, adorned with gold, then directed her conscientious attendant to uncover the head of the war-wager and show it all bloody to the citizens as proof of how she had succeeded in the contest" (lines 171–76). Thereafter, Judith proceeds to explicitly command her people to "gaze unobstructed at the head" (178), mirroring the transformation of Æschere's head into a landmark of retribution. Just as the Mother employs violence as a form of feud-speech, Judith also reveals Holofernes' head "to display it, bloody, as a sign to the citizens" and uses her gift of speech to rally her people to rise against their enemies (171–75). We might recall how Beowulf also participates in this cycle of speaking and signaling through body parts, as seen in his boastful display of Grendel's head in the gold-hall while all "the men looked on" (1650). Like Holofernes' head, Beowulf's bloody treasure further secures his fealty to his lord and his community, reinforcing a bond paid for in the currency of monstrous bodies. Following in the manuscript trails left behind by Beowulf and the Mother, Judith is not exempt from relying on her bloody token to speak on her behalf, to "direct and structure the behavior" of her community and incite fear in her enemies" (Godfrey 19).

While some scholars remain fixated on Judith's sacred femininity, a case can be made for her potential monstrosity which feeds the same economies of terror and violence rather than totally disestablishing them. Godfrey also weighs Judith's morality and whether she should be read as an exonerated agent of God or if she becomes transformed into a monstrous aggressor. She notably contradicts Chance's reading of Judith as purely heroic based on Chance's suggestion that Judith performs metaphorical castration and sexual dominance over Holofernes (an analysis that is also often applied to the Mother's battle with Beowulf). Instead, Godfrey resists any such sexualization of Holofernes' beheading based on her own translations of the lines 98b—110a: "she took the heathen man firmly by his hair, drew him toward her with both hands: a mockery to the body" (Godfrey 23). Similarly, Erin Mullally in *Weaponry in the Old English Judith* extends this discussion by translating the adverb *bysmerlice* (line 100) as "disgracefully" (271). This raises an interesting question: who exactly is "disgraced"—Judith herself or Holofernes? I am more interested in the former being true,

as this would suggest that even the heroic Judith's violence is not without reproach. Rather, she could—like the Mother—act as another dangerous gender trouble-maker capable of "monstrous" behavior, whose subversive, dissonant identity is armored in her high-drag performance as "the beautiful, gold-adorned lady who holds aloft the head of her people's enemy before urging them to battle" (Mullaly 257). Like the Mother, Judith weaponizes her non-normative femininity, queers and destabilizes the heroic narratives in which she is held captive and overturns gendered hierarchies through carnage. This useful comparison between the Mother's and Judith's performances of violence highlights how both Beowulf and Judith parody archetypal masculine roles, queer normative notions of vengeance, and reveal the inherent fragility of the heroic warrior code. However, this still does not solve the issue of why the Mother is seen as somehow more repulsive than Judith even when both characters speak a language of "violence against violence" (Morrison 255)—one that inevitably leads to the Mother's death.

Our discussion would not be complete without acknowledging the violence inflicted on the Mother that finally silences her from the narrative. In his book *Skin Shows*, Jack Halberstam interrogates gender horror and cultural anxieties around powerful, feminine monstrosity. Although his analysis focuses on gothic fiction and late twentieth-century American "slasher" films, Halberstam provides a viable framework for analyzing how gender is manufactured in horror, and how "abominable females" like the Mother transform into monsters in our cultural consciousness. At its core, a monster becomes queer-coded by challenging readers to reflect on how they "read themselves and their own bodies and scan themselves for signs of devolution" and signal our own anxieties around "social death, outcast and outlaw status, and ultimately physical demise" (Halberstam 72). Recalling Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, Halberstam presents a working spectrum of queer monstrosity by asking a similar question: which bodies *splatter?* (139). He elaborates:

> Improperly or inadequately gendered bodies represent the limits of the human and they present a monstrous arrangement of skin, flesh, social mores, pleasures, dangers and wounds. The bodies that *splatter*...are interestingly enough properly gendered 'human' bodies, female bodies, with all the conventional markings of their femininity. Female bodies that *do not* splatter, then, are often sutured bodies, bodies that are in some way distanced from the gender constructions that would otherwise sentence them to messy and certain death. (141, emphasis added)

When applying this to the scene of the Mother's battle with Beowulf and her subsequent death, once more we are met with ambiguity as to whether she is superhuman in strength or a monster who refuses to die: "In turn, she promptly paid him in kind with her relentless grasp and reached toward him; then she overturned the weary-hearted strongest of fighters, of foot-soldiers, so that he came for a fall. Then she held down the hall-visitor and drew her long-knife, broad and bright-edged; she wanted to avenge her child, her sole heir" (Fulk 1541–46). The only woman in *Beowulf* to wield a weapon, the Mother's blade-arm is markedly razor-sharp, her grip supernaturally strong, and her "malicious fingers" wrestle with Beowulf's armor, hungry for revenge. Her violence—which has marred her identity as Other

and ultimately warrants her death—is revealed to us by the narrator as informed by a desire to speak her loss into existence. With the additional reference to her defense of Grendel as her "heir," the Mother is marked as the dangerous and "sutured body"—an amalgamation of bloodthirsty "feminine" rage over the loss of a son, a beastly "sea-wolf (who) carried the prince of rings to her court," a rival king waging war to protect her own blood-ties and her "realm of alien creatures" (1511, 1501). And, for a moment, Beowulf's body becomes diminished and transformed into *her* object to thrash around with punitive satisfaction.

The Mother easily twists Beowulf's body into a pose reminiscent of Judith holding Holofernes in a headlock. Fulk's translation denotes the Mother's martial prowess as an equal match for Beowulf's retributive violence—the two are speaking the same "language," after all— and yet she is impervious to his "hungry war-song on her head" (1521). This again correlates to Halberstam's model of monstrosity, and we find that the Mother induces terror through her "queer body of violence and power, a monstrous body that has blades, makes noise, and refuses to splatter" (160). Likewise, the tension and difficulty with which Beowulf struggles to tear the Mother apart—to repress the woman constructed as a symbol of abject humanity—becomes a public "spectacle of identity performance and its breakdown" (151). The Mother's "breakdown" is a slow and arduous one, due to her resistance to Beowulf's sword Hrunting—"the battle-light would not bite, do no harm to her life" (1522). It is only when Beowulf equips the giant's sword that he finally "struck angrily, so that the hard weapon groped for her neck, broke the bone-rings; the sword went all the way through the doomed covering of flesh, so that she sank to the floor; the sword was sweaty, the man exulted in his work" (1557–69). In the moment where the sword renders the Mother down to her monstrous "flesh," she becomes yet another trophy, joining her son's corpse as the cultural currency exchanged for Beowulf's glory and ultimate "reward" (2135).

Perhaps it is because of these scenes in which the Mother is killed before the audience's very eyes that reinforces our visual memory and rewards us for cheering for her death, as we might when imagining Judith's murder of Holofernes. If this is true, we might trace further similarities between Halberstam's monster theory and Dr. Renée Trilling's concentration on abject theory and its powers of horror. "The abject, after all," Trilling explains, "terrifies us because we recognize that it is really a part of us" (4). What continues to haunt us about the Mother's death, then, is her reminder that "there is no such thing as a unified, coherent identity, effecting a critique of culture that bridges the historical divide between the Anglo-Saxon text and its modern audiences" (Trilling 20). In the end, the Mother's beheading transfigures her into Beowulf's war prize, thereby succumbing to the cannibalistic economy of Heorot and warning those who attempt to resist: "what you eat will eat you" (Halberstam 149). This coincides with Halberstam's observation that the trope of "bloody trophies" amassed from body parts in horror "produces a visceral response in the viewer" that bring awareness to "the logic of capitalism that transforms everything into capital but that also produces the conditions for vengeance (and) produces its own gravediggers" (159). In this reading, the beheaded Mother becomes a cultural object of horror, another sutured and unreadable thing, a mortal wound which invokes Morrison's third response to chaos apart from naming and violence: "stillness" (9). Ultimately, the Mother's stillness in death transmutes her body into metaphor and metonymy, into capital and bloody treasure, and

her fragmented body further queers and blurs the line between bodies that "matter"—heroes, kings, queens, warriors, peace-weavers—and bodies that "splatter"— sinners, foreigners, and queer bodies that defy categorization.

Although the Mother remains an aporia in scholarly conversations on Beowulf, by exploring a queer reading of the Mother, we may further re-examine how we ascribe monstrous qualities to certain behaviors and gender presentations deemed incoherent, nameless, and unreadable. Perhaps to truly queer *Beowulf* and *Judith*, we would have to consider what modern Western gender biases we bring into our readings of medieval Anglo-Saxon culture and Biblical representations of gender. This might encourage further conversations about productions of gender through *Beowulf*'s other characters, how masculinity is constructed as much as femininity within these texts, and how gender is inextricable from intersectional markers of race, ethnicity, and class. These studies would also benefit from applications of postcolonial and critical race theory, Marxist theory, and transgender and nonbinary theoretical studies. Moving forward, we must re-examine our systems of naming, how we view abject and politically constructed bodies, and how language becomes co-opted in technologies of control and violence. This will undoubtedly require a necessary project of unlearning oppressive forms of language, but if we are the monsters of our creation, this may very well save us from our own demise.

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