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All submissions must be accompanied by a cover letter that includes the author's name, phone number, email address, and the title of the essay or book review. All essay submissions should be approximately 12-15 pages and must be typed in MLA format with a standard 12 pt. font. Book reviews ought to be 750-1000 words in length. As this journal is intended to provide a forum for emerging voices, only student work will be considered for publication. Submissions will not be returned. Please direct all questions to [editor@watermarkjournal.com](mailto:editor@watermarkjournal.com) and address all submissions to:

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## *Watermark 2009*

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# Watermark

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#### Editor's Note

I feel very privileged to have participated in the third volume of *Watermark*. I began working on this journal during the inaugural volume, when I was still an undergraduate in the Department of English. It was the hope of E. Brookes Little, editor of the first volume, that after she and Aaron Carroll, editor of the second volume, were no longer directly involved in this process, the journal would continue to flourish and remain devoted to allowing graduate students to gain valuable experience in academic publishing by circulating exceptional academic essays by graduate students both at this university and beyond.

I expect that this volume continues this work and helps carry on and hopefully extend this tradition. In this volume, as in the previous two, many subjects are explored in novel and interesting ways. This volume includes essays about topics as diverse as the world of King Arthur, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, an early fourteenth-century Middle English Breton lay called *Lay le Freine*, and the graphic novel *Watchmen*. We have also continued in our commitment to publish students from many universities in order to help foster an academic community that extends beyond university grounds.

This volume of *Watermark* is the result of the enthusiasm and hard work of many people. I would especially like to thank our faculty advisor Dr. George Hart for continuing to be such an encouraging presence and important part of this process. I would also like to thank Geri Lawson for her time, diligence, and invaluable input. I am also very grateful to Dean Tsuyuki for being responsible for the beautiful artwork and overall appearance of *Watermark* thus far. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the entire editorial staff and the support of the Department of English at California State University, Long Beach. I am confident that the precedent set by the first three issues of *Watermark* will be matched and exceeded in the years to come.

This volume was made possible by the Instructionally Related Activities Fund at CSULB.

Jessica Drawbond-Page  
*Editor*

**Environmental Apocalypse Now! : De-Colonizing Nature and  
De-centering Anthropocentrism in *The Waste Land*  
by Shaheera Shamim Ali**

*"...for even the savage cannot fail to perceive how intimately his own life is bound up with the life of nature."*

----- James George Frazer, *Adonis Attis Osiris*, 1955.

James Frazer considers the vital connection between humans and nature undeniable. The harmonious existence of the human and nonhuman world depends on the realization of balance between nature and culture. This idea of the interdependence of human and nonhuman, obvious even to a savage, is lost in an effort to colonize nature and exploit its resources for human purposes only. *The Waste Land* is a caveat of impending environmental apocalypse subsequent to the colonization of nature. Nature is the colonized Other as it is unable to stem the tide of human consumption of natural resources and is depleted to the extent that humans are left in a symbolic and literal waste land, facing the threat of extinction. In order to colonize nature, its fundamental value to human existence is denied, just as its significance to human progress

becomes a focal point. In T.S. Eliot's poem, nature is portrayed as bereft of its powers of regeneration leading to environmental apocalypse. Since humans can no longer perceive their dependence on the natural world, they feel the effects of a barren nature in the form of anxiety, sterility, and monotony.

With the opening lines of the poem, "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land," the promise of the coming of spring is set up (1-2). Spring, with the "breeding" of flowers from "the dead land" after winter, should be a welcome sign, bringing life and regeneration in its wake. Yet, April is referred to here as "the cruelest month," signaling that something is not as it has been before with the arrival and reception of "spring rain" (Eliot 4). According to Nancy Hargrove, in these lines "the land and the human soul are shown to be locked in the grip of a death-in-life without hope of resurrection" (62), referring to a disconnect between the natural world and humans. She maintains that the people depicted in the poem are living a half-life and have no hope for renewal or resurrection. Her analysis of nature as symbolic of the human psyche thereby relegates nature to a more passive role within the poem.

Such a reading is possible because of the pastoral tradition of nature writing, which is described by Andrew V. Ettin in the following terms: "Pastoral works are not always about nature; indeed, they usually are not primarily concerned with nature directly. The natural world in pastoral writing can be primarily a backdrop...or an outward expression of an emotional condition" (22). Following such a conception of nature as symbol, Hargrove writes: "the poem consists of a collage of symbolic urban and desert settings, each of which reveal one or more aspects of the sickness of man's soul in this modern Inferno" (61). Most critics, like James E. Miller and Robert Crawford, tend to view nature in *The Waste Land* in a similar manner, as indicative of something other than nature

itself. However, Armbruster and Wallace, in trying to expand the field of ecocriticism, maintain that "the natural environment is always a shaping force of individual and group psychology and identity – and that this force can only be ignored or suppressed at a price" (7). It is important to closely examine nature as an influencing force in human affairs in order to bring us to a closer understanding of *The Waste Land*. While nature is often read in symbolic fashion, considering the portrayal of nature in a mimetic manner could reveal important issues heretofore subsumed by an anthropocentric view.

Reconsidering the opening lines of the poem and Hargrove's comment about them, it is fair to say that the natural environment itself plays a larger role in determining the meaning implied. Nature and humans may indeed be "locked in the grip of a death-in-life without hope of resurrection," but this death would be a complete end, not just that of the humans but of the entire natural world (Hargrove 62). April is cruel precisely because it brings back "memory and desire" of springs past when the promise of renewal has been fulfilled (Eliot 3). Instead of facing the painful and horrifying probability of possible extinction, people prefer to lead a half life: "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers" (Eliot 5-7). The winter season brings forgetfulness, allowing escape from the possibility that the promise of returning spring might not be fulfilled after all. The indication of a life that is disconnected from nature is apparent in the words "little life" and "dried tubers." This is no longer a life that is lived to the fullest; the quality of life evoked here is shriveled and insignificant. Interestingly, "dried tubers" suggests that the failure of nature to renew itself produces the dismal quality of a "little life."

Whereas nature's failure becomes apparent in these few lines, its vital connection to human life in the past is brought to mind with the line, "In the mountains, there you feel free" (17). The mountains can be conceived

of in this liberating manner because they could be comparatively free from human influence. Nature in its relatively untrammelled state inspires feelings of liberty; this can exist only as a balance is achieved by both. Personal freedom can be achieved through the freedom of nature from too much human interference. The poem however, shows that this freedom has been lost, both by nature and humans. Nature especially, has been left bereft of its powers of regeneration: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" (Eliot 19-20). The promise of the month of April is already being broken here as no kind of regeneration can be expected in this barren, sterile, stony place. It is a pessimistic picture of the kind of desolate and bleak place the world has become, where the arrival of spring no longer means fresh, green vegetation, rain, and birdsong but rather land that is likened to garbage, something useless, leftover, to be forgotten. This is no longer a representation of "the full richness of nature at its peak, nature that continues with its cycle of ever-renewing life even amidst death" (Ettin 24). Instead, nature is now showing the signs of decades of human exploitation and subjugation, not in a symbolic way, but in reality. Lawrence Buell characterizes one of the ways in which nature has been "otherized": "The natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interest" (21); human interest has served to disempower and thereby exploit nature, a process that not only continues in practice but also theory, as critics continue to deconstruct nature as a symbol of human experience.

This kind of "anthropocentrism, that is to say the parallax engendered by human-centered vision" (Buell 20), is addressed directly in the poem:

Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water. (20-24)

According to the footnotes, the lines cited above bear an allusion to the Bible, in which God is addressing the prophet Ezekiel. A similarly pansophical being addresses all humans in these lines saying that our knowledge is incomplete as it consists of only "a heap of broken images." Humans do not know nature in its entirety, as they only see parts of it that directly affect them, which they then use and exploit. Such a colonization of nature depletes its resources and leaves it barren, with "dead trees" that "give no shelter," which influences human lives in a negative way. Here it becomes clearer that humans have not taken the time to understand nature as it is but have formulated a discourse about it. According to Edward Said, "the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" and that these ideas of the Orient are representations, and should be analyzed "as representations, not as 'natural' depictions of the Orient" (1994, 2007). Just as the Orient has been imagined into being, as it were, nature has become an idea with its own vocabulary and imagery without necessarily indicating any correspondence with reality. Through this discourse, humans have been able to colonize nature, making use of its voicelessness, by taking over its resources but also viewing the natural environment as being specifically for their utilization.

Once again the anthropocentrism that characterizes human relations with the natural world are emphasized and denigrated in the poem in the following lines:

Only

There is shadow under this red rock,

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

And I will show you something different from either

Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;

I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (24-30)

Hargrove suggests that this red rock is an ambivalent symbol which can either be read as being malign and sinister; its color evoking the fires of Hell, or it can bear connotations of stability and protection (64). The fact that there is "shadow under" the "red rock," whereas the "dead tree" no longer provides shade, suggests that this is a place of shelter, a place of refuge (Eliot 23). This place of refuge has the potential to become a place of learning, as humans can learn "something different" than their anthropocentric way of looking at life and the need to be biocentric in order to save themselves and the world. The shadow in the morning and in the evening suggests the narrow perception humans tend to have which allows them to see only their own needs and desires. In the introduction to *Literature and the Environment*, George Hart and Scott Slovic maintain that "there are still those ... who look at ... the rest of the world as if nature were inexhaustible and pristine, despite the phenomenon of the industrial revolution, which from the early nineteenth century through the present has radically depleted a broad range of natural resources" (3); this is the manner in which humans, instead of acknowledging the reality of the state of nature, buy into the discourse that preserves a sylvan picture of it. The speaker of the poem states that he will "show" people "fear"; the fear of environmental apocalypse which can be the only result of continued anthropocentrism.

In order to show that nature is being destroyed the speaker first describes an urban scene that illuminates the degenerating effect nature's destruction is having on human lives: "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge ..." (Eliot 60-2). It is significant that Eliot chooses to represent London, a real city, here; as Hargrove states, "to see an actual, perhaps familiar, location dissolve into a desert of boredom and terror before one's eyes has far more impact than if the setting were unspecified and general" (61). However, this is not just

"a desert of boredom" but an indication that it is turning into an actual desert, which has far more terrifying possibilities: "as the manufacturing cities of England disappeared into a thick haze of photochemical smog, it became possible to imagine that new technologies of mass production might alter the climate and eventually destroy the Earth's ability to sustain life," but it is precisely this possibility of recognizing the consequences of rampant exploitation of nature that eludes people (McKusick 95). Furthermore, it is apparent that depleted nature is affecting people in a manner than engenders anxiety. The "brown fog" is something unnatural, the result of pollution, especially dense in the financial district of London which is "composed of grey streets and grey stone buildings, without any green or natural thing in sight... filled with people and choking car fumes" (Hargrove 66). Robert Day also states that "the proverbial London fog was (and still is, despite smoke-abatement programs) often laden with soft coal fumes" (287). This depressing aspect of a London morning leads to "sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet," alluding to the workers' alienated relationship to their labor, but also to their literal burial "under" the brown fog, which produces a state of anxiousness (Eliot 64-5, Hargrove 66-7).

The buried anxiety of the London crowd becomes more overt in the figure of the woman in the highly constructed settings of "A Game of Chess." The woman's surroundings are very luxurious yet also "synthetic," completely cut off from organic nature (Eliot 87). Hart and Slovic state that "we strive increasingly to suspend ourselves above nature, to enclose ourselves within human-constructed spaces and technologies, to establish abstract, virtual relationships with other people, other species, and even with the natural resources we rely upon for our daily existence," a state of affairs that can be applied to the woman in a chair, "like a burnished throne" (Hart 8, Eliot 77). She strives to make some connection with the man in this scene but fails to do so and her growing nervousness and

hysteria become apparent in her language. But what is more important here is the relationship she tries to forge with nature and other species. In the description of the room in which she is sitting, two images of nature are appropriated for aesthetic enjoyment: "a carved dolphin" and a picture of the change of Philomel, "as though a window gave upon the sylvan scene" (Eliot 96, 98). This is an example of essentializing nature by setting it up for display, confined and bound by a frame, as mentioned by Scott Russell Sanders: "for most of us, most of the time, nature appears framed in a window or a video screen or inside the borders of a photograph. We do not feel the organic web passing through our guts" (226). If this nature imagery is a reminder to the woman of her place in the wider world of nature, it fails in its purpose as it is part of the discourse set up by humans to subjugate nature. Philomel transforming from woman to nightingale is a myth created by humans with no grounding in real nature, and the image of the dolphin has been imprisoned in sculpture that bears no relation to its freedom and vitality swimming in the seas.

Despite the luxuriousness of her surroundings, the woman is unable to find comfort or joy in her life. Her quality of life, though high in material things, is abysmally low in terms of psychological and social aspects. Similarly, the typist introduced later in the poem leads a life of monotony and drudgery. However, her quality of life is also affected by the lack of material wealth: "The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights / Her stove, and lays out food in tins" (222-3). Ronald Tamplin suggests that "If we invoke the idea of contemporary degeneration so characteristic of *The Waste Land*, 'food in tins' will appear as the debasement of a sacred symbol" (354). The "sacred symbol" is nature, as in the past food was directly connected to the natural environment, but has now become a synecdochical representation of industrialization and commodification that serves to deteriorate people's quality of life. Rich or poor, living in this mechanized world can only lead to unhappiness and

dissatisfaction.

After the human-constructed scenes of London and the woman's luxurious yet sterile room, the natural environment becomes the focal point in the "Fire Sermon": "The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf / Clutch and sink into the wet bank" (Eliot 173-4). According to Hargrove, "it is a bleak, entirely realistic scene. The Thames is grey and empty in the clammy mist of a chilly London morning, and along its muddy, brown banks rise bare, leafless trees" (73). It is possible to imagine the speaker standing next to the grey Thames, willing to commune with nature, wondering how long even such a polluted and desecrated part of nature will be able to survive the unbridled domination of human interest: "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" (Eliot 176). By referring to Spenser's marriage song, the contrast between the polluted Thames of the present and the river in the past "in springtime freshness and purity" is heightened (Hargrove 74). Since the river has become so polluted and has lost its past beauty, even the "nymphs are departed," and the river no longer bears the perceptible evidence of its pollution: "empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" (Eliot 175, 177-8). The disappearance of these polluting objects from the river is not an indication that the river is no longer polluted, or that the source of its pollution is in any way being reversed or corrected. The speaker is weeping by the river, urging "Sweet Thames" to "run softly" as he is hoping that he is able to "end my song," and thereby manage to warn people before the Thames and all of nature is destroyed (Eliot 184). His weeping is a sign of hopelessness, as he is aware of how little time he has, and he can already "hear / The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear," indicating that death is close at hand (Eliot 186).

While the common objects that make the river dirty have disappeared with the people who would have come to it to enjoy its beauty, the



"horrifying, corrupting powers of modern materialism" remain (Hargrove 78):

The river sweats  
Oil and tar  
The barges drift  
With the turning tide  
Red sails  
Wide (Eliot 266-71)

The very phrase "the river sweats" brings an unnatural image to mind of the river laboring to fulfill commercial demands. However unnatural such an image may be, it is still a literal picture of the river Thames as cited by Hargrove: "this section of the river is literally polluted by the red-sailed commercial barges which leave a film of oil on the water. In addition, smoke from factories fills the air, and debris and garbage float in the water" (77). Once again nature is being exploited for human interest, leaving it depleted and dirty, impacting aquatic life and eventually, human lives too. Since nature, in its pristine beauty, has been preserved in literature, in sculpture, in images, nobody sees the wasted nature of the present. The discourse of nature as ever-renewing is transposed over the reality of the day. Because humans do not even see real nature as it is, they are unable to forge a connection with it, further "otherizing" it.

This alienation from nature results in the ignorance of humans about the dire situation they are in. The results of this continued ignorance becomes the subject of the section "What the Thunder Said." Here the actual wasted land is depicted in its all its terrifying desolateness:

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water (Eliot 331-4)

These rocky, barren mountains fail to evoke feelings of freedom or

inspiration as the image of the mountains in the beginning of the poem does. The lines may as well be, "In the mountains, there you feel trapped," as the very place of openness and liberty has become nightmarish, with only hard, sterile rock without water to dry the thirst of the land or the thirst of anything that may be alive. The mountains have lost the connotations of wilderness and have now become the representation of nature depleted, of the nonhuman and the human trapped in a hellish place with no refuge, no succor, and no hope of regeneration. "But dry sterile thunder without rain," recalls the cruel month of April when "spring rain" at least stirred "dull roots," when there was at the very least the false promise of coming spring (Eliot 342, 4). Regeneration is no longer possible in this post-apocalyptic waste land, because the thunder brings no life-renewing rain with it.

The exhaustion of the natural environment and its ability to regenerate result in the inevitable wasted land depicted in the arid rocks which has the negative affect of turning humans into "red sullen faces" that "sneer and snarl / From doors of mudcracked houses" (Eliot 344-5). People have lost all traces of human culture and civilization and have become semblances of vicious animal-like beings that "sneer and snarl" instead of communicating through language. The "mudcracked houses" are a pitiful contrast to the images of London, the "Unreal City" (Eliot 60), and the apotheosis of capitalist culture. The unbridled desire for more and more material things, evident in the luxurious setting of the woman's room earlier in the poem, dwindles down in the post-apocalyptic waste land to basic human needs: "If there were water / And no rock /.../ If there were the sound of water only" (Eliot 345-52). Humans need nature in order to survive; the death of the planet will inevitably lead to the extinction of the human race and all forms of life. Hargrove once again reads the natural environment symbolically, arguing that "this rocky waterless region is the landscape of the protagonist's soul, and his physical

anguish, especially his thirst, parallels his parched spiritual condition" (83). The thirst however, is real and cannot be quenched by any spiritual baptism; it requires water, a basic human necessity for survival. Even "the sound of water only" would be better than nothing, providing false hope where there is complete hopelessness (Eliot 352). It is also an indication that humans are willing to live a "little life" in forgetful ignorance, as long as they are spared the necessity of facing facts and changing their behavior (Eliot 7). The only way their behavior can change is through re-education, by realizing their vital connection with nature and by "balancing the skewed relation between production and reproduction, and 'mak[ing] the category of reproduction...central to the concept of a just, sustainable world'" (Merchant 13).

The category of natural reproduction is however, subsumed by that of production which has led to environmental apocalypse. The speaker envisions humans as "those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only" (Eliot 368-70). David Trotter states that Eliot uses the language of Imperial mythology, as is indicated by the "hooded hordes" which suggests "a deluging invasion by barbarian masses" (148); however, the invasion here does not only suggest Imperial anxieties, but also portrays humans as invading and conquering nature. This conquering or colonization of nature works in two ways, as humans exploit natural resources for their industrial progress, but also colonize land and form empires: "What is the city over the mountains / Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers" (Eliot 371-3). The cities, "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London," emblems of human learning, culture, and civilization, are based on notions of the superiority of human culture over nature (Eliot 374-5). These empires and cities crack, reform, and burst, unable to survive because of their sordid abuse of nature. The survival and flourishing of nature are crucial to the survival of human civilization.

The speaker's main purpose is "to raise consciousness about ecological attitudes and practices that are destructive and to illuminate creative alternatives," and this purpose is achieved through the representation of depleted nature and wasted human lives (Carr 18). The possibility of a "creative alternative" can be seen in the speaker's encounter in what Miller calls "the Chapel Perilous" (125):

In this decayed hole among the mountains  
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing  
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel  
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home (Eliot 385-8).

James Miller argues that this is "a confrontation with death" which leads the speaker to the realization that "death is a natural, inevitable, part of life" (125). The imagery of death, ("decayed hole"; "tumbled graves"), though apparent in these lines, does not suggest gloomy inevitability. Instead of concentrating on the absence of human life, and viewing death through an anthropocentric outlook, it is interesting to note the nature imagery in these lines. This is "the wind's home." The speaker is once again in the mountains, which have been connected with liberation and entrapment earlier, but which now are associated with things natural. The "moonlight," the "grass," and the "wind," all set the stage for an encounter between the speaker and nature; an encounter that could help humans reconnect with nature by realizing its significance to their very existence.

A moment of optimism emerges in the poem as there is no sign of humans and their corrupting influence within the "Chapel Perilous." A nonhuman being provides a signal of the coming morning: "Only a cock stood on the rooftree / Co co rico co co rico" (Eliot 391-2). Hargrove says that the cock is a "symbol of dawn", a symbol of hope that arrives at a "moment of utter futility," suggesting a possible future for nature's survival, but interestingly, without humans (86). Another symbol of hope arrives "In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust / Bringing rain" (Eliot

393-4). Rain, with all its power of quenching a thirsty earth, of bringing renewal and regeneration to nature and all forms of life, is a positive symbol here. When the speaker connects with the natural environment, nature, in the form of the wind, brings hope through rain.

The arrival of rain is possible though, only after thunder has been heard, "Then spoke the thunder / DA," and thunder sends a message that could provide a practical solution to the ecological dilemma facing humans and the earth: "Datta," "Dayadhvam," and "Damyata" (Eliot 399-400; "give," 401; "compassion," 411; "control," 418). People need to learn to give of themselves to nature by helping to conserve it, to have compassion with the rest of the nonhuman world, and especially, to control their arrogance and greed which leads them to dehumanize all that they consider "Other." Saving the world could become a possibility if people would be willing to live by these three imperatives.

This optimism however, is not one that is shared by the speaker. Now that his "song" is nearly over, he can only look back at his efforts to warn people about the impending environmental apocalypse and reflect: "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (Eliot 423-5). The speaker does not appear hopeful here that human beings will change their ways. He is resigned though to whatever happens next, as he has left the "arid plain" behind him. Another explanation could be that he is considering that nature might survive after all, while humanity will cease to exist, as with the scenario in the "Chapel Perilous." Hence, he thinks he should take care of the land under his responsibility; it no longer matters whether or not he will be around to enjoy the fruits of his labor, but he must leave his lands in the best form he can, so that they have a better chance of surviving the apocalypse.

While the speaker considers it his responsibility to care for his land, the words "at least" suggest that this is the least he can do after what humans

have done to nature. He feels guilty for the role human interference has played in the approaching disaster. And while he is willing to "set his lands in order," he is also shoring "fragments" against his own "ruin," remembering the different ways in which he has tried to show people the injustice of their behavior towards the nonhuman world through his song (Eliot 430). He recalls telling them that culture has no hopes of surviving without nature: "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (Eliot 420). He reminisces about his message to "feel the ache and tug of the organic web passing through us," to forge a connection with nature: "Quando fiam uti chelidon" (Sanders 226; "When shall I be like the swallow?" Eliot 427). He finally recollects the message of the thunder, "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" ("give. compassion. Control," Eliot 432), that perhaps has led people to say: "Hieronymo's mad againe" (Eliot 431). The speaker's warning is considered the ravings of a mad man and will probably not be taken into any kind of consideration. Either way, the speaker has made peace with the situation, and has left the rest of humanity to make peace with nature: "Shantih shantih shantih: (Eliot 433).

The speaker of the poem then is envisioned as an ecocritic, or an ecocritic, who tries to bring about the re-education of people, bringing awareness of the essential importance of the natural environment in human existence. As Sanders states that "the gospel of ecology has become an intellectual commonplace. But it is not yet an emotional one" (226). By focusing on the "social ramifications of environmental degradation" (Hart 8), the speaker is able to form a terrifying picture of the world, wasted and barren, that deeply affects the continued existence of humans, purposefully creating the imagery of failing and sterile human civilization, the most cherished of human interests, in the name of which the natural world is colonized.

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**The Mask as Mirror: Citizen and City as Avatars in *Watchmen***  
by Mike Buckley

"...Blake understood..."

*He saw all the little men in masks trying to hold it together...*

Alan Moore, *Watchmen*

"How can an object have a story? Well, it can pass from hand to hand... Its story is that of migration, the cycle of avatars it passes through."

Roland Barthes (forward to the Penguin edition of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*)

In *Histoire de l'Oeil (Story of the Eye)*, one of his few works of fiction, Georges Bataille—numismatist, omnivorous theorist, and pornographer—employs a treatment of the concept of the "avatar."<sup>1</sup> The *avataravada*, the Hindu doctrine of the Godhead's descent into mortal form,<sup>2</sup> finds in Bataille's writing a substitution of the Godhead with an object acting as a representative of the novel's theme: a lecherous priest's disembodied eye. Throughout the narrative an egg, a bowl of milk, and a bull's testicle (according to Roland Barthes<sup>3</sup>) all act as avatars for the

eye, which is eventually inserted, as many of the avatars also have been, into the sexual arena of the troubled main characters. In this unique treatment of the *avatar* we can trace the presence of a thematically fetishized object, the eye, through a series of avatars that inform the eye with their own strange characteristics (which are, in turn, informed by the action and sexual proximity of the characters). This complex notion of the avatar can be useful in analyzing aspects of our visual culture. It is, in fact, an especially useful tool with which to understand media<sup>4</sup> that employ unique poetics in bridging text and image, and is well suited to the medium of the superhero graphic novel. Even a cursory reading of *Watchmen* shows a brand of vivisection at work; the action of the novel cuts into a living superhero mythos to explain its workings. Essential to such a vivisection is a heightened concept of both the hero and the hero's substitute identity, the mask. This heightened concept can be explored using Bataille's theory of heterology, which, grafted onto our working definition of *avatar*, will provide panel-by-panel insights into the text of *Watchmen*. I will use these insights to explore and re-define the relationship between the hero (Rorschach) and the city he represents.

When publishing *Story of the Eye*, Bataille created something like a mask for himself—his pen name for the work was Lord Auch:

"The name Lord Auch [pronounced *oesb*] refers to a habit of a friend of mine; when vexed, instead of saying 'aux chiottes!' [to the shithouse], he would shorten it to 'aux ch.' *Lord* is English for God (in the Scriptures): Lord Auch is God relieving himself." (forward to *Story*, 1943)

Lord Auch, as a pen name, reflects many of the complexities within Bataille's thinking. While he is clearly drawn to notions that subvert public society's sanitized treatments of sex, waste, and death, he seeks

rather to transcend traditional thinking on such topics, marrying them to well known notions of the sacred and powerful. "What I am most proud of is having shuffled the cards..."<sup>5</sup> (*Essential Writings*, 222); the result of Bataille's card shuffling is his notion of heterology, a theory that attempts to codify his re-definition of the sacred. Heterology claims that the sacred is brought into being by those rules which are broken.<sup>6</sup> Rules, broken in an attempt to address the unseen by producing the sacred, generally take place in an exclusive space (a space set apart from public view). Altar space, cells meant to enhance the aesthetic life of a monk, and naves constructed specifically to hold certain relics are all places which court separation as way to indicate special meaning.<sup>7</sup> As we extend this heterological concept of exclusive space and the rituals enacted within it as a production site for the sacred, we can imagine it to include the mask of the superhero as well. This space is truly exclusive, and the site of real sacrifice—of identity and societal norms. Although an avatar doesn't necessarily need a mask, a mask represents the attempt to be an avatar (whether successful or not). So, to understand the dialectic divide between public and private,<sup>8</sup> as forcibly expressed in Rorschach's attempt to be an avatar—an actor for his society's will to violence—this paper attempts to define the hero's countenance as the site of conflict between the two, and as such, in heterological terms, a *sacred* space.

If *Watchmen* can be said to have a unifying voice, it would arguably be Rorschach's—Walter Kovacs the abused child and conflicted man—and while other chapters of the work function to explore aspects of the story through each character, the powerful trope of near-religious devotion to "justice" displayed by Rorschach,<sup>9</sup> mixed with the doom-saying Walter Kovacs, his alter ego,<sup>10</sup> combines well behind Rorschach's strange mask, the mark of an avatar of society's will to violence (able to exist in the exclusive and heterologically *sacred* space *behind* the mask, a space, as I noted above, which is both exclusive and productive

of the forces that produced the avatar Rorschach plays—violence and the disintegration of societal norms). *Watchmen* is very much about the extension of the superhero mythos into a “real” world; in this world this mythos is subjected to the various tortures that compose our world—the media, the threat of annihilation at the hands of science and war, the smallness of the individual. Rorschach’s strange mask is, here, the fetishized object as defined above, the image that separates the wearer from society and allows him to act in his unique role. Rorschach’s mask is both the fetishized object within which an avatar exists and the mark of the avatar himself. As in Bataille’s *Story*, in which the priest’s eye tells its tale by “migrating” through a series of avatars, Moore/Gibbons create in *Watchmen* a hero through which the themes of the work are visually treated as they “migrate” through his voice, persona,<sup>11</sup> and narrative.

Rorschach’s journal, the opening text of the story, represents *Watchmen*’s most successful attempt at creating voice in text. The effort plays out visually (in the yellow, jagged text boxes) in word choice (short sentence fragments, “hurrr,” a sort of linguistic calling card, insisting that while Rorschach is one of the most *precise* characters in the work<sup>12</sup>, his language is hurried and imprecise) and with the framework of a journal (while other characters may talk to themselves, or think in text, Rorschach writes it down—although it is questionable in its comprehensibility within the novel). The journal voice, as I shall call it here, is often used to return the reader to one of the central concerns of the work: society’s ills and our responses to them. Rorschach’s first journal entries are extended meditations on the city: “Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell, all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth talkers...” (*Watchmen*, I, 1). The journal voice has acted here to situate the reader in the moral setting of the graphic novel, a world that is not only at the brink of destruction, but peopled with powerful individuals who plot potentially harmful ways to achieve its redemption. In a very

real sense, this moral setting—the brink of global destruction achieving symmetry with the moral destruction the masked heroes court to enact its redemption—is a question of scale: Rorschach is a sort of literalist, subjecting criminals to versions of their own crime, while Adrian Veidt extends his literalism into the realization of the metaphor which had, until his action, kept the peace—Mutually Assured Destruction.

But the journal voice does more than situate the reader in a moral setting. It forwards an important thematic element of the graphic novel in its very opening lines: “The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown” (*Watchmen*, I, 1). This line from the journal hints at Rorschach’s mental state, “lowering” the city so streets are gutters and gutters are filled with the run-off, evocative of one of Bataille’s own photos of an abattoir floor, presumably knocking the whole metropolitan corpus down a distance, situating it’s foundations in the loss of human life. Choosing the word “scab” to refer to the closing (or satiation) of the drains shows that Rorschach, in a very real sense, feels that the city is a living, healable body. The city is ailing as a body would ail, and Rorschach knows that many brands of healing involve degrees of harm. It is with the zeal of a medical practitioner, in a way, that he proceeds with his mission.<sup>13</sup> In this way we can see Rorschach’s role as avatar of the public being in its most emotional sense: the emotional reactions of a child to the profound emotional realities of loss and urban decay—the same response many of its citizens suffer.

After Rorschach’s arrest we lose his journal for quite awhile. During its absence Walter Kovacs, stripped of his “face,” narrates things that have happened to him throughout his life. He is also often projected against the parchment panels of the hell-ship side narrative, and although many characters are used to juxtapose against the action of this side narrative, it is perhaps Kovacs’ story line that speaks most directly to it. He intends

to cure the city person by person, in a way that Veidt, in all his grandiose intelligence, would not. But in Chapter X, as the clock/happy face visual echo is replaced by a radar screen to announce possible disaster, Rorschach's journal voice again helps situate the reader in the urgency of the moment.<sup>14</sup> This time, of course, the function of the journal voice is to remind the reader both of the physical threats that Veidt poses (and who better to remind the reader than Rorschach, the physical virtuoso and lunatic) and the very real chance of global obliteration. And Rorschach also reveals a connection here: This section of his journal is addressed directly to the *New Frontiersman*, a strange and strident paper that we can see as the connective tissue between Rorschach's status as avatar of the public will-to-violence and the strain of public will that rewards his existence.

In Chapter V we see the first in-depth treatment of Rorschach's unique mask, a treatment which will be plumbed later, when Rorschach is arrested, for its psychological depths. The introductory splash page presents a reflection of a bar's lit sign, specifically the odd mirror-image R that forms a skull over a pair of crossbones. The trope of reflection is central to Rorschach (to the actual Rorschach ink blot test as well) and I will return to it later in this paper. What is central to these pages are the visual representations, which begin to deepen and explain the full resonance of the Rorschach mask. To understand these visual representations fully, we must first examine the physical characteristics of the unique mask Rorschach has created.

Masked superheroes choose (or construct) masks which either represent their true, non-performative nature<sup>15</sup> or thematically enhance their choice to be a hero.<sup>16</sup> Rorschach's is decidedly the former. Walter Kovacs' early encounter with the unique material that would later become his "face," a "Dr. Manhattan spin-off fabric," (*Watchmen*, VI, 10) illuminates an underlying aesthetic related to his extreme moral views: "Wrong. Not ugly at all. Black and white moving. Changing shape... But

not mixing. No gray." (*Watchmen*, VI, 10) Previous to this moment an instant of "mixing" disturbed Kovacs—handling women's clothes—but the customer's initial distaste for the dress transforms, in Kovacs hands, to something very unique: a shifting mask. Sensitive to heat and pressure, the mask performs a feat which few other hero masks can—it responds to the wearer, forcing the observer to respond to it. In this way Rorschach's mask is indeed quite like a face, reflecting an internal state which may be difficult for the outside world to name or describe.<sup>18</sup> It is also interesting that Rorschach seems only able to see out of the black segments of the mask. This is obvious in Chapter XI after he attacks Veidt with a fork. Veidt handily stops the attack then yanks Rorschach's mask to the side—as he struggles to right it, Veidt lays him out with a punch.<sup>19</sup>

The mask, though, performs stranger feats. Part of forcing the observer to respond to it is the mask's nature as a sort of psychological test. Kovacs himself, when taking the Rorschach inkblot test, displays a level of performativity characteristic to Kovacs (when not *in face*): "A pretty butterfly," he says, interpreting an inkblot that in fact reminds him of the cleaved head of a dog he killed. The very level of interpretation involved in the seeing of the Rorschach mask is evident with Dr. Long's reaction to Kovacs: "His responses to the Rorschach blot tests were surprisingly bright and positive and healthy. I really think he might be getting better." (*Watchmen*, VI, 1) This is the first chance in the graphic novel for the reader to begin teasing out what Rorschach "means" with his face; in fact, panel to panel, the reader journeys *from* Rorschach's face *to* interpretation. Page one of Chapter VI opens with a close-up of a Rorschach inkblot we assume is the Rorschach mask in close up. In the next panel we see that it is not the mask at all, but a Rorschach card in Dr. Long's hand, in a sort of visual balance between two of Kovacs' hands.<sup>20</sup> As the reader is assumed into the point of view of Kovacs we see the ink blot just beneath the doctor's face, heightening the ubiquitousness of the

inkblot trope (and that of reflection).

Reflecting the “mirroring” trope that is so essential to the Rorschach character (Rorschach’s status as an avatar of the public’s will-to-violence is an important expression of the mirroring trope, which I will illuminate below), we can notice four distinct “moods” the mask is able to express. For the purposes of analysis I have labeled these *Brow Heavy* (often, of course, connoting menace, as in panels four and eight, page eighteen, Chapter XI), *Mouth Emotive/Joy/Surprise* (as in panel two, page twenty four, Chapter II), *Mouth Emotive/Rage/Consternation* (this mood is ubiquitous, and interestingly, will sometimes indicate motion, as in the very kinetic panel seven on page twenty, Chapter II) and finally *Walnut*, a symmetrical rendering relatively free of comprehensible emotion and used when Rorschach’s mood changes from one to another, as in conversation. Thus we see that Rorschach’s mask is not an unreadable series of shapes, and just as it is rooted to the physical state of the wearer, it is rooted to the mental state of the reader.

Returning to Chapter V, in which is both the culmination of the mirroring trope that informs Rorschach’s mask and his status as an avatar—an embodied reflection—of the public’s will-to-violence, and the brutal stripping of both his mask and his avatar status, we find at once the vivisection of his character (an avatar—unrecognized, unexamined—is less compelling) and the moment when he is set to be exposed to the side of society that denies conjuring his avatar status—Authority. The beginning of this chapter finds Rorschach stepping through a mirrored R, serving as a skull over cross bones, and connoting both his shifting visage (*Brow Heavy*: violence) and his signature representation of it. This is an instant of visual foreshadowing—the skull and crossbones, rendered to resemble Rorschach, tell us that much—but as we learn later, both red and yellow are tied to concussive acts of violence and retribution within Rorschach’s mind. In this chapter the accompanying quotes address

symmetry also (this type of balance so vital to Rorschach’s character): “FEARFUL SYMMETRY” (*Watchmen*, Chapter V, 4) is the quote which cuts the page, referring to the William Blake<sup>21</sup> quote from “Tyger” near the end of the chapter.<sup>22</sup> In Chapter V there are two meetings with the man who was once Moloch, the last of the costumed villains. Symmetrical in the chapter, they open and close it; the violation of this symmetry (a rupturing of the trope of mirroring essential to Rorschach’s identity) is foreshadowed visually when Rorschach himself breaks the reflection of the R in the puddle with his foot. Symmetry is violated in other ways as well—the second visit to Moloch is unproductive because he has been killed, and in a final violent showdown, Rorschach is not only defeated but stripped of the trappings that constituted his true identity, forced back into the realm of the performative, and robbed of his role as avatar of society’s will-to-violence.<sup>23</sup>

Stripping Rorschach of his mask results in a continued treatment of the trope of mirroring. As discussed above, Rorschach’s journal voice is used by Moore/Gibbons as an entryway into the moral setting within the city, and one of the insights that Rorschach produces regarding the city is its essentially human frailty. As Rorschach is unmasked (reduced to his weakest, falsest state: Walter Kovacs) the city is unmasked in the same sense: at its most vulnerable, the city will soon act as a stand-in (or avatar) for two larger forces at work—The United States and The Soviet Union. In this way the city itself is a sacrifice, by our working definition of the heterological: “For a fly that has fallen into the ink, the universe is a fly that has fallen into the ink,” Bataille notes; (*Essential Writings*, 270) as the avatar suffers for the city, the city will suffer as avatar of larger, more alien forces.

The full extension of the trope of mirroring, both within Rorschach (as avatar) and within the city, depends upon a re-thinking of it. Until now symmetry has existed laterally: both sides of Rorschach’s face, the



beginning and end of Chapter V, the image of Rorschach's feet (one shoeless) acting as the axis of water puddle reflections, not unlike the mask he has just lost. Mirrors act as axis points between images—the subject and the reflected subject—and this relationship, as displayed in Rorschach's visage (and the countless visual echoes of it in *Watchmen*) is lateral: side-by-side representation. The most profound example of the mirroring trope, however, rests upon that fetishized object that is so central to the genre of hero stories (and the medium of graphic novels): the mask. Rorschach's shifting mask acts as a mirror, connecting one avatar (Rorschach: avatar of the public's will-to-violence) and the city (a sacrifice—and avatar of greater, potential conflict—of Veidt's plan to produce a third villain for the United States and The Soviet Union to fear). That is, Rorschach is a reflection of the city (through his mask), as the city is a reflection of him. Within this relationship Rorschach is the trace that bleeds—revealing the dialectic between citizen and city as mediated by his mask.

As an avatar is an attempt at a representation (and therefore interpretation), we can understand Rorschach to represent the city which he seeks to heal. The fact that he suffers as much at the hands of the city as he does at its enemy's hands speaks to the odd reversals that exist within heterologically sacred space: Rorschach is a sort of sacrifice. He is also, of course, the avatar of (and to a degree participant in) a different, larger sacrifice, the destruction of the city. Interestingly, later in the work, Veidt feels his mis-deeds are necessary to the safety of the world. More “ethically uncertain” (*Watchmen*, Chapter X, 30) is a “facsimile of the feared vigilante,” Rorschach. Veidt much prefers marketing an army of faceless terrorists, which is essentially what he later does. While “faceless” enemies and allies fit with Veidt's desire to promote himself to the exclusion of others, this very facelessness acts as the central metaphorical machinery of *Watchmen*, producing complex relationships between citizens and hero, hero and city, city and world.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Our own obsession with the concept of the avatar springs from the word's assumption by the gaming community, a discourse arena in which the avatar is asked to negotiate tasks on behalf of the gamer—the *expressed deity within the avatar*. Interestingly, it is essential for the gamer to find a measure of individuality within the avatar, a measure of choice.

<sup>2</sup> In his recent study of one such avatar, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Prashant Miranda writes: “He had a strong faith in the reality of an unseen world behind the flux of phenomena.” (*Avatar and Incarnation*, 5) The “unseen *was a reality*” (12) to Dr. Radhakrishnan, and the assumption of this spiritual metaphor for use within a community that experiences the “seen” in a similar way—the control of the seen within a video game to negotiate complex, unseen ideas outside out of it (identity, contention, group formation, etc.)—speaks to the usage I will attempt with the concept: the avatar within Rorschach's character in Moore/Gibbon's *Watchmen*. (All italics mine.)

<sup>3</sup> In the forward for the Penguin edition of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*.

<sup>4</sup> Other media than video games—the primary association most people have with the *avatar*.

<sup>5</sup> “Shuffling the cards,” for Bataille, meant an attempt at making something *unique to our time* (but not “new”—for Bataille, we are always already performing an old masque, the ancient ritual of society) by marrying together the profane and the traditionally sacred to create a new type of sacredness. His definition will figure importantly in my analysis of *Watchmen*. (The above quote is from the only interview Bataille did, with journalist Madeleine Chapsal, in 1961.)

<sup>6</sup> Heterology is also tied to Bataille's theory of General Economics. Conflict, in this model, is tied to the accumulation of material goods. The sacred, a necessary element for a given society to define itself in relation to the unseen (and attempt to exercise agency over it), also expels the accumulation. He uses as support for this theory phenomena as disparate as ritual feasting, ritual gift giving among Pacific Northwestern Native American tribes, and human sacrifice.

The poignancy for Rorschach's role as an avatar for the fears of the ailing larger society hinges on my argument that his mask is a unique expression of a sort of sacred space, rooted in Bataille's theory of heterology.

<sup>7</sup> Bataille, later, extended his ideas of the sacred (as defined in heterological terms) to places like abbattoir. The Surrealists in general were fascinated by drawing parallels between ritualized sacrifice in ancient societies and modern industrialized meat packing.

For our purposes, the idea of the sacred (for Bataille) is a product of two things: an effort to produce it by “wasting” resources (as in a sacrifice) and an exclusive space set aside, both restricted and known to the general public—the place in which the rules of

society are broken for the betterment of society.

- <sup>8</sup> The dialectic between public and private is a concern as old as the superhero comic. Previous to graphic novels like *Watchmen*, the most interesting treatment of the dialectic might have been the open question that comics like *Wonder Woman* posed: If a character is from a fabulous place, the trappings of the norms they have to conform to in the straight world—their glasses, their business suits and repressed powers—are the costume, and the strange tights known as the uniform of the extraordinary are projections of their true selves.
- <sup>9</sup> This is, of course, an echo of similar long term themes within other comics, like *Batman*.
- <sup>10</sup> “My face,” Kovacs calls the Rorschach mask—asserting that his disguise and its performative elements are, in fact, the ones related to Kovacs (such as the exposed face, the doomsday sign) not Rorschach. The mask is his face—masked he is the truest expression of himself.
- <sup>11</sup> I treat Rorschach’s “persona,” in reference to its role as an avatar through which themes pass, as his mask.
- <sup>12</sup> The conflict that Rorschach suffers is a decidedly less complex one than many of the others: He seeks a way to deepen his experience as a masked hero; he does not question his role.
- <sup>13</sup> He will “Never” quit because his sadism is rooted in salvation.
- <sup>14</sup> This is important in a graphic novel like *Watchmen*, itself a Gorgian knot of narrative and multi-genre text.
- <sup>15</sup> As discussed in endnote eight.
- <sup>16</sup> Captain America would be an example of the latter, as would Driedburg.
- <sup>17</sup> A useful parallel to understanding the hero-as-avatar is to re-imagine him as a dancer in a codified—but secular—dance, as is present in many Native American societies. “Contemporary culture has no counterpart to Yup’ik masks,” *The Face of Dance* by Lynn Ager Wallen states; “...there is no counterpart to the mask as artistic product, as sacred art, as part of a stylistic tradition, as a symbolic system, as an integral part of dance, or as a vehicle to spiritual transformation.” (*Dance*, 13) Indeed Rorschach’s being represents an incarnation—and *avataravada* of the public will that is difficult to find parallel with in the city’s institutions, which constitute the most deliberate of its endeavors.
- <sup>18</sup> It is interesting that the other heroes choose or construct less reactive masks; excepting, of course, those who do not mask themselves, like Adrian Veidt.
- <sup>19</sup> This seems consistent with the “signature” that Rorschach uses, two blot shapes over two dots, conjuring the barest of expression—eyes.
- <sup>20</sup> It’s interesting to note that the Rorschach inkblot that Dr. Long administers includes no colored blots. According to the *Dictionary of Psychology*, the Rorschach test typically includes a number of colored blots. We do, later in Chapter VI, begin to see Kovacs’ mind transmogrifying the blots—colorizing them with the emotion the image conjures. First yellow—as he relates the moment he cleaved the dogs—then orange, and finally red, as Kovacs ties the “color” of the memory to the non-color of the blot: “Dark by then. Dark as it gets.” (*Watchmen*, Chapter VI, 21) As is typical with many of Rorschach’s moments, after the red blot, the reader is in neutral space again, watching the kidnapper/murderer move through his house. Then, towards the bottom of page 22, the reader is in Rorschach’s point of view again, looking through a dim window at the murderer, before the return of color (the red of the inkblot) crashes through the window in the form of the murdered dog.
- Thusly the inkblot seizes the narrative.
- <sup>21</sup> The parallel in *Watchmen* between Edward Blake (the Comedian) and William Blake is in their destructive insights: The more the Comedian understands, the darker, more scarred, more masked he becomes.
- <sup>22</sup> Blake’s tiger, which addressed the wonder (and destructive power) of the Sublime, is here re-framed to address the human: Rorschach.
- <sup>23</sup> Part of this “theft” of his role as avatar takes place as the police taunt him. They reveal his physical smallness, his stench, his ugliness... “This ugly little zero is the terror of the underworld?” (*Watchmen*, Chapter V, 28)

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The Extravagant Mystery of Meaning: Deconstructing *Heart of Darkness*  
by Catherine Conner

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* presents its reader with what seems to be an account of Marlow's journey to the Congo, the "heart of darkness." However, one cannot ignore the ambiguities within the text—the "meaning" of Marlow's tale is itself elusive, yet one can sense there are other meanings embedded within the text, hidden from view. The narrator confesses early on in the story that he knew he was about to hear "one of Marlow's inconclusive stories" (7). Critics of *Heart of Darkness*, such as Florence Ridley, have attempted to address that sense of unresolved meaning. In her essay, "The Ultimate Meaning of *Heart of Darkness*," Ridley asserts that most critics would agree that meaning in Conrad's novella is "suspected rather than seen" (1). Ridley proceeds to extract a sense of certitude from the text in order to solve the mysteries of the text, and goes so far as to claim that Conrad makes "explicit" the similarities between Kurtz's women. But in a letter to American critic and editor Barrett H. Clark, Conrad expresses that "a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to

a definite conclusion" ("Selected Letters" 301). Further, Conrad explains in a letter to writer and personal friend Richard Curle, "Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion [ . . . ] Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of an explicit statement" ("Selected Letters" 302). Although Ridley is accurate in pointing to suspected meanings in *Heart of Darkness*, she is simultaneously destroying the beauty of its mysteries by attempting to assign explicit meanings to it.

If assigning explicit meaning to key elements in *Heart of Darkness* makes those very meanings insignificant, how should one read *Heart of Darkness*? Is it possible to arrive at an understanding of the "meaning" of the novella and, further, should one even assume a concrete understanding is to be had? Moving onward from this point, a deconstructive reading of *Heart of Darkness* can be undertaken in order to flesh out underlying meanings or alternative readings of the text. According to philosopher Jacques Derrida, the "ultimate meaning" of a text can never be discovered. To read a text deconstructively, one must view the text with a skeptical eye to expose the inconsistencies and instabilities both within the text itself and in relation to the system of meanings already in place. Since the process of reading a text deconstructively elicits more than one possible interpretation, this multiplicity of meanings leaves one to wonder which, if any, meaning prevails or if, in fact, one should prevail at all.

One of Conrad's critics, Chinua Achebe, also asserts access to the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* as does Ridley. In his essay, "An Image of Africa," he states, "Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: 'What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours . . . Ugly'" (339). Although Achebe's generalization about what fascinates the Western mind is somewhat troubling, his position is understandable. Achebe goes on to make a number of salient and plausible points throughout the remainder

of his essay, because, at one time, the sad truth was that some societies did believe Africa to be a "dark" continent, filled with savage, uncivilized beings. Since then, this "truth" has been re-examined and is no longer a central truth, as it once was. However, the question of the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* remains unanswered.

In the pursuit of meaning, Derrida asserts that one will find a chain or system of meanings that will continue to refer to other concepts or systems. Therefore, arriving at one end of a chain will ultimately lead to another chain, and so on and so on, seemingly *ad infinitum*. Therefore, a concept cannot exist only in reference to itself onanistically: "[T]he signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts" (*Speech and Phenomena* 138, 140). Similarly, when a text is read deconstructively, the chain of meanings or concepts that relate to the concept in question must be scrutinized. When the text itself fails to offer meaning, one can look to footnotes or marginalia that point back to the text to offer the reader clarity about the text. However, it is important to remember that the text and the marginalia/footnotes are interdependent—the text needs the marginalia/footnotes to facilitate an understanding of it, just as the marginalia and footnotes need the text to establish its own necessity. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow recognizes the interdependence between text and footnote in a book found during his journey to the Inner Station.

In a small hut about fifty miles before the Inner Station, Marlow finds a book titled *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*. Marlow describes the text of the book as "dreary" despite its accompanying illustrations and "repulsive" tables of figures—his only appreciation of the book stems from the author's "singleness of intention" and the fact that the book, which appears to be sixty years old, is an antiquity (38). Marlow's true

fascination with the book comes from something that points back to the main text, rather than the main text itself: "Such a book being there was wonderful enough, but still more astounding were the notes penciled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text [. . .] They were in cipher! [. . .] It was an extravagant mystery" (38). For Marlow, the actual text held little value, but the ciphered marginalia proved infinitely more appealing. However, the ciphered writing needs its own system of meanings in order to be useful to the text—the marginalia needs marginalia. Without it, the ciphered notes are reduced to little more than incoherent scribbles.

Another text that Marlow comes upon is Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. In this case, a notation added to the text changes his overall perception of the text to which it is attached. In Marlow's estimation, Kurtz's report is "eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung" (49), yet nonetheless a "beautiful piece of writing" (50). In this report, Kurtz writes that "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," an ideal that Marlow ascribed to as well, as it made him "tingle with excitement" as he read it (50). However, Marlow admits that in "the light" of the notation Kurtz added to the margin of the report, the opening paragraph now seems "ominous" (50). Marlow explains:

This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' (50)

Had Kurtz not included the note calling for the extermination of "the brutes," Marlow would not have regarded that first paragraph as

"ominous." It was only through the addition of that last notation that the nature of the preceding text was altered. The note is dependent upon the text of the report to demonstrate the change in Kurtz's ambitions and to expose the hypocrisy and failure of his—and the Company's—intentions. Simultaneously, the text relies upon the footnote to reveal its own instabilities and inconsistencies as a "report." Both Kurtz's notation and his report are linked in a system of meanings that at the same time elucidate and obscure the very meanings it attempts to reveal.

Notions of obscurity despite attempts at elucidation are found elsewhere in the text. Of particular interest is the undefined narrator's preface to the tale about Marlow:

to him [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (5).

In this passage, an attempt at illumination does little more than enhance the haze. The difficulty of illuminating an obscurity brings up an important point critical to the concept of deconstruction: meaning is not found at the center of a story, but in the exterior that surrounds it, and it is the maneuvering through the exteriority of the tale—the haze—that allows one to pursue some sense of meaning. However, this type of maneuvering can be problematic as well, since attempts at shining light upon that which is obscured only result in an illumination of the haze, rather than the meaning.

Later, Marlow recounts his experience in the Congo, admitting his own difficulties with obscurity in the face of illumination: "It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No. Not very clear. And yet it seemed to

throw a kind of light" (7). Marlow confesses that his experience, while bringing to light "everything" about him and his thoughts, nonetheless failed to enlighten him or offer him a sense of clarity. Instances of illumination and light are prevalent throughout the novella and, as such, it would be appropriate to explore the chain of meanings associated with the term "illumination."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "illumination" is defined as "the action of illuminating; the fact or condition of being illuminated; a lighting up, a supplying of light." The first two parts of the definition do not tell much about the word itself—at this point, the word is referring only to itself. Therefore, the next definition must be reviewed: "Optics. Degree of lighting up; the intensity of the light falling upon a surface, as measurable by the amount incident on each unit of the surface." Interesting, but "illumination" in *Heart of Darkness* is figurative, not necessarily literal. Move to definition three: "Intellectual enlightenment; information, learning; intellectual gifts. Also, the 'enlightenment' or doctrines of the Illuminati." Now "illumination" begins to make sense when the third definition is applied, but additional definitions and references remain. For instance, the reference to the "doctrines of the Illuminati" would require an exploration of the term "Illuminati," that will then launch the reader on yet another journey to another system of meanings and referents, which may or may not bode useful in the understanding of the text of *Heart of Darkness* or the initial term "illumination."

The concept of "intellectual enlightenment" seems to fit well with the above passages in *Heart of Darkness*. That being said, another problem arises: what is meant by "enlightenment"? The actual lighting or making luminous of a thing or being? Literally or figuratively? In short, yes, all the above, according to Derrida. One of the definitions of "enlightenment" is "the imparting or receiving of mental or spiritual

light" (OED). "Light" can also be defined: "bright, shining, luminous; of a place, the time of day, etc.; *fig.* enlightened mentally; pale in hue" (OED). For the purposes of *Heart of Darkness*, the definitions "pale in hue" and "enlightened mentally" offer the best avenues with which to scrutinize the light/dark binary. But in true deconstructive fashion, the notions of "dark" can also be explored to understand its juxtaposition to light. "Dark" has several definitions, but perhaps the most useful for this discussion are "The quality of being dark in shade or colour; the want of spiritual or intellectual light; absence of the 'light' of life; death; gloom of sorrow, trouble, or distress; a condition or environment which conceals from sight, observation, or knowledge; obscurity; concealment, secrecy; obscurity of meaning" (OED). With these definitions in hand, one can set about to "neutralize" the oppositional binaries, as Derrida advocates, in order to allow for the reversal of their polarity (*Of Grammatology* 188-89). However, the binaries do remain interdependent despite their changes in status. If the terms are neutralized and the preferentiality reversed, conventional interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* will be destabilized, thereby opening new avenues for thought and variations on meaning.

Of great interest to many critics are Kurtz's women: the unnamed Intended, and the similarly unnamed African woman who appears near Kurtz's cabin. The obvious light/dark binary can be seen and addressed first in this context: one woman is African (darkness of skin) and the Intended is Belgian (lightness of skin). To this can be added notions of "illumination" or "enlightenment": the African woman is not "enlightened" (by European ideals, education, knowledge, or religion), whereas one can safely assume that the Intended, being Belgian, is "enlightened." From the novella's European perspective, the term "light" is privileged over the term "dark." But if the light/dark oppositional binary is neutralized in the context of the two women, the polarity of these terms can be reversed to produce interesting results.

Going back into the text, the (dark) African woman is described by Marlow as “wild and gorgeous,” “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent” (60). Further, he observes that “the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (60). The African woman is vibrant, displaying a connection to the earth and the wilderness, and surrounded by life. Later, when he visits Kurtz’s (light) Intended, Marlow’s description of her is quite different from that of the African woman: “She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering [ . . . ] This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me [ . . . ] with every word spoken the room was growing darker and only her forehead smooth and white remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” (73-74). The Intended, with her “ashy halo” and “dark eyes,” evokes images of death and, in addition, is physically surrounded by furnishings that also suggest a sense of death, such as the piano which stood in the corner of the drawing-room “like a sombre and polished sarcophagus” (73). In terms of these women, the dark is aligned with life and the light is associated with death.

The light/dark binary can be explored further in terms of its associations with life and death, another binary that can be reversed. Kurtz’s Intended is described as having a “smooth and white” forehead. If one ascribes to the notion that light or fair skin is preferable over dark skin, then the Intended’s forehead is simply a matter of outward appearance. However, “smooth and white” also evokes a sense of coldness, perhaps the cool, smooth feel of an exquisite slab of marble. Typically, marble was used in buildings, often in churches—and in sepulchres. In *Heart of Darkness*, several allusions are made to sepulchres: Marlow speaks of the Company’s offices as being located in a city makes him think of a “whited sepulchre”

(9), a “sepulchral city” (70), suggesting death, coldness, hollowness. The Intended can be seen as a sepulchre as well, cold and hollow, save for the memory of Kurtz’s former self that is entombed within her. In addition, her corpse-like pallor is illumined only by an “unextinguishable light of belief and love,” evoking a funereal image, particularly that of a perpetual flame burning in memoriam for the deceased. Conversely, the African woman, whom one might consider to be the embodiment of darkness, is depicted as very much alive, outdoors in the light of the sun, her savage stateliness drawing the attention of humans as well as the wilderness. In fact, Marlow remarks that the wilderness regarded her as “the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (60), indicating that, although dark, she is not hollow—she has within her a soul.

Aside from notions of life and death, the light/dark binary also suggests a knowledge/lack of knowledge binary. Kurtz’s women provide an illustration of these binaries, in terms of the knowledge each had about Kurtz. The Intended, the light, remained “in the dark” about the truth of Kurtz’s activities in the Congo, as well as about his last words, “The horror! The horror!” (69). When the Intended inquires about Kurtz’s last words, Marlow reluctantly conceals the truth from her, informing her instead that he uttered her name as his last word. In doing so, he relegates her to a darkness, a lack of knowledge, expressing, “I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether” (77). The truth about Kurtz (enlightenment) would have been a source of darkness for the Intended, the “gloom of sorrow” (OED). For Marlow, his knowledge of Kurtz proves to be a burden and source of darkness for him.

As for the African woman, if she is understood to be Kurtz’s consort, she possesses knowledge of the true “darkness” of Kurtz. Although she is the embodiment of darkness outwardly, she is also the embodiment of light inwardly due to her knowledge about Kurtz. However, this knowledge is not a source of “darkness” as it would have been with the

Intended, or as it turns out to be for Marlow. Placed side by side, it becomes clear that the Intended, living in the world of supposed light (knowledge), exists in a state of darkness (lack of knowledge), while the African woman, living in world of supposed darkness, exists in a state of light. The women embody both elements of the light and dark binary, and the privileging of one term or concept over the other shifts. At any rate, the terms remain interdependent, continuing to rely upon each other within the system of meaning in order to define themselves.

In terms of knowledge as light and lack of knowledge as dark, an early indicator of this binary is seen before Marlow even begins his journey. When he was young boy, he was fascinated by maps, losing himself in "all the glories of exploration" (8). Particularly inviting to young Marlow were the "many blank spaces on the earth" (8), which fed his aspiration to explore the "biggest—the most blank" space on the earth. As he matured, however, he realized that the blank space no longer existed: "It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness" (8). For Marlow, the mystery of the blank space is what beckoned him. The association of knowledge with light and lack of knowledge with dark has been reversed, as it was for Kurtz's women.

Finally, what is to be said of the "darkness" in the novella's title, *Heart of Darkness*? Does it point to darkness in terms of lack of knowledge? Does it, instead, indicate something sinister? And what is meant by "heart"? Turning to definitions once again to address these questions, the term "heart" is defined in many ways, but the most common are listed as: "the bodily organ, its function, etc.; as the seat of feeling; something having a central position; the vital part or principle" (OED). The "heart" of darkness, then, refers to something occupying a central position within a surrounding darkness. That being said, it is still unclear

precisely to what "heart of darkness" refers. Is it the seat of darkness within Kurtz? Is it a topographical location, as in the central point in Marlow's "place of darkness" on a map? Again, yes—all the above. The appeal of a deconstructive reading is its production of multiple meanings, of a decentralization of a singular meaning. All avenues can be explored and discussed once the centrality of "truth" is done away with.

To decentralize truth and meaning, Derrida plays with the term "exorbitant" in relation to the centrality of "truth." In the conventional sense, "exorbitant" refers to notions of excess, of exceeding boundaries in an undesirable way. However, for Derrida, "exorbitant" refers to something that is *ex-orbitant* (OG 162), away from the orbit, characterized by "leaving a specified track; deviating from a specified rule or principle" (OED). To read a text *ex-orbitantly*, one must deviate from the accepted path (way of reading the text) in an effort to decenter the "orb" (central truth of the text) and elicit alternate meanings of the text. By resisting the pull of the orb and deviating from the orbital path that presupposes and requires the centrality of the orb, the text's "truth" is decentralized, thereby allowing the reader to explore new paths within the text to cull additional meanings from it. According to Derrida, "Every discovery of a center or an origin is subject to a decentering" (*Structure* 247-265).

To return to the undefined narrator's preface in the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, it seems he is well aware of the need to move away from seeing the meaning of the story as central to it:

to him [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (5).

Earlier in this essay, notions of illumination and obscurity were examined in this passage. Here, another examination is undertaken, but in terms



of ex-orbitancy. If illumination seemed to be central to the meaning of the passage, a re-examination of the passage will decenter that meaning. The narrator is also referencing Marlow's attitude that meaning is found in what surrounds the tale. To point back to the possible meaning of the phrase "heart of darkness," it can be said that one needs not focus on the "heart," the center. Instead, one is better served by focusing on that which envelops the center, the surrounding "darkness." Marlow seems to understand this as he continues with his story.

In terms of understanding himself and his experience, Marlow states that "to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience" (7). Marlow, in essence, has decentralized himself: rather than focusing attention on his thoughts or inner emotions, he suggests using exterior events (Marlow's journey) to understand the interior (Marlow himself). While his thoughts and emotions are certainly part of the story, they are not central to it. By keeping an eye toward the exterior (Marlow's journey) one can begin to understand the interior (Marlow himself). Further, he reveals that it was the "farthest point of navigation" (assuming the centrality of Belgium) yet the "culminating point" of his experience. In essence, Belgium is no longer the center from which his experiences emanate—rather it is Africa. If one compares Marlow's experience in the novella to the experience of reading *Heart of Darkness*, meaning can be pursued by moving away from the assumed central truths about the text, just as Marlow moved from the centrality of Belgium. In doing so, his movement away from the center provided him with the discovery of a variety of truths: about Kurtz, Africa, the Company, himself—even his own complicity in the making and perpetuating of "truths."

In conclusion, there is no conclusion. A deconstructive reading

ensures that. Explanations can be "dreary" (37), as Marlow discovered in *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*. To be sure, the writing of the text was eloquent, but because of the explicitness of the text, it held no mystery—instead the marginalia written in cipher was the "extravagant mystery," which, incidentally, was never solved nor was the meaning of Kurtz's last words, "The horror! The horror!" Certainly, the "meaning" of the title *Heart of Darkness* as well as the meaning of the entire text remains open to a variety of interpretations. To recall Conrad's own words, "explicitness is fatal." The myriad ambiguities of the text do reveal one thing: the human desire to find answers to the questions that beleague them. The mysteries of Joseph Conrad's novella fulfill that need for its readers. As humans, we look for answers to the riddles of our world, filling in blank spaces as needed, wading through mire after mire of possible meanings until we finally arrive at one that satisfies us. Whether we are truly satisfied with the answers we find or if we are merely tired from the wading is indeterminable. However, it is the existence of the riddle that keeps us on our quest. Perhaps the reason for *Heart of Darkness*' longevity is that there has not been (and most likely never will be) a definitive, "ultimate" meaning or truth. And that would suit Derrida—and Conrad—just fine.

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### The Fictitious Self: Exploring Identity and Survivance in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* by Amie Howell

*If there even is a natural being, an irreducible self, it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all impersonation—the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate...in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through.* (Roth 320)

Both Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* present the reader with a highly conscious recognition of performative identity, which enables the characters in their works to both manipulate their socially constructed existence and to ensure a sense of cultural survival. At various moments, the characters in these works realize that their seemingly essentialist view of self is merely the result of outside influence and expectations. Characters such as Alexie's Thomas Builds the Fire (Spokane Indian) and Roth's Nathan Zuckerman (Jewish-American) are able to dismiss any dependence upon a sense of essential being and instead recognize the highly artificial nature of identity. Rather than cling to the notion of an inherently essential, and thus sacred, sense of ethnic self, both Thomas and Nathan cobble together hybrid selves, picking and

choosing which traditional constructs and contemporary modifications to adopt. One should not consider this sense of hybridity an assimilative move in the slightest but, rather, a revisionist move to modify the ethnic self in terms of its contemporary American surroundings. The conscious recognition and utilization of performative identity serves as a vehicle for ethnic survival. As Thomas and Nathan continuously revise what it means to be Native-American or Jewish-American, respectively, they are practicing what Gerald Vizenor has, in *Manifest Manners*, coined "survivance": the continuous self-fashioning of cultural identity to ensure ethnic continuance in the modern world. Identity becomes a fiction, something to be revised to suit the storyteller's needs; this is especially true for both Nathan and Thomas, as they are constantly redefining themselves and the world around them through language.

In both novels, dense and long-standing historical constructs initially encapsulate the individual perception of ethnic identity, trapping individuals and disabling them from revising personal identity. For Nathan Zuckerman, being a Jew means being assailed by a myriad of social, political, and historical expectations, which can bog down independent progress towards identity. In response to this restriction, Nathan takes these perceptions and works within them, continuously teasing out the implications and revising himself and others. As Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky explains,

In *The Counterlife*, Jewishness became a *historical* condition whose meaning must be explored, as well as a series of conflicting ideologies whose demands must be analyzed within the novel's intricately imagined structure [and] in dialogue centered on the ability to reshape both national history and (Nathan Zuckerman's) personal identity. (90-91)

Roth uses various settings in order to express historical influence upon perceived ethnic identity. In some ways, the settings chosen serve as

characters in their own right; they dominate the narrative, shape the way the other figures in the novel interact with one another, and influence one's own perception of self. This means that, through Nathan's visions and revisions, both he and his brother Henry's sense of self are consistently repositioned.

In New Jersey, for example, Nathan and Henry Zuckerman are consumed by work and affairs of the flesh. Their existence is wholly secular, and their Jewish heritage seems almost incidental to the story. The next chapter, however, transplants the brothers to Israel, and as a result, they are redefined completely through the historical, social, and religious implications of the environment. Henry becomes devotedly, even obsessively, religious while Nathan is defined by his own anti-Zionist perspective. Each individual's sense of self becomes as unstable as the physical location of the novel and constantly in a state of flux. Identity is reconstructed radically with a change of locale or the turn of a page. With each change in locale, Roth explores the nature of Jewish-American identity as something performative and essentially constructed in response to external stimuli. These performances take place in the suburbs of the United States, the hills of Israel, and the flats and churches of England; Henry and Nathan's identities are revised subsequently in response to their surroundings.

In this regard, Roth illustrates the creation of self as something highly unstable and occurring in relation to others. In the face of this mélange of influence, there is no essential "Jewish" identity on which to base one's sense of self. Nathan reminds his friend Shuki of this: "Stop calling me a normal Jew. There's no such animal, and why should there be? How could the upshot of that history be normalcy? I'm as abnormal as you are" (Roth 162). Shunning any dependence on an essential (and thus "normal") ethnic identity, Roth and Nathan are free to develop and explore the artificiality of self. If, Nathan reasons, the self is nothing

more than a series of constructed social expectations embodied through performance, then what is to stop him from continuously revising the play-acting? Derek Parker Royal reinforces these phenomena, arguing that

The author who performs the inscription is himself a fictional creation, making the novel a sort of trial run...Nathan Zuckerman creates a series of textual scenarios where each representation of his life is different from the others. At times the differences are slight, at other times profound. In every case, Zuckerman's attempt to rewrite the self becomes an effort at understanding the self, especially in relation to his Jewishness. As he writes to his younger brother, Henry... "the construction of a counterlife[...] is one's own anti-myth at its very core." (Royal 424)

For Roth, contemporary Jewish identity is a permeable substance which is malleable to individual experience and experimentation. Nathan's re-envisioned scenarios, both in his writing and experiences, posit a sort of speculation in identity construction. By acknowledging identity as something artificial and baseless, Nathan is free to interpret the Jewish self in a multiplicity of locales, voices, and counter lives.

Nathan performs multiple roles within the novel, from that of the wry documentarian to the chronic revisionist, that serve to undermine further the nature of essential ethnic identity. Nathan is acutely aware of fiction's role in his life and in the depiction of reality; nothing escapes his records and revisions, and with his writing. Nathan is able to shape reality to suit his own experimental needs. Characters are substituted, scenarios posited, and fates reversed through his use of language. Nothing is stable, permanent, or reliable. In this way, both Nathan and Roth use fiction to confront the ambiguous nature of identity, ethnic or otherwise. Debra Shostak refers to "subjectivity as textuality" (210) in her own examination

of Nathan's approach to identity as a dissemination of words, identifying *The Counterlife* as "a series of propositions, hypothetically limitless and bound to no standard of coherence" (205). Nathan is nothing more than these constructs of language, describing himself as having "made himself out of words" (Roth 208).

This fictive invention and subsequent perpetual reinvention becomes a way to assert existence and to explore the conflicts and implications of Jewish identity (Kauvar 731). This is not to say that either Roth or Nathan comes to a definitive conclusion in regards to ethnic identity but, rather, to a nihilistic realization and compromise. Robert Alter notes that the

"self-conscious fictionality of *The Counterlife* proves to be the perfect vehicle for confronting the question of what it means to be a Jew. Given the ambiguous burdens of Jewish history at this particular moment of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roth offers no solution to the conundrum, though he is luminously aware..." (qtd. Rubin-Dorsky 91).

Just as Roth's Zuckerman brothers are inscribed upon by the influences of racial background, historical legacy, religious expectations, and national ties, Alexie's motley band of FlatHead and Spokane Indians face another form of societal inscription that results in a highly artificial sense of indigenous identity. For Alexie, much of this identity construction comes from the omnipresent influence of colonialism. Indians such as Thomas and Victor become defined initially through the images and expectations of the colonizer. This act of definition takes a particularly insidious turn when one may see outside influence not only marginalizing the tribal members in a larger sense, but also contaminating their own personal beliefs and reservation culture. Inundated by images of stoic braves and staggering drunks, the residents of Wellpinit Indian reservation are subjugated and further marginalized by history, politics, and popular culture.

Thomas, the novel's protagonist, is ostracized for failing to be a "normal" Indian; more appropriately, he is an outsider for failing to adhere to the artificial ethnic identity constructed for him out of images of Tonto and *Dances with Wolves*. Thomas is avoided and bullied; additionally, "Indian women had never paid much attention to him, because he didn't pretend to be some twentieth-century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest. He was neither loud nor aggressive, neither calm nor silent" (Alexie 4). His inability to perform this one-dimensional act somehow makes him deviant and unsafe to his fellow tribe members, but it is through Thomas that Alexie begins his own counter-war against popular culture, using the tools and images of the enemy to deconstruct this colonial perception of ethnic identity.

It is in these seemingly accepted stereotypes that Alexie chooses to ground his systematic and satirical destruction of the essential colonial identity, choosing instead to have his characters explore the constructed self through artistic experimentation. As John Newton points out, this experimentation must still have the resonance of colonial influence:

As the subjugated "other" of an invader discourse synonymous with global media saturation, the Native American subject finds himself spectacularized on a global scale. And if Alexie makes his stand in the struggle for subjective agency not in some autochthonous interiority but on the flat, open ground of the invader's own image-repertoire, the result is a comedy whose figures and gestures communicate lucidly on a global stage. (415)

For Alexie, these colonial expectations of the Native American are duplicitous, but their significance is not to be dismissed or ignored. While these identity constructs may erroneously essentialize the indigenous individual, they are inherently harmful. Those that adhere to the essentialist perception of the "proper" Indian are inherently damaged

and devalued as individuals. Junior, another Spokane youth, believes "Indians were supposed to have visions and receive messages from their dreams [since] all the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do" (Alexie 18). Subsequently, he can never meet these set expectations and cannot live in the artificial existence constructed for him; in the end, he ends his life. Victor, the reservation bully, conforms to the "warrior" archetype as he "appears to be somewhat of a puppet of mainstream American popular culture, more image than substance, given his propensity to dress in disco-era clothing" (Grassian 80). In this regard, Alexie establishes the artificial nature of an identity forged in the face of colonizing influence.

Identity is an artifice that several characters recognize throughout the course of the novel. For example, despite the torment Thomas is subjected to, "he knew that Victor and Junior were fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises" (Alexie 16). To adhere to, and believe in, the identities constructed through mainstream media and years of American colonialism is to wear a mask and limit the self. While any identity is ultimately just another construction, Alexie argues that the individual must forge the revised sense of self with an awareness of colonial marginality.

The disparity between expectation and reality is heightened throughout the work as white groupies named Betty and Veronica are introduced and, with them, their romanticized sense of native identity. Betty's depiction of the constructed indigenous self is something to be perceived as ludicrous, and thus further devalued:

White people want to be Indians. You all have things we don't have. You live in peace with the earth. You are so wise.

You've never met Lester Falls Apart have you? Chess asked. You never spent a few hours in the Powwow Tavern. I'll show you wise and peaceful...Like I was saying, everybody wants to

be an Indian. But not everybody is an Indian. It's an exclusive club. I certainly couldn't be Irish. Why do all these white people think they can be Indian all of a sudden? (168)

Alexie engages in a deconstruction of popular images, identifying the artificiality of Indian identity as expressed in both natives and non-natives.

The quintessential images of the Indian as mystic, stoic, brave, sage, drunk, and tragic figure permeate life on the reservation, and Alexie deconstructs them further through the inherent commoditization of these tropes. The colonized image of the Indian is something to be bought and sold, something to be fabricated and exchanged. In a moment of quintessential Alexie satire, the native members of the band are simply not "Indian" enough to be commercialized; they must be modified to fit into a more colonially recognizable role. As Thomas' band, Coyote Springs, prepares for a recording deal with Calvary Records, executives feel the band's "Indian-ness" needs to be enhanced with "war paint, feathers, etc. [to] really play up the Indian angle" (191). The presumed "essence" of indigenous identity is so void of meaning that it need not actually be attached to indigenous figures; it is transmutable. As a result, ethnic identity is divorced from ethnicity.

The colonial image of the indigenous individual can be cheaply and conveniently constructed, as seen in the validation and transformation of Betty and Veronica, who have "been on the reservations. They even played a few gigs with Coyotes Springs... these women have the Indian experience down. They really understand what it means to be Indian. They've been there" (269). Eventually, ethnicity through association is an acceptable new construction of self, further diluting the basis of colonial ethnic construction. The creation of identity is so shallow and artificial that it is simply a matter of a costume change for the two white singers, as a record executive suggests a "fine tuning" of the girls' image: "Can't you

see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher, you know? Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians" (270).

Alexie goes to great lengths to satirize the performative nature of identity, concluding with the musical debut of the new "Indianized" Betty and Veronica who, while not ethnically tied to any indigenous group, can easily conform to the colonial depiction of what it means to be Indian:

And my hair is blonde  
But I'm Indian in my bones  
And my skin is white  
But I'm Indian in my bones  
And it doesn't matter who you are  
You can be Indian in your bones (295)

The track uses a "vaguely Indian drum, then a cedar flute, and a warrior's trill, all the standard Indian soundtrack stuff" (295), to add further "authenticity" to the transformation, a theft that causes Thomas to run about the house, collecting treasured objects, "afraid that somebody was going to steal them next" (296). The girls, through the persuasion of the record executives, proceed to enact a theft of sorts, stealing the surface raiment of colonial native identity, and enacting another staging of identity.

The concept of performance is crucial to both novels in regards to the inherent nature of identity construction, and the means by which characters may revise the self and survive. Both Roth and Alexie present the self as an illusion, simply a collection of performances that creates an illusory image of identity. Identity becomes a matter of performance; this cannot change, the authors argue, but the terms by which the performance is scripted can be revised.

Nathan addresses this directly in *The Counterlife*, dismissing any illusions of a primary or genuine self: "I'm all for authenticity, but it can't begin to hold a candle to the human gift for playacting. That may be the only authentic thing that we *ever* do" (Roth 138). In this regard, Nathan becomes both the playwright and the player as he composes and enacts the reality envisioned in language. There are no limitations to Nathan's imaginings, as there is no standard sense of self to return to, allowing him to "play fast and loose with the *I*, turning the self into a company of actors" (Schechner 114). This fictive reimagining or performance allows for a certain sense of authorial freedom that, in turn, loosens the historical confines which may typically limit one's identity construction. Through the whim of his pen, Nathan is free to operate in various modalities and experiment with different senses of self. For him,

being Zuckerman is one long performance and very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to [him] people impersonating what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to be taken to be by whoever is setting standards. So in earnest are they that they don't even recognize that being in earnest *is the act*. (Roth 319)

He can be an observer, documentarian, brother, son, and father. He can watch his brother collapse under the pressures under an agonizing decision, or he can reverse the depiction upon himself. With this perpetual fictive recreation, the individual has no firm ground to stand upon, as Nathan's mistress, Maria, realizes upon reading the manuscript: "After reading Christendom twice I went upstairs, and when my husband came home, I began to wonder which was real, the woman in the book or the one I was pretending to be upstairs. Neither one of them was particularly 'me.' I was acting just as much upstairs" (247). With this, one may see performance on every level of existence, whether it be in the

pages of the novel, in "real life", or in the subsequent fiction of reality. It is simply a matter of creation.

Nathan's conscious recognition of this freedom is what enables him to make his discursive choices; he understands that "the treacherous imagination is everybody's maker—we are all the invention of each other, and everybody's a conjuration conjuring everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (Roth 145). Performance becomes empowerment, a way to negotiate with the nebulous demands of historical, social, and religious influence in order to construct yet another sense of ethnic identity in relation to the demands of post-modern society and hopes for survival. Nathan seems more skillful at this art of pretending through his mastering of fiction. As Nathan points out:

What people envy in the novelist aren't the things that the novelists think are so enviable but the performing selves that the author indulges, the slipping irresponsibility in and out of his skin, the reveling not in 'I' but in escaping 'I', even if it involves—*especially* if it involves—piling imaginary afflictions upon himself. What's envied is the gift for theatrical self-transformation, the way they are able to loosen and make ambiguous their connection to a real life through the imposition of talent. The exhibitionism of the superior artist is connected to his imagination; fiction is for him at once playful hypothesis and serious supposition, an imaginative form of inquiry..." (210)

Again, one may see the importance of the illusory "I," that transmutable sense of self so easily discarded or revised to suit the creator. To escape the "I" is to escape the culturally inscribed self; for Nathan, this is done through his own imaginings. As Shostak asserts, "The self, then, is what *becomes* through utterance even as it thereby distinguishes others, and it is this process of becoming... that Roth envisions as performance" (131).

The power comes from this skill at evasion and, more importantly, the recognition of this skill's importance. With this recognition, the self may become the author of its own text, creating opportunities for revision and empowerment.

Performance takes on a more literal interpretation with the music of Coyote Springs and Thomas' consistent story telling. As with Nathan Zuckerman, Thomas Builds the Fire seems highly conscious of the artificial constructs expected of him and the others on the Indian reservations. The characters are surrounded by popular representations of themselves in movies and television and become so saturated by these expectations that the images begin to pollute their existence and infringe upon their dreams. To succeed in the mainstream music business, they must look the part of the Indian; they must perform a role that would seem to need no scripting, yet there is a conscious dissection of the band members' images in order to ascertain if they are adequately fulfilling the roles prescribed through years of colonial imposition and pop culture reference. It is surface-level assessment with a standard checklist of attributes: big noses, dark skin, numerous scars, and long hair. Even then, their image requires enhancement -- their costumes require an upgrade. Much as Nathan's fiction shapes reality, so too do the popular imaginings of indigenous identity. The men and women in the tribe begin to buy into these images seen on the screen, modeling their existence and identity to suit the provided template. The pervasiveness of these caricatures dictates a sense of self, and "Indian men have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in movies" (Alexie 208).

Nathan and Thomas' recognition of a rootless and artificial identity then aligns itself with this sense of performance to create new opportunities for reinvention. For Roth, it seems this reinvention comes with the conflict against, and disavowal of, the past. This means that he must not only revise his sense of self and the identities of others, he must

imagine a completely new paradigm for the individual to exist within. The author's imperative becomes the "need to (re)invent the world, [and the] daring exploration of the monumental confrontation of self with history: the American self which *can* be reborn and Jewish history which *cannot* be reinvented" (Rubin-Dorsky 92).

Paradoxically, one must disavow the past and refuse the possibility of any sincere sense of self. The individual is void of an autonomous identity; in short, an individual must operate with a sense of nihilism. Nathan is the ultimate example of this, as he works to confront cultural inscription and perform strategic and experimental imaginings upon himself and others. Nathan never allows the reader to become comfortable with any semblance of reality. Perspectives, narrators, and identities constantly shift, leaving one without a recognizable centrality. The author urges the reader not to look for the determinate self, but to embrace the confusion of the de-centered and artificial identity. In order to gain agency, one must "transcend the anxiety of the interpretive act, to embrace and be liberated by the duplicity of reality itself and not merely the duplicity of language" (Shostak 205). By negating all sense of authority, Roth frees the self from what Elaine Kauvar refers to as the "tyranny of the actual [and by] thwarting actuality, the self comes to own the power to create whatever version of its self it desires" (733). It is only when one is able to transcend these prescribed identities that one is able to approach self-invention and empowerment.

Ironically, one must sever ties with traditional ethnic constructs in order to create a sense of post-modern ethnicity. Both Roth and Alexie show this in their works as Nathan and Thomas struggle to restructure personal identity and to revise their performances. Ultimately, the individual must achieve a sense of ethnic hybridity, acknowledging the artificiality of identity and revising the self in light of this post-modern paradigm. Gerald Vizenor coined the term "survivance" to give a



name to this phenomenon. Essentially, to practice survivance is to find reconciliation in the artificial nature of the self, carving out a revised sense of being which allows for both individual success and modified ethnic continuance. For Roth, this means the highly conscious act of representation, attempting to “impersonate best the self that best gets one through” (320). This performance relates to the reevaluation of the meaning of “homeland” and the cultural constructs that marginalize contemporary Jews. To Nathan, America is a country of equal opportunity; that is to say, it is a country where all individuals have an equal opportunity to be led astray by damaging limitations to the self. He scoffs at the label of the “self-hating Jew,” pointing out to his brother that

America is full of self-hating *Gentiles*, as far as [he] can see- it's a country that's full of Chicanos who want to look like Texans, and Texans who want to look like New Yorkers, and any number of Middle Western Wasps who, believe it or not, want to talk and act and think like Jews. To say Jew and goy about America is to miss the point, because America simply is not that” (46)

For Roth, America becomes a sort of post-racial stage for a revised sense of Jewish identity, where anxiety is by no means allayed, but is acknowledged and embraced.

For Alexie, with hybridity comes strength and continuance—more so than in Roth's work. Coyote Springs embodies this sense of multifaceted change, as the band resists colonial influence and marginalization. They do not conform to standards and expectations set. When “New Agers” come to the show “expecting to hear some ancient Indian wisdom [, they] got a good dose of Sex Pistol covers instead” (Alexie 41). Readers may observe this melding of ethnic signifiers most clearly with the band's blues influence through jazz musician Robert Johnson and his guitar. The music of one culture, moving and transforming itself into new incarnations, need not be restricted to a certain group. Alexie never shies

away from popular culture and mainstream influences, choosing instead to blend them with colonial expectations of indigenous culture with the purpose of finding “productive intersecting points between Native and other cultures” (Grassian 84).

It is with this intersection that Alexie concludes the novel, as Thomas speeds away with his young Indian companions to the unknown world of Spokane. While they may seem to be embracing a counterculture in direct opposition to the native imperative, the spirit horses guide them as “other Indians were traditional dancing in the Longhouse after the feast, while drunk Indians stood outside the Trading Post, drinking and laughing. Robert Johnson and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota played a duet” (Alexie 306). The novel concludes with these images of hybridity and survival. As readers, we are assured of the trio's eventual success in the larger world, since “songs are waiting for them in the city” (306), but this success will come from the revision of native identity to include a multitude of voices and inscriptions.

Ultimately, both *The Counterlife* and *Reservation Blues* grapple with the post-modern construction of ethnic identity in relation to collective desires and independent survival. Neither author finds a definitive sense of centrality for the self, instead arguing that no such concept exists. Instead, their explorations signify an attempt at understanding the ambiguous and discursive nature of ethnic and personal identity. With this understanding, the individual can operate within the system of inscription as an actor upon the stage in order to facilitate independent and ethnic survivance.

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Speculations on the Role of Slander in *Lay le Freine*  
by Jane Minogue

In *Lay le Freine*, an early fourteenth-century Middle English Breton lay, the story begins with a knight's wife who slanders a neighboring knight's wife.<sup>1</sup> The neighbor has given birth to twin boys and the "hokerfulliche missegging," or malicious mis-saying, involves an accusation of adultery derived from the superstition that a twin birth involves more than one father. When the slanderer herself gives birth to twins, she would rather kill one of her children or abandon it rather than admit that her slander was incorrect or be the subject of rumors herself; the fear of her reputation is stronger than the life of her child and her responsibilities as a parent. The "hokerfulliche missegging" sets in motion a series of mis-sayings that cause suffering for the characters in the story. The slander is a nexus for anxieties about sins of the tongue, which includes worries about sin and the salvation of one's soul as well as producing legitimate heirs within one's own social class. *Lay le Freine* can be seen as a moral tale that condemns deviant speech, particularly in women, and promotes silence, restraint, and sacrifice. This tale of missegging and its consequences shows how maintaining proper speech

is used to maintain the social order.

First, it is useful to relate the story. Within a short poem of approximately 400 lines, *Lay le Freine* manages to concern itself with issues of slander, jealousy, gossip, lying, deception, hypocrisy (both secular and religious), adultery, infanticide, child abandonment, premarital sex, abduction, concubinage, and true love. *Lay le Freine* also balances all of this antisocial behavior with redemption through self-sacrifice, confession, forgiveness, and the sacrament of marriage. *Lay le Freine* is a remarkably complex little piece, as follows: A lady accuses another knight's wife of having had two lovers because the woman bears twin sons. When the lady herself bears twin daughters, she saves her reputation by abandoning one of her infants, wrapping the child in a richly embroidered cloth and tying a gold ring to her. Le Freine, who is named after the ash tree where she was left, is baptized and cared for by an abbess. When Le Freine turns twelve, the knight Guroun falls in love with her and takes her as his lover. Guroun's peers and the clergy, however, persuade the knight to find a suitable wife who will provide him with proper heirs. He reluctantly finds a candidate, who turns out to be Le Freine's twin sister, Le Codre, whose name means the hazel tree. Le Freine obediently and silently prepares the bridal chamber, laying down the embroidered cloth on the bed. Le Freine's mother discovers the cloth and then confesses. Le Freine's identity is revealed. Le Codre's marriage to Guroun is annulled, and he marries Le Freine. Le Codre is married off to another suitable knight.

Second, it is useful to set the *Lay* in context. It might seem odd to think of *Lay le Freine*, which is a fourteenth-century English translation or adaption of Marie de France's Anglo-Norman twelfth-century *lai*, as a didactic piece about correcting sins of the tongue rather than a promotion of courtly love. However, the context for the English version differs from that of the Marie de France beyond the gulf of approximately a century and half; there are differences in audience and manuscript context.

Marie de France wrote towards the end of the twelfth century for an aristocratic, even a royal audience.<sup>2</sup> While it is possible that people from all classes heard the story, there is a case to be made from details about the manuscript that *Lay le Freine* was for the English gentry and mercantile class. Susan Crane sees the audience for romance broaden as the barony declined and the middle and lower classes rose. Crane writes:

Merchants who adopted coats of arms, attended tournaments, formed poetry-writing fraternities, and even achieved knighthood were encroaching on new territory in the fourteenth century....Indeed, the attempt in the late romances to confer courtly standing on listeners served competitive commoners better than it served the barony (Crane, *Insular Romance* 215).

That *Lay le Freine* was for a broader audience than the barony can be deduced from looking at the context of the manuscript.

*Lay le Freine* survives in only one manuscript, which is Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.21 (the Auchinleck manuscript), dating from between 1330 and 1340 (*The Auchinleck Manuscript*) *Lay le Freine* appears in folios 261ra-262A. The manuscript has a plain appearance and is small enough to be hand held rather than placed on a lectern. It appears that the manuscript was a lay commercial production rather than a monastic one, probably requisitioned for a wealthy merchant (*The Auchinleck Manuscript*).

The Auchinleck manuscript is almost exclusively in Middle English and contains poetry in a variety of genres, weighted heavily towards romances, which account for three-quarters of the manuscript. There are also humorous tales, satirical poems, and political poems, as well as more serious hagiography, doctrinal instruction, a chronicle that takes English history up to the reign of Edward II, and a short prayer for the young Edward III. Of the seventeen romances, eight are unique and all except one are in the earliest copies known to us (Evans 7). Murray J. Evans

writes that there is a “noticeable grouping of some items, particularly religious legends and romances” (Evans 111). Considering the time and expense of creating such a compilation, this is not a casual arrangement of items but, rather, a carefully edited collection with a special purpose in mind. Rosalind Field notes the following:

An editorial hand can be detected in the organization of the Matter of France material and in the inclusion of short, more lyrical pieces under the traditional guise of the Breton *lai*. We are more aware of editorial than authorial activity, of a cutting-and-pasting technique exercised on romances so similar that there is no room for an authorial presence. The Auchinleck Manuscript is about the transmission of culture, collecting and making newly available material that had been accumulating in England for nearly two centuries (Field 171).

The question then becomes whether or not we can discern the editor’s special purpose.

Jean Harpham Burrows finds that the Auchinleck manuscript’s compiler was interested in editing and placing material together not by genre but specifically for secular and spiritual lessons, which makes the audience the ideal one for such lessons (Burrows 3633). The implication, then, is that the manuscript was used for didactic purposes rather than merely for entertainment. Burrows believes that the audience preferred to hear or read the texts in English rather than in Anglo-Norman, which is not surprising for the fourteenth-century nobility as well as the middling and lower classes.<sup>3</sup> Some of the items in the manuscript, such as *Guy of Warwick* or *The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, appear to be appropriate for a gentrified class looking for connections with their history.<sup>4</sup> However, the emphasis is on teaching the audience proper behavior in first loving God and then one’s fellow human beings (Burrows 3633).

This coincides with Crane’s view that insular romance absorbed the Anglo-Norman ideals and presented them in a way that associated the ideal with practice (Crane, *Insular Romance* 215). Private action succeeds at “everything from defending the nation to achieving salvation to finding a wife,” which places these romances at the beginning of the time when the competitive mercantile class was displacing the feudal lords (Crane, *Insular Romance* 223). This also coincides with the view that the merchants identified with a rags to riches story; one could achieve wealth and position through one’s effort and wits rather than an inheritance. The Auchinleck manuscript can be seen as instruction and entertainment for both the gentry and an upwardly mobile middle class.

If one looks at the placement of *Lay le Freine* in the Auchinleck manuscript, it follows two relatively short moral poems, “A Peniworþ of Witt” and *How Our Lady’s Sauter was First Found*, and precedes two romances from the French Charlemagne cycle, *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel a Knight*. Taken together, these texts promote proper behavior in loving and worshiping God first before resolving problems on earth. It is interesting that *Lay le Freine* is placed next to “the matter of France” rather than other lays in the collection, such as *Sir Degaré* and *Sir Orfeo*. This choice of placement was made even with an awareness of genre, as in the Auchinleck both *Lay le Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* share the same prologue that describes “layes that ben in harping” (3).<sup>5</sup> Marie de France’s *Lai Le Fresne*, as part of her collection of twelve *lais* in British Museum, Harley 978 f. 139a-181a can be viewed as part of a discourse on the nature of love. *Lay le Freine*, as part of the Auchinleck MS, for a wider, mercantile, or middling class audience, can be viewed as part of a discourse on instruction towards good Christian behavior.

With the story, its context, and its audience in mind, we can examine the text itself. The slander, the original sin here, starts everything in motion:

Than was the levedi of the hous  
 A proude dame and an envieous,  
 Hokerfullliche missegging,  
 Squeymous and eke scorning.  
 To ich woman sche hadde envie;  
 Sche spac this wordes of felonie:  
 'Ich have wonder, thou messenger,  
 Who was thi lordes conseiler,  
 To teche him about to send  
 And telle schame in ich an ende,  
 That his wiif hath to childer ybore.  
 Wele may ich man wite therfore  
**That tuay men hir han hadde in bour;**  
**That is hir bothe deshonour.'** (59-72)<sup>6</sup>

The lady of the house is described as proud and envious, disdainful and scorning. Both pride (*superbia*) and envy (*invidia*) are among Pope Gregory I's Seven Deadly Sins. Her slander or speech act comes out of these vices. According to Edwin D. Craun in *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature*, English pastoral texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries list verbal sins as daughters of the Seven Deadly Sins. Hence, boasting would be a daughter of pride and whispering and backbiting of envy (Craun 13).

Sins of the tongue were difficult to control and required confession. Part of the scriptural basis is from James 3:7-8:

For every king of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of  
 things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind;  
 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of  
 deadly poison.

Craun writes of the large pastoral movement in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, stemming from edicts from the Fourth Lateran

Council of 1215, to battle against vices. The Fourth Lateran Council also made an annual auricular confession mandatory for Christians. Parish priests and mendicants were to preach to instruct against vice and for a Christian way of life and to hear confessions (Craun 10-24). As we see in *Lay le Freine*, the climax of the story is Le Freine's self-sacrifice that prompts her mother's confession.

Certain trades, such as merchants, lawyers, and minstrels, were often preached to against sins of the tongue because they were the most tempted to lie for gain (Craun 41). While men were warned of the dangers of deviant speech, Sandy Bardsley writes in *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* that "women, however, were constructed more often as potentially disruptive speakers, who ought to limit both the quantity and tone of their words" (Bardsley 47). Women were to model themselves after Mary, who "was applauded for her taciturnity," and " anchoresses, nuns, and both laywomen and laymen were reminded repeatedly that Mary's speech was recorded in the Bible on only four occasions and on each occasion she spoke 'words of great discretion and great might'" (Bardsley 51). Le Freine remains silent in the story until the very end, when, unlike her mother's deviant speech, Le Freine speaks 'words of great discretion and great might.' Part of the intent of the lay in the Auchinleck manuscript may be moral instruction for the mercantile audience to avoid sins of the tongue and to confess if they have transgressed.

In *Lay le Freine*, the slander that stems from pride and envy causes the woman's husband to rebuke her "to speke ani woman vilaynie" (76). The word "vilaynie" in this sense means to speak reproachfully or insultingly, to defame, or to slander (*Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. "vilenie"). "Vilaynie" can refer to rudeness or churlishness, as in someone who has the manners of a villain or peasant. It implies that the lady's speech is discourteous and not genteel, like that of a peasant. Also, any

women who hear the lady curse her: "That yif hye ever ani child schuld abide / A wers aventour hir schuld betide" (82-83).<sup>7</sup> This shows control by both her husband and other women.

When the slanderer bears twin girls, she sees the event as something she has caused, sealing her doom because she spoke harm of another woman: "Ich have ygoven min owen dome. / Forboden bite ich woman / To speken ani other harm opon" (90-92). Christine de Pizan, in *Le Livre de la cité des dames*, wrote to the nobility of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries that slander was cowardly, and was like "the person who wanted to make war on the heavens and pointed his bow toward the clouds. The arrows fell back on his head and wounded him severely" (Christine de Pizan 163). The message is that slander against your adversary wounds your soul and honor. Slander is not recommended as part of the courtly behavior the mercantile class wanted to emulate. As part of the unfolding tale, the audience is shown that spiteful, bad words return harm to the sender.

Instead of confessing her sins, the lady tries to decide what to do. She deliberates her options and the consequences like a lawyer planning to defend a criminal. The deliberations start with lines beginning with "or ich mot..." and concern deviant speech acts, in that she would need to lie or other people would slander her. For example, people will say she lay with two men. Or she would have to say that she lied about her neighbor. Or she must slay one of her children to get rid of the evidence.<sup>8</sup> If she lies and says that she lay with two men, then she will be accused of adultery. By showing the lady to think like a conniving lawyer, she once again appears as villainous and as though she is not acting like a proper lady. This shows the mercantile audience how not to behave if they wish to be genteel.

Ultimately, a noble serving lady offers a fourth suggestion to leave the child near a local abbey, which is what occurs in the story. It seems

strange to a modern sensibility that the lady would even consider killing or abandoning the child rather than say she was wrong about her neighbor or herself. To understand her reasoning, we need to look at the consequences for adultery, infanticide, and child abandonment. According to James A Brundage in *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, among the canonists, such as Bernard of Pavia, Johannes Teutonicus, and Thomas of Chobham, "there was general agreement that adultery was a serious crime and that it often lead to further crimes" (Brundage 388). There were penalties of excommunication and separation from the marriage, as well as other punishments, such as shaving the head, being paraded in torn clothes through public places, and whipping. Also, the aggrieved husband could expel his wife from the matrimonial home and keep her dowry. Neither party could remarry during the lifetime of the other (Brundage 389). If the wife committed adultery, it was the husband's duty to bring it to court, although doing so was shameful and embarrassing to the plaintiff (Brundage 513).

The consequences for infanticide varied from a year of bread and water to a lifetime of monastic living. According to Georges Duby, the twelfth-century *Decretals* of Pope Gregory IX listed twelve years of penance for infanticide (Duby 69).<sup>9</sup> In the text, the lady says, "Yete me is best take mi chauce, / And sle mi childe, and do penaunce" (113-114). Abandonment on the other hand, according to James Boswell in *The Kindness of Strangers*, was more or less tolerated: "Christian morality continued to view abandonment, like slavery or poverty or the economic forces that affected all three, as part of the world to be regular and coped with rather than opposed absolutely" (Boswell 335). Barbara Hanawalt describes the attitudes towards child abandonment as a "culture of oversight" (Hanawalt 168). No laws required parents to care for their children. The community at large did not have orphanages, and foundling hospitals were rare. In the thirteenth century, fewer children were taken

in as oblates, and church teachings emphasized more on honoring parents than good parenting.

In thirteenth-century England, Boswell notes that at least thirteen different councils passed legislation on abandoned children, but most of it was practical, concerned with their baptism and care (Boswell 322). Nicolas Orme writes:

By the late twelfth century the church was also taking an interest in foundlings, because of the need to baptize them. Church councils at York (1195) and Estminster (1200) ruled that when children were abandoned, 'with or without salt', they should be christened unless this was known to have been done already. The mention of salt refers to the practice by which the christening party took some of it to church for the priest to use in the service. Those who abandoned infants with salt showed, by this little ritual, that they wished them to be preserved and baptized (Orme 76).

In *Lay le Freine*, when the maid is about to leave the baby at the abbey, she prays "that it mot ycristed be" (171). And the first thing the abbess does when she finds the child is take it to be christened: "The abesse lete clepe a prest anon, / And lete it cristin in funston" (227-278). Le Freine is not sent with salt, but the cloth and ring are symbols that indicate she is from the nobility and should be cared for. The abbess in the story does take this into account and brings her up as her "kinswoman."<sup>10</sup>

The slander in *Lay le Freine* causes a chain of "misseggings" until it is confessed. For example, the lady, her midwife, and her maid all keep the secret of the twin birth. The abbess lies to say that Le Freine is her niece. Guroun, a rich knight who lives near the abbey, hears of Le Freine, and goes to the abbey to meet her under the pretense that he is going to a tournament. Guroun falls in love with her and gives the abbey "londes and rentes" to "bicom your brother," which disguises his frequent

meetings to meet with Le Freine. Guroun flatters Le Freine, a form of lying, and makes her his "leman." He tells her that she can have a better life with him than at the abbey.

Even though Guroun loves her, he gives in to his knights and the Holy Church who persuade him to marry for legitimate heirs: "And seyde him were wel more feir / In wedlock to eten him an air" (315-316).<sup>11</sup> Because Le Freine's parentage is unknown, he does not know her social class or if they are related. He unknowingly could be violating laws of consanguinity. The restructuring of marriage doctrines and laws in the late twelfth century through the thirteenth century discouraged concubinage, and the laws regarding legitimate heirs became stricter (Brundage 414-416). Only through the miracle of Le Freine's sacrifice of her embroidered cloth to the bridal bed of Guroun and his new wife, who turns out to be her twin sister, Le Codre, is this chain of "misseggings" broken. Le Freine gives away one of the only clues to her identity and inheritance out of her true love for Guroun.

The point in the story where the mother questions Le Freine about the cloth is also the first time we hear Le Freine speak to explain that she was found wrapped in it as an infant, with a ring tied to her arm: "Myne aunte tolde me a ferli cas / Hou in this mantyll yfold I was, / And hadde upon mine arm this ring" (381-383). The mother "swoned and was wel neight ded" (387) and then confesses to her husband: "And she told him al her wo, / Hou of her neighbor sche had missayn, / For sche was delivered of children twain" (390-393). The father quickly embraces his lost daughter and "oftimes, and to the bisschop wende / And he undid the marriage strate" (400-401). Guroun and Le Codre's marriage is annulled. Le Freine and Guroun are married, and we are assured that Le Codre is "sone was spousyd with game and gle, / To a gentle knight of that countre" (405-406). The story ends happily. The lady saves her soul through confession, Le Freine discovers her identity, true love wins out,

and the twin girls marry within their social class to produce legitimate heirs.

The “hokerfulliche missegging” plays a crucial role in *Lay le Freine* to set in motion a whole series of mis-sayings that cause suffering for the characters in the story until the original slanderer confesses her sin of the tongue. From the manuscript’s context as well as from the text itself, we can view *Lay le Freine* as a moral tale that condemns women’s deviant speech and shows how to control the tongue to maintain the social order.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lays are a sub-genre of romance and are usually brief enough to be recited or read in one sitting. They are short narrative poems, characterized by concentrated action. According to Laura Cooner Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin, *A Companion to Old and Middle English Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002) 350, there are no surviving original Breton *lais*, which were thought to be songs sung in the Breton language, accompanied by a harp or rote, “then followed by a *conte* or narrative that explicated the lyrical *lai*.” John Finlayson, “The Form of the Middle English Lay,” *Chaucer Review* 19 (1985): 367, subdivides the lays further into those that involve a supernatural element and those that involve an ordeal that is resolved through improbable consequences. *Lay le Freine* is of the latter type.

<sup>2</sup> In the General Prologue to a collection of her *lais*, Marie de France dedicates them in the honor of a “*nobles reis / Ki tant estes pruz e curteis*” (43-44), that is, a noble king who is worthy and courteous. See Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. A. Ewert (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). Scholars believe that the king referred to could be King Henry II of England or his son Henri au Cort Mantel. *Marie de France, The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (London: Penguin Books, 1986) 11-13.

<sup>3</sup> French was the language of the courts, government, law, and polite communication. However, Susan Crane writes that the Anglo-Norman dialect was an “artificially maintained language of culture,” but English was the mother tongue. See Susan Crane, “Anglo-Norman Cultures in England, 1066-1460,” *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 45.

<sup>4</sup> Evans believes that *Guy of Warwick* was “the great prestige item of the collection for a number of reasons,” mostly for the intertextuality with other items in the collection. The romance *Amis and Amiloun* in the Auchinleck manuscript has many similarities to Guy; there is a *Speculum Gy de Warewike* in place of the traditional *speculum*; Guy appears in a list of heroes in *Beves of Hampton*; and there is a short story of Guy in the *Chronicle*. See Evans 7.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from *Lay le Freine* are from *The Middle English Breton Lays.*, eds. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) 61-88. Compare lines 1-22 of *Lay le Freine*, 68, with lines 1-24 of *Sir Orfeo, The Middle English Breton Lays.*, eds. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) 26.

<sup>6</sup> The slander, in bold, translates as “the lady has had two men in her bed, which is a dishonor for both the lady and her husband.”

<sup>7</sup> In Marie de France’s *Le Fresne*, the slander damages the marriage of the knight who had twin boys. This causes the knight to be suspicious and no longer trust his wife.



<sup>8</sup> According to Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, women assisted each other in childbirth, so it is possible that no one else knows that she delivered twins. See *Lay le Freine* 83.

<sup>9</sup> The list includes three years of penance for abortion before the child has quickened or if the mother rolls over it and six years of penance for prostitution. See Duby 69.

<sup>10</sup> According to Orme, the story of *Le Freine* had a real parallel: "Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine found a small boy in the road, destitute of a mother, and arranged for him to be brought up in Abindgon Abbey." See Orme 96.

<sup>11</sup> In Marie de France's *lai*, the knights actually refuse to provide Guroun with their loyalty and service if he does not marry someone who can produce legitimate heirs. In *Lay le Freine*, they just speak to him.

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**A Biography of the Closet: Censorship, Androgyny and  
Divergences of Textual Meta-Awareness in Virginia Woolf's  
*Orlando*  
by Irene Novac**

Leslie Kathleen Hankins claims that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is "addressed mockingly to the censor." *Orlando*'s self-consciousness as a text and the acts of writing that Woolf describes within the plot convey Woolf's need to self-censor as a writer of queer text. The evolution of Orlando as a character into the Modernist age follows a biography of identity development, but it is also a history of identity masking. By matching the genre of biography to a more historically-scaled timeline, Woolf chronicles the trajectory of self-censorship throughout the ages, necessarily equating it with the development of queer identity. It is through this postmodern feature of meta-awareness that the text of *Orlando* does its most subversive work. Published in 1928, the same year as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Woolf's text escaped labeling as a transgressive text, while Hall's did not.

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler posits that censorship is not "understood exclusively in terms of juridical power" (128) but that it

delineates “precisely the constraining conditions which *make possible* any given decision” (129). Censorship is indeed responsible for the way in which Woolf approaches writing in *Orlando*. *Orlando* can only achieve its fullness as a text because of the devices that Woolf employs in order to point to identity masking as an act. Leslie Kathleen Hankins claims that “[p]lacing Woolf’s strategies in *Orlando* within the censoring climate of her day reveals the text as both an accommodation to censorship and a profoundly witty and powerful critique of censorship” (Hankins 183). Earlier on, Hankins introduces the multiplicity of audiences at play in *Orlando*: Woolf addressed the novel to a “common reader,” to Vita Sackville-West, to the censor, and “polemically to straight, gay and lesbian readers -- and the tension between the addressees provides much of the wit, delight and power of the novel” (182). Woolf’s novel is rich with examples of its own consciousness as queer text, which pinpoint its importance to Vita and other queer readers while passing as normative to the censors.

Hankins claims that in *Orlando*, heterosexuality is an “outer envelope” that “protects the lesbian note and allows it to be transmitted under the nose of the censor” (187). This is the key to deciphering the form-as-content ethic of Woolf’s novel. Indeed, there is a literalism to moments of cloaking in the novel. On page 14, the Biographer as narrator begins with a description of his task as a storyteller: “one drops the pen, takes one’s cloak, strides out of the room, and catches one’s foot on a painted chest as one does so. For Orlando was a trifle clumsy.” Thus begins a conflation of Orlando (the character) with *Orlando* (the text). It is this conflation that allows for a dimension of meta-awareness within a text that can produce its own commentary on the act of textual/identity production. The irony is that once character and text are conflated, neither claims a responsibility to verisimilitude.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes Woolf’s text as “at least a parodic

biography, a female history of Britain, a feminist apologue – an insouciant break with conventional norms surrounding gender, sexual identity, and narrative” (131). At the beginning of Chapter Two in *Orlando*, “The Biographer” states that his or her “first duty” is “to plod, without looking right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads” (49) and later that “[o]ur simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may” (49). Yet this passage reeks of irony, failing to match up to the exaggerations, parody, puns, and double entendres that fill the rest of the novel. The Biographer’s duty is neither simple nor factual. As a producer of a potentially transgressive text, both s/he and Woolf as author occupy a space that must necessarily exhibit artifice in order to avoid discovery.

We find, then, the necessity of “structural drag” within *Orlando*. Acts of Orlando cross-dressing and gender-switching depict a visual drag, encased in the Biographer’s structural drag of exaggerations, parody, puns, double entendre, etc.<sup>2</sup> that produce such images of Orlando the character. There exist a variety of moments in Woolf’s novel during which Orlando (the character) stands in as an analogue for *Orlando* (the novel, the biography, the history, the satire, the love letter). Writing about the composition of “The Oak Tree,” Woolf describes Orlando as having “vacillated between this style and that; now prefer[ring] the heroic and pompous; next the plain and simple,” a struggle to “win immortality against the English language” (61). Earlier on, the Biographer notes that a series of questions “discomposed” Orlando (Woolf 30), punningly hinting at structural destabilization.

An investigation of the “love letter” aspect of the novel can lend its own brand of clarity to the textual substitutions within. Elizabeth Meese points out the analogues between Woolf’s desires as Biographer and her

gaze as Vita's lover: "Orlando/Vita (who signs her name so, and to whom Virginia addresses other "love" letters), and *Orlando*, that novel inventing and commemorating Vita, excite Virginia. Are they separable? What's the differ(e/a)n(ce): Vita and Orlando, "Orlando" and Orlando or *Orlando*?" (107). Meese suggests *Orlando*'s position within the canon of Vita and Virginia's missives, and a problematizing of "language's capacity to stand in for its subject, or to render the object a subject" (100). Therefore, literature must be a corrupted translation of desire. As a result, desire is confounded infinitely, evidenced by the masking, drag and sex-changing throughout the novel.

Historically, there existed a coding relating to androgyny and masquerade during Woolf's era. Suzanne Young points out that

By the 1910s and 1920s, when male artists began to dispense with their aesthete styles, lesbian artists continued to write and dress in ways that signaled their professional and personal allegiance to an 'intermediate sex' and to the 'soft' and 'ambiguous' sexuality of the nineties. By the time *Orlando* was published in 1928, masquerade was clearly, though not exclusively, associated with female homosexuality. (173)<sup>3</sup>

This is interesting to note, but there remains debate as to exactly how much Woolf's novel is self-consciously present within a lesbian canon of writing and how much it is simply a private epistle made public, intertextually referring to Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran*, as Hankins's essay claims. Young continues: "What escaped the censors -- the pervasive queer sensibility of a work that seemingly broached the subject of same-sex attraction only indirectly — would have been clear to critics of *Orlando*'s glib artificiality, rhetorical excess, and stylistic masquerading, if only through literary association" (176). Rhetorical devices, like the masking and cloaking early in the book, point to themselves as conscious producers of aesthetic identity.

Androgyny, then, is a way for Woolf to tangentially approximate and simultaneously closet desire: "Androgyny is a way out of the either/or trap through substitution of a both/and relationship" (Meese 104). Androgyny acts first as a sort of textual "amnesia": Orlando "appeared to have an imperfect recollection of his past life" (50) and after he becomes a woman "certain things had become a little dimmed" (103), yet "in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been" (102). Similarly, DuPlessis suggests:

The erotic, zesty tone of *Orlando* as well as its generic multiplicity generates the counter-idea that mixed or mingled sexual identities could be exhilarating and pleasurable. As well as being a general answer to dichotomous thinking, the androgynous combination answers that depressing notion of a mind-body split in a homosexual personality. (DuPlessis 134)

Yet while sartorial choices lend a sense of humor and "drag" to Woolf's text, Orlando's physical sex change does not occur without resulting difficulty and struggle.

Orlando as a woman (somewhat grudgingly) accepts her womanhood: "up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought" (113) but once she sights England from the *Enamoured Lady* her thoughts become grim and she feels "culpable; dishonoured; unchaste" (Woolf 120). A sameness of mind but difference of body point to both a masking of text and to Orlando's confusion regarding how to substitute herself in society, "uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity" (Woolf 125). Meese writes: "The androgyne, as a gap, an excess, resembles the lesbian, but without community, without the sociopolitics of identity and the history of movement and struggle, and still caught within the oppositional categories of gender" (110). The androgynous figure, represented by the disoriented Orlando is queerness incarnate, able to pass because s/he lacks "sociopolitics of identity,"

alluding to but not explicitly illustrating queer desire.

Judith Halberstam offers an alternate reading of androgynous identity: "The androgyne represents some version of gender mixing, but this rarely adds up to total ambiguity; when a woman is mistaken consistently for a man, I think it is safe to say that what marks her gender presentation is not androgyny but masculinity" (Halberstam 57). Therefore, Halberstam defines this type of figure as not "androgynous" but as a "masculine woman." Thus we encounter a substitution of one for the other, and contrary to Meese's theory, according to Halberstam androgyny is probably an either/or choice. In fact, if *effective* passing or transference of gendered behavior was unsuccessful in Woolf's novel, it would have most likely been subject to juridical censorship (to use one of Butler's phrases).

It is important that once Orlando enters the realm of feminine identity, she feels that she must at first be dishonest in emotional presentation: "Candid by nature, and averse to all kinds of equivocation, to tell lies bored her" (Woolf 115). Earlier in the novel, just before Orlando's sex change, the Biographer parodies the censors through the allegorical figures of Purity, Chastity and Modesty (paraphrase of Hankins 185). These three figures are banished by Truth, yet the Biographer is obliged to illustrate Orlando's need to at least feign these stereotypical virtues. Orlando is able to continue writing as a woman, but "still for all her travels and adventures and profound thinkings and turnings this way and that, she was only in the process of fabrication" (130). Once again, Orlando's moment of textual production signifies her gender identity production, which in turn signifies the Biographer's textual production.

Pamela Transue puts this substitution of signification in clear terms: "Aside from the obvious approval with which Woolf views androgyny, she seems to indicate an approval of bisexuality as well. By using the metaphor of 'changing clothes,' Woolf is able to support the idea of bisexuality

without naming it as such" (122). However, to read this expectation into the text is rather anachronistic, since Woolf uses a conflation of gender-shifting and sexuality to demonstrate the ineffectuality of reading either fixed gender or fixed desire in her text. All genders and sexual desires in *Orlando* are displaced in favor of other notions that continue to generally represent the same concepts under the same general categories of "gender" and "sexuality." For this reason, the ontological endpoint of compulsory heterosexuality *ostensibly* takes precedence at the novel's conclusion.

Indeed, Woolf presents readers with the Tiresian dilemma of whether or not Orlando's change will mean either burdensome knowledge or fulfillment. The Biographer notes: "It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (139). This is unusual because here the text seems to suggest an innateness of identity radiating outwards. But the Biographer follows shortly with a passage that states "Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above" (Woolf 139). Becoming a biological woman seems to have allowed for a better balance of masculine and feminine traits in Orlando, a far cry from the laughable approximation of male brutality displayed on the novel's first page.

Androgyny meets desire again in the passage where a female Orlando dresses as a man in order to visit the prostitute Nell: "[H]aving been so lately a woman herself, she suspected that the girl's timidity and her hesitating answers and the very fumbling with the key in the latch and the fold of her cloak and the droop of her wrist were all put on to gratify her masculinity" (Woolf 158). Halberstam notes: "[T]he connection between prostitute and masculine woman seems quite common in the nineteenth century, and we might read this synonymous connection as a function of the nineteenth-century tendency to categorize women in relation to

marriageability" (51). In this way Orlando, the disguised woman, and Nell, the prostitute, share a lack of authenticity in presentation. The passage with Nell is set at the end of the eighteenth century, but based on the Biographer's description of Nell's initially inauthentic performance as feminine, the same idea would seem to apply.

Later on in the novel, Woolf shifts from problems of gender identity back to problems of text production. When the Biographer describes how Orlando discovers her manuscript of "The Oak Tree," s/he needs to remind us that "[Orlando] had been working at it for close on three hundred years now" (173). Orlando the writer has now produced a historical-literary artifact, while the Biographer encapsulates the same item in the "envelope" of biography. Therefore it continues to embody the same litany of identities throughout: novel, biography, history, satire, love letter, and sometimes takes on additional genres, like poem-within-a-novel. Nancy Cervetti posits: "In the midst of all the irreverence and fluidity, Orlando's writing sustains the narrative's one constant fact. Woolf regularly returns to the importance of reading and especially writing—to Orlando's need to write..." (169). Writing allows Orlando to reclaim an agency that she is in danger of losing once the repressive nineteenth century begins.

The last two chapters of *Orlando* portray Orlando's struggles with compulsory heterosexuality and once again offer a portrait of displaced identity. Heterosexual union creates a space away from writing:

The nerve which controls the pen winds itself around every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver. Though the seat of her trouble seemed to be the left finger, she could feel herself poisoned through and through, and was forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband. (Woolf 178)

Later on in the same passage, the Biographer concedes that "the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to [Orlando] in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her" (178). However, Orlando has the fortune to find "a man, who is a woman, just as she is a man" (DuPlessis 132). It seems to be her union with Shelmerdine that is responsible for producing Orlando's identity as a full-fledged woman: "I am a woman" Orlando declares, "a real woman at last." (Woolf 185). Her sex is "indisputably female" thereafter.

The beginning of Chapter Six again places marriage in opposition to the act of writing: "[I]f one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage?" (Woolf 195). The logical connection is that Orlando's desire to write could stand in for a state contrary to marriage, thus associating it both with "masculine" gender identity and potential same-sex desire. Hankins elaborates: "Woolf's text doesn't choose between lesbian and feminist discourse; she uses desire to seduce Vita into the feminist text, and the most lesbian moments in *Orlando* are made richer, wiser, and more delightful by the feminist energy" (193). Ironically, non-heteronormative desire is re-localized in the text as the result of a (more or less) sham marriage: either the marriage between Orlando and Shelmerdine is compromised and less genuine due to the reasons quoted above (page 195), or Orlando and Shelmerdine are both sufficiently androgynous so as to satisfy the desire of each character for an androgynous (or same-sex) partner, or both instances are true to some degree.

DuPlessis argues that "lesbianism is the unspoken contraband desire that marriage liberates and that itself frees writing" (133). Indeed, many have noted that heterosexual desire is interrupted throughout the novel (Hankins 183-4); if same-sex desire must be displaced as text then so

must heteronormativity. Orlando passes the "examination" of her age successfully because she now has a ring on her finger. She was "in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did" (Woolf 196). But it is important to note that in the passage just before this, the act of "putting on a ring" precedes "finding a man on a moor." The importance of the performative act, and not the substance of the relationship itself, takes precedence here. Howard Harper points out that "Marriage for Vita, as for Virginia herself, provided a structure which was protective without being too inhibiting" (189).

If production of text parallels production of gender identity, as I have been saying throughout this essay, then how do *Orlando's* identities as novel, biography and queer history tie together? Cervetti suggests that:

Gender becomes a cultural performance shown to be historically, even geographically, contingent and in the service of the regulatory systems of reproduction and compulsory heterosexuality. Anticipating Judith Butler's claim that gender identity is a stylized repetition of acts through time, the novel demonstrates possibilities for gender transformation in the arbitrary relation of these acts and in their parodic repetitions. (168)

Once Orlando becomes a woman, the inevitability of life conjoins with a much more specific account of the progression of time. On page 196, the Biographer names all the months that pass within a single year. According to the Biographer, love is what makes life more real and because "we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman's whole existence" (198).

As life and desire converge with time, Orlando the woman cannot escape the explosive reality that, "It was the eleventh of October. It was 86 | Novac

1928. It was the present moment" (Woolf 219). Life's convergence with time risks exposing Orlando to a surrounding reality, and for this reason it becomes horrifying to her. Because the concept of time becomes more threatening towards the novel's conclusion, Orlando's awareness of her poem "The Oak Tree" signals a temporal urgency of the text to be understood in certain terms: "It wanted to be read. It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read" (Woolf 200). The poem has practically fused itself to Orlando physically because it was composed "to the dictates of the human heart" (206) and is consequently a metonym for desire, as is the entirety of Woolf's novel.

Art meets truth in the form of "The Oak Tree" because at heart this poem is a container for queer desire. This figuration of desire (regardless of how masked the queer desire within may have been) causes controversy in the consideration of *Orlando* as literary text: "[T]he omission of *Orlando* from critical discussions because it is presumed to be a 'biography' -- or its reduction to an escapade or 'love letter' works to silence this radical text. If the point of *Orlando* is reduced to the author's attempts as self-help or her relation to Vita, its subversion becomes a subversion of little social and political importance" (Cervetti 172). Woolf illustrates the relevance of multiplicity through textual self-awareness. *Orlando/Orlando's* art can variously be reduced to the nonsensical "Rattigan Glumphoboo," or can be appropriated by Nicholas Greene and published as an emblem of "the dictates of the human heart" just as the Biographer can call upon the list of Orlando's past identities to carry out representation.

To a certain extent, the final chapter of *Orlando* deconstructs much of the drag and playfulness that defines the earlier part of the novel. There is suddenly a jarring unknowability of the present age, and a *memento mori*: "And if I were dead, it would be just the same!" she exclaimed" (200). After meeting Sir Nicholas Greene again, Orlando experiences a violent disillusionment. The canon of patriarchal literature does not

present many promises for her. Sir Nicholas and his cadre of writers “made one feel...that one must always, always write like somebody else” (210), removing traces of both gender and sexuality.

Suzanne Young writes that “objection to *Orlando’s* supposed ‘artificiality’ implies a desire for literary models that are timeless and self-evident, just as sexological objections to ‘deviant’ sexuality demonstrate science’s assumption of a preexisting natural order, and both discourses suggest that that the “natural” is simple, unitary and empirically ascertainable” (170). Yet even the artificial qualities of Purity, Chastity and Modesty abandon Orlando (and the Biographer) by the advent of the Modernist<sup>4</sup> age. The playful and positive drag of the English Renaissance and Orlando’s sojourn in Turkey are long-gone. After all, “what more terrifying revelation can there be than it is the present moment?” (Woolf 219). By the end of the novel, the text loses its solace of non-realism to a certain degree.

Orlando realizes that “Time has passed over me” and that “Nothing is any longer one thing” (223). The Modernist age seems to arrive with a multiplicity of possibility that differs in nature from earlier possibilities of drag. DuPlessis remarks that old mottos like “Amor Vin--” are “fractured and deligitimated” (132) and according to the text, “Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish” (Woolf 225). Though this fragmentary world mandates that queer desire remain unconsummated, it also effectively outmodes Victorian literature and facilitates an exclamation of “natural desire” (Woolf 216).

The Biographer then invokes the multiplicity of Orlando’s past selves, “For [Orlando] had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (Woolf 226). Orlando’s ontological fragmentation has actually *anticipated* the epistemological fragmentation

of the Modernist era. Woolf underscores this quite early in the novel when the Biographer interjects, supposedly at the time of writing this given passage, that “now” is the first of November, 1927 (Woolf 58), and defocalizes the action of Orlando’s writing at this time to hir own task of illustrating “our commonest deeds.”

It is at this turning point that the Biographer articulates just how the confusion of the Modernist era assists hir in textual concealment: “For it is probably that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dis severment, and are trying to communicate but when communication is established there is nothing more to be said” (Woolf 230). On page 231 of Woolf’s novel, it is actually the rooms of the houses that make Orlando’s “community” because only they, the Biographer and the reader, have witnessed all of Orlando’s “selves,” interpellating readers into the queer historicity of the novel rather than simply exposing the work as a love letter.

At the novel’s finale, nature and art converge physically in Orlando’s placement of the poem “The Oak Tree” at the foot of the actual tree. Following this progression, text becomes nature and text is the “stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods” (Woolf 238). Text, desire and nature conjoin because Orlando must do something with her artistic production at the conclusion of this *künstlerroman*. Text production itself warrants a conclusion; there is no escape from the inevitability of structural conclusion.

Subsequently, Orlando calls out for the object of her desire, her husband having arrived safely on land. Orlando’s environment falls to chaos: the “tent-like landscape collapsed and fell,” Shelmerdine’s name falls out of the sky “like a steel blue feather” and Shelmerdine himself falls to the ground (Woolf 239-41). The physical object of Orlando’s desire is, as in many other passages in the novel, textually displaced and also quite possibly murdered altogether. The Biographer must wreck hir text in



order to confound and destroy any potential trail of meaning that could lead too easily to reading too much historical verity into the text, that could too easily encourage a censor (or reader) to deem it only a queer love letter, and that could too easily privilege only the genre of biography.

Woolf's text masters a polymorphousness of identity that is evident both pictorially and textually. Additionally, *Orlando* follows a timeline that diagrams an origin of desire that produces art, and an art that returns to its origin of desire intermittently. By illustrating the decentralized, displaced and infinitely regressing identity of this text, Woolf and the Biographer participate in a heritage of self-censorship by "enforcing the very distinction between permissible and impermissible speech" (Butler 139). Because of the text's (and also the female Orlando's) self-policing, the boundary of "impermissible speech" need never be displayed, placing *Orlando* away from the scrutiny to which Radclyffe Hall's novel was subjected.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis refers to the novel's conclusion as embodying "the kinds of fiction and values that are now possible, writing beyond the ending" (132), opposed to Butler's theory of self-limiting text production. I contend that both self-limitation and the generation of extra possibilities are plausible in *Orlando* because of the nature of androgyny-as-ambiguity in the novel, which I have already detailed. In a sense, the text of *Orlando* is an extension of both Vita and Virginia's attempts at real-life drag<sup>5</sup>, the "clothing" for a simultaneously "out" and "closeted" multi-genre work treating of non-heteronormative desire. Orlando's presence within a narrative of drag identity/sex change recounts a tradition of censorship through acts of masking, warning readers that even "at the stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-Eight," the most contemporary of all possible moments in the novel, all efforts to read desire into this work cause us to chase "the wild goose."

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I choose to use the androgynous pronoun "hir" for the narrator/Biographer for various reasons, the main one being that s/he chooses to identify himself primarily through first person plural during hir narrative intrusions. Hankins (91) does touch on the possibility of Woolf's narrator emulating Vita's male narrator in *Passenger to Teheran* as well. Additionally, s/he has the power of gaze and characterization in relation to Orlando, which may point to Woolf's emulation of the power of the male gaze, or simply an androgynous/genderless narrator.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to find these rhetorical features in light of Keith Harvey's study (qtd. in Cameron and Kulick) referencing *gay male* linguistic devices. Each of the features I mentioned above connects in some way to Harvey's findings of Paradox, Inversion, Ludicrism and Parody in gay male speech. Obviously Woolf's novel was written decades before Harvey's study, but it is nevertheless a notable connection within the history of queer culture.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the critical essays that I have found on *Orlando* discuss the concept of "androgyny" at some length, yet the dynamic of "female masculinity" as Halberstam describes it is mostly avoided. That is to say, that in Woolf's novel, we are not looking at a portrait of masculinity or "blatant butch" (Halberstam 215) that has been revoked from the male body, but we are focusing on a study of "the balanced binary in which maleness and femaleness are in complete accord" (Halberstam 215). Halberstam discusses this in relation to the film version of *Orlando*. An analysis of butch/femme dynamics in this novel is material for another essay altogether.

<sup>4</sup> I choose to use the term "Modernist" to signal the presence of Woolf's text within literary history rather than simply within temporal, cultural history.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia dressed as a man for the Dreadnought Hoax, and Vita was known to dress in drag as "Julian" (Hankins 191).

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Nietzsche and the Problem of the Romantic Hero in Conrad's  
*Lord Jim*  
by Jeffrey Oderlin

If the Brothers Grimm were given the task of retelling the story of Jim from Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* in a succinct little tale, they might have summarized it like this: an immature little boy with wild conceptions about what it means to be an adult and live in the world gets thrown into the woods only to be eaten by the wolves. *Lord Jim* essentially tells the story of a young man who lets himself get lost in his ideals, eventually resulting in his demise. But why does this happen? Using the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, a contemporary of Conrad, as a context for interpreting *Lord Jim* shows how Jim's faith in the literary concept of the Romantic hero ultimately lets him down to such an extent that he feels that his only option is death. Where Jim fails, though, Marlow succeeds as he falls in line with Nietzschean philosophy by not letting himself get sucked into the illusion of concepts. Instead, he seeks out an ambit of perspectives on the "hero," Jim, and inadvertently comes out as the hero himself.

Many contemporary critics tend to take a postcolonial perspective

while analyzing *Lord Jim*. Scott Cohen, in "Get Out!: Empire Migration and Human Traffic in *Lord Jim*," and Todd Bender, in "Competing Cultural Domains, Borderlands and Spatial/Temporal Thresholds in Hardy, Conrad, and D. H. Lawrence," both contextualize and analyze the novel in terms of "the turbulence of empire migration... at the height of imperial administration" (Cohen 375). In a somewhat similar fashion Janice Ho, in "The Spatial Imagination and Literary Form of Conrad's Colonial Fiction," argues that *Lord Jim* "reveals [Conrad's] ambivalent response to the experience of spatial compression... [by] attempt[ing] to re-mystify a world that has been thoroughly mapped and unveiled" (1). Sanjay Krishnan, in "Seeing the Animal: Colonial Space and movement in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*," looks specifically at Conrad's treatment of the Malays in *Lord Jim* as having "certain attributes of the human without entirely belonging to it" (327).

There are some critics, though, who have offered a more text-based interpretation of *Lord Jim*. For instance, Daniel Hannah, in "Under a Cloud': Silence, Identity and Interpretation in *Lord Jim*," bases his reading of the novel on the opening inscription by Novalis to argue that "the novel invites the reader's analytic involvement" (39), so that individual readers may assign a unique meaning to it. While the inscription may function in this sense, Hannah overlooks the fact that it is also an allusion to German Romanticism and the modern "tales" that writers like Novalis and Goethe wrote during that period, which definitely have an influence on the "tale" that Conrad tells in this novel. Yael Levin also sticks primarily to the text, and more specifically the narrator, in "The Moral Ambiguity of Conrad's Poetics: Transgressive Secret Sharing in *Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes*," in which he argues that the narrators in both of the novels are "an accomplice, a second, a supplement... [whose] experiences are buffered through a proxy that allows the storyteller to remain intact and unscathed" (212).

While these readings enlighten their audiences on certain aspects of the novel, they stay away from how the novel, as a whole, constructs meaning. The postcolonial readings show readers how imperialism influences and is criticized in *Lord Jim*, but they really end there. Even the text-based readings only focus in on a small scope of analysis such as the narrator or the role of the reader. This reading will also focus primarily with the text, but it will study *Lord Jim* by using the framework of a "tale" to show how the novel constructs meaning, while also adding a convincing perspective pertaining to the novel's historically illusive conclusion.

First, an understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy of language is essential to understanding this reading. In "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" Nietzsche explains language as "illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions" (878). In other words, humans have mistaken the words they use for labeling things in the world for the essence of those things. A word acts more like a single metaphor in an infinite expanse of possible metaphors that could be used to explain the same thing. For Nietzsche, humanity's self-deception grows, as "it is language which works on building the edifice of concepts" (881). So not only does humanity put faith in words, they also put faith in concepts, consisting of words, which also fail. Ultimately, Nietzsche felt that humanity must become aware of this false sense of security that they use as a "cloak ... [to] wra[p] [themselves] in" (884) and be more like an "exuberant hero' ... [or a] man of intuition... [who] wields his weapons more mightily and victoriously than his contrary, [the man of reason]" (883). He explains this hero as a man who uses "the rule of art over life" (883), who "will speak only in forbidden metaphors and unheard of combinations of concepts so that, at last demolishing and deriding the old conceptual barriers, he may do creative justice to the impression made on him by the mighty, present intuition" (883).

Andrew Bowie clarifies and gives a modern interpretation to Nietzsche's groundbreaking essay in his article "Nietzsche and the Fate of Romantic Thought." He explains that Nietzsche thinks "[t]he problem of truth arises... from the attempt to make what are inherently particular human perceptions universally valid" (289); "[h]e therefore contests the possibility of an Idealist harmony between the subjective and objective" (289). Bowie explains that complications arise in Nietzsche's argument, as he asks, "How can he identify the illusion, if he wishes *truly* to assert that all truths are illusions? What, in that case, is the difference between truth and illusion?" (289). Bowie makes a keen observation, but he is missing the point of what Nietzsche is arguing towards. In "On Truth and Lying and a Non-Moral Sense" Nietzsche is arguing against the very nature of truth itself by attempting to deny its existence. There is no need to identify what the illusion or the truth is if there is an understanding that there is no way to truly relate the objective into subjective terms. Truth is essentially the essence of something. Since words can never get to the core of the essence of things, any attempt is therefore an illusion. As this study will show, the problem with Jim is that he feels that he is able to understand the essence of the Romantic hero through the books he has read, but as Nietzsche points out, his understanding is only an illusion; he was set up to be disappointed by the illusion of truth created through writing.

In "Cruel Illusions: Nietzsche, Conrad, Hardy, and the 'Shadowy Ideal,'" Barbara DeMille discusses Nietzsche's concept of language as "cruel illusions" and how it relates to *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*. DeMille explains that "Conrad had read his friend Edward Garnett's essay on Nietzsche in 1899, during the writing of *Lord Jim*... but add[ed] that these imprisoning forms [language and concepts] are necessary illusions... a 'saving power'" (700) because "the man who finds out that apparently innocent truth... [a man such as Kurtz perhaps] is

henceforth of no use to mankind" (701 author's brackets). It is interesting that DeMille moves from *Lord Jim* to *Heart of Darkness* here to show Conrad's seemingly obvious view on the illusion of language, because it is easy for readers to take a negative stance on Kurtz and his liberation from the norms of society. However, looking strictly at *Lord Jim* shows how Conrad develops this idea regarding language to show that while language may be necessary in order to get along in life, taking it to the extreme also results in rendering a man as "no use to mankind."

A good place to start analyzing the novel would be the event that many critics have observed to be its center and turning point: Marlow's discussion with Stein about Jim. In "That 'Wonderful' Man Mr. Stein" George Waddington undermines the common reading of Stein as a "paternal presence in *Lord Jim*, whose motives are good" (94). He explains how Marlow's praise of Stein is superficial, as Marlow initially praises Stein for having the right looks and coming off as "one of us" (93), but "Stein's calm and collected exterior hides a character of diverse sympathies and impulses that most critics categorize as Romantic" (93), and Stein is actually "motivated more by self-interest than kindness" (93). So when Stein resolves to send Jim away to Patusan, it is not as an act of kindness but Stein looking out for his trading post there. Although Waddington does not get into Nietzschean theory, he is essentially relating *Lord Jim* directly to it; through Marlow's tendency to make superficial judgments by "recirculating the same clichés" (95) about people, he has constructed an unreal model of Stein through language that fails under heavy scrutiny.

While Waddington shows how Marlow's construction of Stein fails, he overlooks the fact that this is going on simultaneously with other characters in the novel, especially Jim. Like Marlow, Jim is also recirculating the same clichés, not about another character, but about himself in reference to the Romantic heroes of the seafaring adventures he loves to read. At the very beginning of the book, when the tale is narrated

by the, more or less, objective narrator, readers find that “after a course of light holiday literature [Jim’s] vocation for the sea had declared itself” (7), and that he “live[d] in his mind the sea life of light literature” (7). Jim sees himself as “saving people from sinking ships... or as a lonely castaway” (7) along with a variety of other illusions about himself that he has constructed. With references like these it is easy to conclude that Jim probably obtained his personal morals and values, which come into play throughout the book, from literature about the sea. This is also apparent to other characters, as Stein “...understand[s] very well. [Jim] is a romantic” (162).

The narrator provides a gloomy outlook on Jim’s life from the very first sentence of the novel when he explains that Jim “was an inch, perhaps two, below six feet” (5), cluing the reader in on the fact that, no matter what, Jim will never be able to live up to his Romantic hero ideal because he physically does not measure up, whether or not he matches the ideal internally. Nevertheless, Jim tries to achieve the ideal throughout the entire novel. He wants to keep his honor by not fleeing the court proceedings after he jumps off the Patna and continually tries to restart his life by trying to find places, like Samarang, where no one has heard of his unfortunate incident. When he finally settles in Patusan, Jim gets the closest he possibly can to his ideal. No one knows about his faults, and he is able to become “Tuan Jim” (186). At this point, Jim tries to reinvent himself according to how he believes a hero would act according to his favorite books.

In “Lord Jim: The Limitations of Romance,” Linda Dryden asserts, “Jim [in Patusan] is no longer a man; he is the boyish hero of an adventure story” (164). Even his manner of speech is changed as it “is peppered with expressions like ‘Jove’ (LJ, 235), ‘bally’ (LJ, 253), and the public school oath ‘Honour bright!’ (LJ, 269)” (164). Dryden believes that these “schoolboy idiom[s] [are] evidence of the regression to childhood” (164).

He even dresses differently, with his “white helmet to canvas leggings and the pipeclayed shoes” (290) that perhaps give him the extra two inches he probably secretly desires.

But is Jim *really* the “boyish hero of an adventure story” that Dryden suggests, or has he just attempted to construct himself into being one? It seems that Jim cannot actually be the hero he admires for a variety of reasons. First is Jim’s inability to measure up to the physical requirements mentioned earlier; furthermore, Jim’s actions do not match up to that of the Romantic hero. This becomes especially pertinent when considering the complete title of the novel, *Lord Jim: A Tale*, because certain tropes are expected in a Romantic tale about a hero, much like what is expected out of the modern adaptations of German folk/fairy tales that writers like Novalis, from whom the novel gets its opening inscription (3), wrote (e.g. *Henry Von Ofterdingen*). In order to take this point further, though, an understanding of the heroes from these tales is necessary.

Joseph Campbell explains these German folk /fairy tales in terms of “The Adventure of the Hero” (47) in which the hero “is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds to the threshold of adventure” (245) and “enters a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces” (246). Eventually, “he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward” (246), which is often times represented as a marriage, atonement, or apotheosis. The “final work is that of the return” (246) with the boon he brings that “restores the world” (246). While the hero cycle is generally referenced in terms of ancient mythology, Campbell explains in a supplement to *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales* that “[fairy tales] are frequently derived from myth. They must be explained as myth is explained” (857), while also adding another interesting note that is important for this discussion: “The Brothers Grimm had produced, in an unpredicted way, the masterpiece which the whole Romantic Movement in Germany had been intending” (838). With the diagnosis made by Stein, who “had been born

in Bavaria" (Conrad 156), that "[Jim] is a romantic" (162), the Grimms' fairy tales, along with the hero cycle, provide a perfect template by which to analyze Jim and the novel.

Jim's tale begins like most, with an immature youth whom desperately needs to grow up, but his interactions and complications, once he passes the "threshold of adventure" into Patusan, do not follow the classic structure of the hero cycle. For instance, a common trope is "[t]he hero... discover[ing] and assimilating his opposite (his own unsuspected self) either by swallowing it or being swallowed" (Campbell 108). Jim's opposite self comes in the form of Gentleman Brown, but neither swallows or is swallowed. Instead Jim and Brown go their separate ways, leaving a crucial part of the cycle incomplete.

In simple terms, Jim and Brown are opposite sides of the same self because they almost appear to be the same man at different stages in his life. It would not be a stretch to assume that Brown was also captivated by seafaring adventure tales as a child, as he eventually matures into a "buccaneer" (269). Also, he is unlike his "brother ruffians" because "the others were merely vulgar and greedy brutes, but [Brown] seemed moved by some complex intention" (269). Like Jim, no one really understands the core of Brown's motivations for what he does. Marlow's letter reveals another similarity between Jim and Brown, though, as Brown stands "in mortal fear of imprisonment" (271), which is the cause of his constant travelling from place to place. Like Jim, he is constantly running away from something; it is easy to imagine Brown having the same reaction as Jim once he finds out that strangers around him either know of him or his deeds: they both flee.

There are obvious differences as well, which are made apparent when Jim and Brown finally confront one another. Jim is wearing his white suit while Brown is wearing "a checked flannel shirt with sleeves cut off at the elbow, grey bearded, with a sunken, sun-blackened face" (290).

These are only superficial differences, as the similarities become clear when "they fac[e] each other across the creek, and with steady eyes tr[y] to understand each other before they ope[n] their lips" (290). They both go through a similar thought process as they face each other, both backed by their respective men, and the confrontation comes off more like two people looking into a distorted mirror.

Fleeing makes them similar, but Brown also embodies what Jim may turn into if he continues down the path he is on at this point in the story. A hint of this is given as Brown "curse[s] in his heart the other's youth and assurance" (290), as if Brown remembers the days when he was exactly like Jim. If Jim had not decided to end his life when he did, and continued to travel from port to port in search of anonymity but still craving the seafaring life, it seems plausible that his last resort would be to take the life of a jaded pirate who must steal to make his money since he would never be satisfied with any job. Perhaps Brown had the same motivation as Jim once, but the passing of time lead to the deaths of the people who knew Brown during his idealistic phase, and now his motivations are passed off as some unknown "complex intention."

As Campbell points out, in order for Jim to complete his hero journey he must unite and meld with Brown, but this never occurs. The imagery of their encounter makes this clear as they are on opposite sides of the stream and stay on their opposite sides throughout their interaction. They never cross, never even get close to each other, making a unification completely impossible. Instead, they go back to their respective bases. Jim "never set[s] eyes on him again" (297), and sends word to Dain Waris to dismiss Brown. The alternative way the hero could unify his self would be to marry his opposing force, but Jim never marries Jewel, so the journey is not completed on that level, either. Nietzsche's philosophy starts to become apparent at this point as Jim's ideal of the hero from literature starts crashing down upon him.

The fact that Jim does not complete this crucial component directly results in his failure to complete the final part of the hero journey: the return. Campbell explains that the return is an essential aspect of the hero journey because the hero must bring back the metaphorical/literal "Jewel" or knowledge/experience that he gains from his trip. Jim is unable to accomplish this goal because he gives himself up to Doramin, who "sho[ots] his son's friend [Jim] through the chest" (317). It is almost as if Jim is aware that he missed his chance to complete his hero journey. He misses the opportunity to become one with his other self and he does not acknowledge the possibility of marrying and unifying with his opposing force in Jewel. Jim has no boon to return to his native land with and has failed his hero journey, so he submits to the only possible fate left: death.

This is not to say that Jim is not a hero of some type, especially since readers do not get an explanation of what is going on in Jim's head, but he is most definitely not the Romantic hero he had initially set out to be. Perhaps he is a tragic hero, deciding to own up to the consequences of his actions, to symbolically stay on the Patna like he wished he could have always done, but the evidence suggests the contrary. It appears as if Jim had put all of his hopes and dreams into the ideal of the hero from the literature he had been reading, as if he felt he could make real the hero cycle of which he was so fond. Yet he was distraught to find that the fantasy-world of literature is just that, a fantasy. It is true that sometimes the end of the journey can be a symbolic death and then a rebirth or "resurrection" (Campbell 246) into a new life, but the death at the end of *Lord Jim* is not a symbol in that way. There is no prospect for a new life. Jim says, "Time to finish this," (314) as if he knows there is nowhere left to go.

While John S. Kirby does not explicitly discuss the failure of the hero myth, he delves into the lack of the ideal in Patusan in his essay "Shadows on the Cave Wall: Platonic Imagery in *Lord Jim*." Kirby begins

by explaining that "a major, complex source of Conrad's inspiration [was] the myths of Plato's *Republic*" (221). He continues as he explains life in Patusan as life in Plato's allegorical cave where "the moon floats above Jim's valley... [and] is described as the 'ghost' of the sun like the fire in the cave" (222). Kirby goes on to state, "The image of 'false light' reappears as 'starlight...that cannot resolve shadows again into shapes'" (223), and once again "the imagery of moon-shadow-cave is resumed in chapter 34...[when] Marlow considers the rising moon and the various shadows it casts on the forest" (223). This observation falls in line with this interpretation of *Lord Jim*, as Patusan is the land where the Platonic form of the ideal Romantic hero is unable to be realized; it can only be a hazy, shadowy, faulty copy.

In a way, then, Patusan is a metaphor for Nietzsche's philosophy, as it is a land where the ideal is unrealizable. In "Metaphor and Truth in Nietzsche and Emerson: A Critique of Idealism and Realism," Richard Findler explains that "[i]n 'Truth and Lies' Nietzsche cites his mistrust of the ideal" (97). Nietzsche conceived truth as something that "is not there to be picked up and taken in by our cognitive faculties" (98), but that is exactly what Jim is trying to do throughout the book. He feels that there is some type of substantial truth about what it means to be a hero in the books he loves. It is almost as if Jim thinks that the actions of the characters are the tangible truths he simply needs to duplicate in order to replicate the heroes essence, but as he tries to duplicate them reality sets in, and his ideal lets him down.

Kirby juxtaposes his observation of cave-like imagery in Patusan to imagery of the freed cave prisoner that Marlow delivers once he leaves Patusan: "In Patusan, Marlow had discovered himself somehow to be in a cave. Yet, as he prepares to depart, he knows that he has been changed, somehow liberated by his encounter with Jim in the Island kingdom. He seems to feel liberated from illusions, but which illusions... he doesn't

really say" (223). The fact that Marlow experiences a kind of enlightening feeling after leaving Patusan leads to an interesting dynamic in this reading, as it appears that it may be Marlow himself who has completed his own hero journey.

Marlow, it seems, has traversed all the stages of the hero journey unbeknownst to himself. He begins his narrative by explaining a type of innocent interest in Jim's case as he explains that "to this day [he] hasn't left off wondering why [he] went" (28). His intense interest eventually leads him to visit Jim in Patusan: his crossing into the threshold of adventure into the unknown realm, the same as Jim. He studies Jim there in the shadowy world and leaves, exits the cave, feeling enlightened, but does not know how. Some could argue that Marlow does not bring back a boon or treasures, but his narrative comes off as a treasure to his captivated listeners, especially to the "privileged man" (257) that eventually receives the rest of the story in Marlow's letter. Another argument that could be made is that he does not unite with anyone or assimilate his other as Campbell suggests is crucial, but it seems that his narrative, and later his letter, are the vehicles by which he assimilates and incorporates his others into himself, as all Marlow's depictions of the characters, or at least Stein, according to Waddington, tend to show his biases.

Taking Marlow as the hero, then, changes the focus of the ending from Jim to Marlow. Marlow claims to be on the fence about what happened with Jim, and he considers that Jim's death may have been an "extraordinary success" or that it shows Jim as the victim of "exalted egoism" (318); this is what many critics have characterized as the illusive ending since Marlow comes to no real conclusion, but focusing on Jim is wrong in order to derive meaning out of Marlow's experiences recounted in *Lord Jim*. Rather, the novel shines light on the process Jim tried so hard to push on himself. It seems that the wisdom to come out of Marlow's hero journey is that people cannot force themselves into becoming a hero

based on what they have read a hero is supposed to be. They just have to let it happen like Marlow did. They have to live out the essence rather than try to live up to one that is poorly constructed for them.

Although Conrad initially rejected Nietzsche's philosophy on language in *Heart of Darkness* as DeMille explains, it appears as if he comes to sympathize with it in *Lord Jim*. Jim, who put his hope in the concepts related in the literature he loved, as if copying the actions of his favorite heroes would somehow lead to him sharing in the essence that makes them heroes, fails. Marlow, on the other hand, lives his life, tries to get as many possible perspectives of the situation he is studying, like Nietzsche's "hero"/artist who roams around searching for new metaphors to explain the same concepts, and comes out as the hero with the jewels to change the world, or if not the world, at least the lives of those who come across his story. So while the title of "Tale" initially seems to fail, it is because readers are focusing on the wrong character. In a sense the title of the novel works in the same way as the story itself, as readers must realize that Jim, while crucial to the story, is not the ends to heroic wisdom, but the means by which Marlow attains it.



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### "The Matter of Britain": Life, Death, and the Experience of Time in the World of King Arthur by David Pendery

*In the Eternal nothing is transient, but the whole is present.*

- Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI

#### Introduction

The vast passion play of Arthurian legend, deeply woven with strands of ethical, political, social, aesthetic and personal exigencies, pleats filaments of an English conception of life, death and the experience of time that have bound and caparisoned the British people and nation for centuries. King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table—dauntless champions of freedom, paragons of virtue and courage, defenders of individual human worth—comprise a venerated model of aptitude and behavior that has been adopted by many cultures around the world. This popularity has at times resulted in King Arthur being reduced to a cuddly cartoon character, ideological flag waver, or hackneyed "knight in shining armor," but at their most transcendent, the Arthur tales remain, centrally, an allegory of "The Matter of Britain"—the British national and

historical consciousness, founded on and venerating a conception of life, death and the experience of time as the essential constituents of a vision of ardor, greatness and permanence. Arthur himself was a hero among heroes, perfectly virtuous, an eternal "once and future king" and a savior who would lead Britain and the British out of esteemed past historical experience, along a plane of ever-improving present existence, and into the glory of futures yet untold:

And therewith they kneeled at once, both rich and poor, and cried Arthur mercy because they had delayed him so long, and Arthur forgave them, and took the sword between both his hands, and offered it upon the altar where the Archbishop was, and so was he made knight of the best man that was there. And so anon was the coronation made. And there was he sworn unto his lords and the commons for to be a true king, to stand with true justice from thenceforth the days of this life. (Malory vol. 1, 14)

Such attitudes are admirably confident (to the point of conceit), and seemingly *so* British, but we will find that this vision is only half the truth. For coursing beneath this view of permanence and glory is a less sanguine current that recognizes mutability, volatility and suffering in life, and approaches world-weariness and disillusionment. In this more fitful view, we find the British apprehending life-into-death and temporality more cautiously, and the recognition of an innate threat to order and flourishing that lurks in the corners of lived experience. Thomas Malory voiced a paradoxical vision of life's fleeting, ambiguous and even parlous quality across time:

...in this season, as in the month of May, it befell a great  
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anger and unhap that stinted not till the flower of chivalry  
of all the world was destroyed and slain. (vol. 2, 339)

In the following analysis I will explore these more plaintive murmurs in the English world view by analyzing passages from Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" and Thomas Malory's *La Morte D'Arthur*, first in light of currently understood facets of historicity, historical consciousness and historical narrative, followed by a reading of these works through the prism of Book XI of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the great African/Latin philosopher's meditation on time and eternity. We will find, I trust, that Augustinian thought uniquely illuminates the veritably neurotic ambivalence in the Arthurian tales, with their willfully optimistic prophecy coursing alongside their pensive downward glance at impermanence and ambiguity. In the end we may decide that such an anxious amalgamation of idealism and insecurity, vainglory and vacillation, divination and despondency, is the fate not only of societies that have had such enormous successes and failures as England, but may also be enfolded within the fabric of national life, historical consciousness and the literature of other peoples and nations.

### The Writing of Historical Narrative

"History" is virtually a given in everyday life. We are steeped in histories, day in and day out—from our own histories secreted away in memory and personal diaries; to family histories conveyed by parents and grandparents, lovingly housed in scrapbooks and photo albums; to conceptions of history learned in schools and churches; to media outlets that are substantial contributors to most people's historical understanding; and finally to higher-level historiography and theory of history, which seek to explain events and actors across time and space, from the crushing of a butterfly's wings to the evolution of an entire  
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era, and to link such incident and temporality across an epistemological and ontological continuum spanning individual, community, nation and civilization, ultimately linking human endeavor to a universal conception of awareness and experience. That *history happens*—unfolding in a coolly unwavering fashion (not for nothing have teleological or deterministic theories of history long been appealing to humans), compiling a vast array of experiences day by day, permeating every moment and incident—is no doubt one accurate depiction of human existence. We may posit that the very structure of human consciousness, forever linking lived (past), current (present) and anticipated (future) experience in a Husserl-esque (and Augustinian), horizontal, retentive/protentive framework of memory, awareness and anticipation creates a ready-made historical consciousness that seems to be forever rising to the surface of human cognizance, and demanding yet more historical input and interpretation. Just above, we saw some of the variety of such input and interpretation, but in this paper I will focus on one source, a source which, interestingly, is usually thought to virtually thumb its nose at authentic historicity: fictional and poetic works. Indeed, stop right here, some will say—for although William Caxton wrote that *La Morte D'Arthur* was a “*history* of the said noble king and conqueror King Arthur” (Malory 1, emphasis added), such works as this are rarely given credence in terms of genuine historicity. Indeed, I grant that for most readers there exists a “fundamental bifurcation between historical and fictional narrative” (Ricoeur vol. 1, 52). However, while such *bifurcation* as there is separating works like “*Idylls of the King*” and *La Morte D'Arthur* from conventional historical writing must be treated with a healthy respect, I will in the following describe a given *congruence* between historiography and poetic/fictional narrative. My aim may not be to search in these works for much history “proper”—that is, empirical “scientific” historical writing based on documentary research and objective evaluation of evidence associated with past events. These

elements I call the *figuration* of history, the actual (though “absent”) events and actors, given a palpable existence when constructed back into existence in historiography. In contrast to this, I will seek to excavate an understanding of English historical consciousness across a given “ground” of historicity that can be discerned in poetic and fictional works by way of, we might say, *infiguration* (I borrow the term from Peter Munz, used in his analysis of historicity and historical writing, *The Shapes of Time*). Let me explain this position.

We find that both fictional and non-fictional historical writing share a fundamental approach: the re-composition of *lived experience* within the grand aesthetic edifice of *narrative*. We thus immediately detect a congruence, with both narrative and lived experience apprehended and constructed as emplotted stories of temporal and spatial *praxis* (which are composed of, I feel compelled to say, beginnings, middles, ends and not a few other essential aesthetic elements commonly used to narrate experience). In these respects history *becomes* narrative, and then narrative *becomes* history, first when history is *manifested* during lived experience, and later when it is *made* by way of the emplotment and narration of fictional and non-fictional writers. David Carr links lived historical experience and narrative in this way when he writes that “the story we tell places [...] action in a temporal continuum, relating it to previous actions and events that led up to it; and it places the action also in relation to a future scenario or set of possible futures” (“Narrative Explanation” 22). Hayden White, one of the master analysts of this historico-narrative coding, adds in this respect that “historical events possess the same structure as narrative discourse” (“The Metaphysics of Narrativity” 171). The end result of this structural processing is that “... we are in history as we are in the world” (*Time, Narrative and History* 4). I will continue with this conception in mind as we examine the works by Malory and Tennyson, each of which effects aesthetically and

historically, "a continuance of the process of mapping the limit between the imaginary and the real which begins with the invention of fiction itself" (White, *The Content of the Form* 45). Ultimately, we find that "the significance of past occurrences is understandable only as they are locatable in the ensemble of interrelationships that can be grasped only in the construction of narrative form" (Mink 148). This identical narrative figuration shows that the narrated experience of both fictional and non-fictional histories are equal in terms of their epistemological, cognitive, experiential, linguistic, aesthetic and ontological qualities.

That historiography differs from fictional historical writing, in that the history in historiography is either *remembered* or *(re)assembled* from source documents and artifacts, as opposed to that which is *imagined* or *created* by authors of fiction, is of little bearing in my argument. As Hayden White has shown, the "techniques or strategies that [historians and novelists] use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on the purely surface, or dictional level" ("The Fictions" 121). This truly is a "new old idea" <sup>1</sup> in the field of literary and historical analysis, and we are no longer surprised that "the historiographical value of a piece of history is determined less by the facts disclosed in it than by the narrative interpretation of such facts" (Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic* 1). In terms of all of the above, we find that emergent historical narratives "course up" out of lived historical experience, are mapped onto narrated historical writing, and are finally *(re)placed* within a healthy contextual circle of human experience and communicative endeavor.

We can fruitfully interpret the King Arthur tales with the above understanding in mind. But what can we hope to find of true historiographical value in such fictional/poetic works? In answer to this question, and as I have referred to, we will find a historical *ground*, beneath which we will be able to mine a lode of historical apprehension.

This apprehension is composed of a people's attitudes, biases, fears, beliefs, intellectual and philosophical mindsets, conceptions of character, prejudices, convictions, ideas, emotions, etc.<sup>2</sup> Such factors may at times be one step removed from history "proper," but they are no less (potentially) truthful and revealing. The soil of this ground becomes a rich, organic culture, ultimately yielding credible and necessary perspectives on, attitudes towards, and enlargements of complete historical apprehension. In a word, there is more going on in works like "Idylls of the King" and *La Morte D'Arthur* than just poetry, fiction, legend, fable or myth. And this should not surprise us, for the combination of "Literature and History," as historian Norman Davies has written, constitute the "guardians of the national conscience" (217), while Peter Munz writes even more broadly that fiction and history "have much in common in their universal actuality" (147).

In sum, I see the totality of this posited ground as a dappled experiential tract of historicity in human affairs, a dynamic, densely deliberative and imaginative field embedded within profoundly aesthetic contexts comprising individual and community histories studded with manifold elements of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, invention and artfulness, intentionality and actualization. Here, history is first lived, and out of this, historical writing is composed. I might turn here to the thoughts of the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), who wrote of history that "no knowledge of the particular is possible without its being understood within a general frame" (or, as he yet more poetically put it, "Every historical fact opens immediately into eternity" [299, 300]). Similarly, the ground of historical experience described above becomes the "general frame," the veritable "eternity," and the "universal actuality" within which we can discern historicity.

Historical apprehension such as I am positing here will admittedly require something of a leap of epistemological faith in order to cross the

divide separating history “proper” and fictionalized versions thereof. In spite of this challenge, I warrant that we are anything but forbidden from entering this territory, with the aim of reasonably ascertaining historical perception. We must be assiduous, we must be discerning, we must be critical, we must be generous—but enter this historical environment, these corridors of memory, history and experience conveyed in fictional and poetic works, we may.

### St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and historical consciousness in “*Idylls of the King*”

I am turning to Book XI of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* in order to link the historical attitudes of Arthur’s day with the major philosophical thinking of the time, for no one can deny that Augustine was anything less than “the fount of authority” during his and following ages (Tuchman 59). Augustine (354–430) is very nearly contemporaneous with the origins of the Arthurian tales, and his impact was without question unmitigated from the earliest through the later Arthurian writings.<sup>3</sup>

In Book XI of *Confessions* Augustine posits a threefold temporality comprising “a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come” (235). He continues that “if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity” (231), and in this way “what [the human mind] expects passes through what has its attention to what it remembers” (243). Such an expansive conception encompasses not only a semi-mystical idea<sup>4</sup> of a “continuous eternity” in lived experience (past, present and future as unified, a continuous moment that is expected, transpires, and then passes into memory, but which ultimately “[does] not exist except in the present” [*Confessions* 234]), but also a comprehensive and pragmatic historically-mediated consciousness—with its backward glance of a “present considering the past [...] memory” (*Confessions* 235), its current

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grasp of a “present considering the present [...] immediate awareness” (*Confessions* 235), and human anticipation “considering the future [...] expectation” (*Confessions* 235). The bridge from these meditations to eternity as a fixture in lived experience is a short one, and “the whole is present. But no time is wholly present. It will see that all past time is driven backwards by the future, and all future time is the consequent of the past” (228-229). We might broaden our understanding of this time consciousness by way of Thomas Aquinas’s conception of *aevum*—a “betwixt-and-between position” on the continuum of time and space that, specifically, links the lives of angels upward to the eternal Godhead, and downward to mortal humanity. Frank Kermode writes that the concept of *aevum* (an idea that Thomas Aquinas seems to have innovated, but which may in fact have descended from Augustine) has in our time become more “humanized,” less esoterically pious, and that it has helped people “to think about the sense [...] of participating in some order of duration other than that of the *nunc movens* [ordinary, lived temporality]—of being able, as it were, to do all that angels can” (71). Consider how this link from the everyday temporal to the eternal divinity coincides with the discussion thus far, and can be applied into the understanding of the temporal and historical consciousness of the British people as I have framed them (see also note 4).

Augustine’s temporal framework coheres with the poetics of Tennyson’s “*Idylls of the King*,” with both evincing subtle representations of temporality where past, present and future events “occur” almost simultaneously, and with eternity conditioning all lived experience. Augustine writes, “It is not the case that what was being said comes to an end, and something else is then said, so that everything is uttered in a succession with a conclusion, but [that] everything is said in the simultaneity of eternity” (226). In spite of this apparent stability, however—with Augustine writing that “nothing is transient, but the

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whole is present" (228)—we must examine in more detail Augustine's philosophy of time and eternity, and links to "Idylls of the King," for we will find that there is much more at work.

In "Idylls of the King," death (eternity) becomes a bridge from past to present to future, a belief that no doubt can be applied to the English nation and historical consciousness—this nation that could (would...) "last for a thousand years"—and also linked to Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>5</sup> Augustine of course viewed the death of the body as a passage into Christian eternity—"The deity would not have done all that for us, in quality and in quantity, if with the body's death the soul's life were also destroyed" (105)—which can be interpreted, as with the Arthurian tales, as nearly a liberation theology, with death viewed as a peace, a unity, an ultimate eternal refuge that was probably appealing in its own right during Arthur's time:

But now farewell. I am going a long way

[...]

To the island-valley of Avilion;

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,

Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies

Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns

And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,

Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.' (440)

Alongside this permanence, however, we see a deep ambivalence, crossing over from Augustine, into the Arthur legend, and ultimately into English historical consciousness. For eternity for Augustine had a dual conception—at once a cessation, that is, death, but also a continuation, a sempiternity and bridge to an undying future. This could be read alternately as the eternal and the changeful functioning

*simultaneously* in lived experience, or as uncertainty functioning *within* eternal changelessness. Thus we find that threatening and turbulent conditions of lived experience intrude into the picture, with "stability" not always part and parcel of "eternity," and ultimately with something of a "changing-same" temporality emerging that is much less than constant and hospitable. Throughout *Confessions*, alongside his meditations on eternity, Augustine refers to ceaseless change and tumult: "heaven and earth exist, they cry aloud that they are made, for they suffer change and variation" (224). Times are beset with "storms of incoherent events" (*Confessions* 244). Humans, vainly, "attempt to taste eternity when their heart is still flitting about in the realm where things change and have a past and future" (228). And creation itself "alternates between regress and progress, between hostilities and reconciliations" (*Confessions* 138). Indeed, we see here how "changefulness" is only a step away from "violence," with continuity ever skirting bedlam, fruition ever contiguous with destruction. Thus, at one point, in "The Coming of Arthur," we are introduced into the advent of a new age—an age, given that Arthur is equated with Jesus Christ, who has been "breathed a secret thing" by God, will no doubt constitute an "eternity which is always in the present" (*Confessions* 230)—

'Blow, for our Sun is mighty in his May!

Blow, for our Sun is mightier day by day!

Clang battleaxe, and clash brand! Let the King reign.

'The King will follow Christ, and we the King

In whom high God hath breathed a secret thing. (295)

—but at the same time disorder irrupts into this splendor, and Arthur—he who experiences frequent "confusion" (435) and "doubt" (440)—finds himself in a world "Commingled with the gloom of

imminent war" (287). This war later explodes into Arthur's hoped-for quiescence:

Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear; and ev'n on Arthur fell  
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.  
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend now knowing whom he slew (435)

In such a double-edged environmentality we are forced to ask: "Who can lay hold on the heart and give it fixity, so that for some little moment it may be stable, and for a fraction of time may grasp the splendour of a constant eternity?" (*Confessions* 228), and in turn to conclude: "Then it may compare eternity with temporal successiveness which never has any constancy, and will see there is no comparison possible" (*Confessions* 228). Even in an address to the most elevated, Augustine felt bound to describe the discrepant, mutable, crenellated disposition of lived experience, with a series of oppositions:

Most high, most utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden, yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and 'leading' the proud 'to be old without their knowledge' (Job 9:5); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing all to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking... (*Confessions* 4-5)

A passage from "The Passing of Arthur" illustrates these conceptions. Though a sense of timelessness, a feeling of an Augustinian eternal is evident in this passage—"He comes again; but—if he come no more [...] then from the dawn it seem'd there came, but faint / As from beyond the limit of the world, / Like the last echo born of a great cry" (440-441)—a simultaneous changefulness infringes, and "The old order changeth, yielding place to new." The change in Arthur's world moves between light and shade, with what was once "an image of the mighty world" having descended into an existence "dead," with darkened days spent "companionless" among "strange faces, other minds." Tennyson writes:

For now I see the true old times are dead,  
When every morning brought a noble chance,  
And every chance brought out a noble knight.  
Such times have been not since the light that led  
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.  
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved  
Which was an image of the mighty world,  
And I, the last, go forth companionless,  
And the days darken round me, and the years,  
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.'

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:  
'The old order changeth, yielding place to new, (440)

In the following passage, the sensation of permanence is underscored when Aurelius (Arthur's uncle) and King Uther are seen to have uniformly "fought and died" (the parallel syntax of the two lines creates a felt simultaneity or "timelessness"), which is followed by the arrival of Arthur, who reigned for an indeterminate temporal "space." But this

continuity and hoped-for permanence is seeded with decay, for after all, “a doubtful throne is ice on summer seas” (291), and yet more ominously, “Modred laid his ear beside the doors, / And there half-heard; the same that afterward / Struck for the throne, and striking found his doom.” (292). From Tennyson:

And still from time to time the heathen host  
Swarm'd overseas, and harried what was left  
And so there grew great tracts of wilderness,  
Wherein the beast was ever more and more,  
But man was less and less, till Arthur came.  
For first Aurelius lived and fought and died,  
And after him King Uther fought and died,  
But either fail'd to make the kingdom one.  
And after these King Arthur for a space,  
And thro' the puissance of his Table Round,  
Drew all their petty principdoms under him.  
Their king and head, and made a realm, and reign'd. (287–288)

Later in this section, the conception of changeless, imperforate, timeless existence is further emphasized—but again is linked to a melancholy *précis* of blight and death in Arthur's life and times:

Then might we live together as one life,  
And reigning with one will in everything  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live.' (289)

The above passage indicates that the experience and apprehension of death were central in Arthur's world. Death in a “knightly fashion,” ever  
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calling “like a friend's voice from a distant field” (Tennyson, 381, 383) was a virtual calling card for the knights of the Round Table—a potential requirement for honor in this world, and a passage to eternity in the next. Death in turn permeates Tennyson's poem. Elaine recalls a song she sang in her childhood —

I needs must follow death, who calls for me;  
Call and I follow, I follow! let me die.' (383)

—while Vivien's gloom, with its touch of promise at once hopeful and haunting, seems to capture something of the heart of the poem's tone—

My father died in battle against the King,  
My mother on his corpse in open field;  
She bore me there, for born from death was I  
Among the dead and sown upon the wind—  
And then on thee! (354)

Arthur's and Guinevere's impassioned speech to each other at their wedding brings death literally into their loving arms—

'Behold, thy doom is mine.  
Let chance what will, I love thee to the death!  
To whom the Queen replied with drooping eyes,  
'King and my lord, I love thee to the death!' (294)

—while Tristram meets his doom with his lips on his lover's throat—



He spoke, he turn'd, then, flinging round her neck,  
Claspt it, and cried "Thine Order, O my Queen!"  
But While he bow'd to kiss the jewell'd throat,  
Out of the dark, just as the lips had touch'd,  
Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek—  
'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him thro' the brain. (423)

All of these ambivalences and antagonisms are existentially troublesome, a vision of a people at best uneasy, or worse, at war with itself. We find, however, and a bit more hopefully, that they form a necessary foil to a true focus and belief in the value of eternity, such that "Even when we are instructed through some mutable creature, we are led to reliable truth" (*Confessions* 227). We find this same marriage of opposites in "Idylls of the King," where Arthur and the Round Table are at once doomed—

But when that moan had past for evermore,  
The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn  
Amazed him, and he groan'd, 'The King is gone.' (440)

—and eternal—

[...] I pass but shall not die.' (434)

We again encounter these principal ideas—the eternal that is present in past (memory), present (experience) and future (expectation), and the relationship of death and eternity both corporal and metaphysical—when Arthur, near his demise and now only a "King among the dead," traces past, present and future time into an enduring unity as he elegizes to Bedivere:

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The goodliest fellowship of famous knights  
Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep  
They sleep—the men I loved. I think that we  
Shall never more, at any future time,  
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,  
Walking about the gardens and the halls  
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.  
I perish by this people which I made,—  
Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again (436)

#### Conclusion

The imbricated, ambivalent temporal consciousness stemming from St. Augustine's *Confessions* accords with the English historical consciousness as I have described it, a florid understanding of death, time and lived experience that incorporates and apprehends in existence and experience that best and most inviting, as well as that worst and most baleful. This temporal understanding and historical consciousness offer in one more optimistic respect a vision of stability and permanence, what we might call a given metaphysical "upper limit to the process of the hierarchization of temporality" (Ricouer vol. 1, 86), which fits well with the political and social aims of a unified England during the entire span of time I have referred to. This more buoyant understanding offers up something of a blunting of the corrosive passage of time, and creates an aperture onto a sempiternity allowing for the full realization of the potential of a people and a nation, a temporal ontology confidently in charge of its own destiny, functioning in a world wherein it "will see that all past time is driven backwards by the future, and all future time is the consequent of the past. And all past and future are created and set

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on their course by that which is always present" (*Confessions* 228-229). This theater of time and existence, however, constitutes an ambiguous compass, and becomes also an opening into an uncanny "experience of 'deep temporality,'" with its ultimate constitution the "the enigma of death and eternity, the ultimate matter figured in every manifestation of human consciousness" (White, *The Content of the Form* 184). We might see here something like the animation of "sublime historical experience," as Frank Ankersmit has conceived it, a poignant amalgam of contentment, melancholy, love and loss, brought to life through the unique experiencing of the past of writers like those we have examined. For a nation like England that "has had such sublime historical experience, the past and an awareness of this past will become ineluctable realities" (Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* xv). And for the English "The past will...be no less a part of what they are as our limbs are part of our bodies" (Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* xv).

Grandiose was the Arthurian—the English—historical consciousness, a vision of ideal virtue, vaunted greatness, and hoped-for permanence: Arthur would "stand with true justice from thenceforth the days of this life" (Malory vol. 1, 14). Embedded in such propitious estimations, however, is the more disconsolate recognition that, even in the midst of the English nation's greatest glories, nothing could last forever, that nothing was permanent but change—Winston Churchill recognized this volatility when he wrote that "the [Arthur] legend lived upon the increasing tribulations of an age" (48), and Tennyson himself had in "Idylls of the King" inscribed a melancholy view of what by his time were the looming tribulations of the English nation—

Are morning shadows huger than the shapes  
That cast them, not those gloomier which forego  
The darkness of that battle in the West,

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Where all of the high and holy dies away. (442)

Malory too had Arthur voice a haunting, paradoxical vision of life's fleeting ambiguity across time—

Tide me death, betide me life, saith the king (vol. 2, 387)

We have seen in the works by Tennyson and Malory that these qualities, perceptions and self-perceptions in English life and consciousness, steeped in an austere vision of life, death, and the experience of time, result in a paradoxical admixture of idealism, pomp, gloom, menace, variation and transmutation, all agitating and displacing perceptions and awareness of a people's and a nation's roles in the past, present and future. In the end, ultimately, all must face a given futility and disillusionment, for "The future diminishes as the past grows, until the future has completely gone and everything is in the past" (*Confessions* 242-243). If such tensions, simultaneously clashing and harmonious, auspicious and anxious, have long teased and tormented the English psyche, readers have nevertheless always been able to take heart that, in the end, Arthur would rise on the wings of the hoped-for eternal—"quondam Rex que futurus"—and would "come again" (Malory vol. 2, 391). Indeed, a light ultimately penetrates the gloom, and hope abides—

Down that long water opening on the deep  
Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go  
From less to less and vanish into light.  
And the new sun rose bringing the new year. ("Idylls of the  
King" 441)

In the conclusion to his masterpiece, Tennyson seems to revel in  
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the mosaic of contradictions, beliefs, hopes, dreams, disappointments, conceits and moral energies that made “The Matter of Britain,” as it played out in conjunction with the “natural rise and fall through all the vicissitude of ‘life in Arthur’s days’” (Vinaver xx), what it was—an “old imperfect tale,” that—yet again paradoxically—grew “wealthier—wealthier—hour by hour” (“Idylls of the King” 441). I quote at length below from the conclusion of the poem, “To the Queen,” excising lines to draw attention to certain of the topics and themes examined in this paper. I leave readers with this, and give my sincere thanks for sharing in this appreciation and analysis.

To the Queen

...

And welcome! witness, too, the silent cry,  
The prayer of many a race and creed, and clime—  
Thunderless lightnings striking under sea

...

So loyal is too costly! friends—your love  
Is but a burthen: loose the bond, and go.  
Is this the tone of empire? here the faith  
That made us rulers? this, indeed, her voice

...

What shock has fooled her since, that she should speak  
So feebly? wealthier—wealthier—hour by hour!

...

Not for itself, but through thy living love  
For one to whom I made it o’er his grave  
Sacred, accept this old imperfect tale,  
New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,  
Ideal manhood closed in real man,

...

To its own harm: the goal of this great world  
Lies beyond sight: yet—if our slowly-grown  
And crowned Republic’s crowning common-sense,  
That saved her many times, not fail—their fears  
Are morning shadows huger than the shapes  
That cast them, not those gloomier which forego  
The darkness of that battle in the West,  
Where all of high and holy dies away. (441-442)

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> From Lawrence Stone's "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History."
- <sup>2</sup> The factors listed here accord with Daniel Wickberg's focus on the value of "histories of sensibilities" in historiography. Wickberg discusses and defines sensibilities as "modes of perception and feeling, the terms and forms in which objects were conceived, experienced, and represented in the past" (662), as well as "ideas, emotions, beliefs, values" (670). E.H. Carr in this respect described "the historian's need of imaginative understanding for *the minds* of the people with whom he is dealing" (18, emphasis added), an idea which harks to R.G. Collingwood's notion of "history as thought." A people's sensibilities become a historical seam "that lets us dig beneath the social actions and apparent content of sources to the ground upon which those sources stand: the emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral dispositions of the persons who created them" (Wickberg 669). Wickberg's framework links back to the vagaries, complexities, subjunctivity and modality of conscious lived experience, which are keys not only to historical apprehension, but are also experiential springs that skilled writers of fiction and poetry may be particularly apt at tapping into and fashioning into historical representation. I believe we may view these elements or conceptions in a historical vein in the fictional works we will examine.
- <sup>3</sup> The Christian themes, imagery and philosophy of *Confessions* of course exert tremendous influence over the Arthurian legends, as well as the English nation in manifold ways. But I will not examine these religious themes, particularly, in this analysis.
- <sup>4</sup> Neo-Platonic is probably more accurate, as is the straightforward conception of the Christian godhead as eternal. This of course is the principal thrust of Augustine's philosophy: "[God's] 'day' is not any and every day but Today, because your Today does not yield to a tomorrow, nor did it follow on a yesterday. Your Today is eternity" (*Confessions* 230). We will examine in this paper how this sempiternity has been re-inscribed in secular contexts that have been employed in the English historical consciousness, at times no less than elevating it to a place alongside the Godhead—confident (to the point of conceit), and *so* British—where God "began one coeternal [...] to whom you said: 'Today I have begotten you'" (*Confessions* 230).
- <sup>5</sup> The quote is from Winston Churchill, in a speech delivered to the House of Commons on June 18, 1940.

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### Readerly Resistance to the Senders in William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*

by Michelle Lee Rice

Before the poststructural revolution changed the way we read texts, most critics were still assessing literature through the veil of the liberal humanist tradition. The deciding factor, for critics, concerning whether a text was deemed literary, centered on the question of morality. As we know from the censorship trial in 1965, the jury was out for some time attempting to determine the social significance of William Burroughs's notorious novel, *Naked Lunch*. However, as Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg suggest in their 1991 overview of Burroughs's critical reception, *William S. Burroughs at the Front*, the author's critics still fall into two camps—the humanists and the antihumanists (3). The latter are those who more readily embrace the postmodern avant-garde. Unlike the humanists who assert an inextricable link between morality and aesthetics, the antihumanists believe human nature to be relative, changing, and thus irrational. Since *Naked Lunch* was birthed in a humanist climate, into a time when what was most prized was a rational, authoritative text from which we could glean something of ourselves and make sense of the

world, to many, this novel could only be our nemesis.

There were those, of course, who did find the work to be of literary value, but these critics were also adherents to the humanist tradition and accordingly, reduced its stature, labeling it a moralist's social critique; in so doing, they failed to see the art's unconventional form and style for its own sake (7). One critic, in particular, however, pointed us back to the text, to its very style and language. In "Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*," Mary McCarthy asserts that "the national novel, like the nation-state, [is] dying and...a new kind of novel, based on statelessness, [is] beginning to be written" (33). McCarthy suggests that the newness of *Naked Lunch* lies in its antisymbolism. As it inherently undermines the authority of language and our symbol systems in its new form and content, McCarthy suggests that *Naked Lunch* is indeed a novel *after* modernism. It thus draws the line between old and new writing, exemplifying an emerging literary era.

Burroughs, clearly, was ahead of his time. We might say that the echo of poststructuralism pervades the pages of *Naked Lunch*, but, of course, the inverse is true. In the case of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs's art precedes a literary theory that supplies us with the most fitting terms to describe that precursor, and a way to somehow sift through the mayhem and grab hold of a scrap.<sup>1</sup> Through "panopticons" and "ideological state apparatuses," we can see that *Naked Lunch's* postmodernism lies in its dismantling of symbol systems, especially concerning traditional notions of knowledge, language, and identity.<sup>2</sup> Within the text, we quickly discern that, for our "Factualist" narrator, Agent Lee, beneath such symbol systems lies the tyranny of a Sender who has been infected with the Human Virus of Control. Through this particular metonym for control that represents the embodiment of all evil, readers cannot help but realize how it is not only those within the context of the novel that are susceptible to the Senders of the Virus, but we, too, can be infected. Despite his depiction

of a world overrun by Senders, and, in spite of his refusal to doctor-up and make savory the bite we're so ready to consume at the *end of our forks*, the author illuminates a way out.<sup>3</sup> Through the pen, "*Naked Lunch* treats this health problem" by exposing us to the facts (205). Burroughs contends, "If civilized countries want to return to Druid Hanging Rites in the Sacred Grove or to drink blood with the Aztecs and feed their Gods with blood of human sacrifice, let them see what they actually eat and drink" (205). In this new knowledge, the author *wises up the marks* and suggests that we, too, like Agent Lee, may kill off our own Hausers and O'Briens.<sup>4</sup>

In "Gentle Reader, I fain would spare you this, but my pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner": Narrator(s) and Audience in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*," Ron Loewinsohn suggests that, despite the fact that many are nearly driven to lunacy over the text, *Naked Lunch* is an allegory from which its readers can indeed extract wisdom. Loewinsohn argues:

In order to accomplish his educational mission of wising up the mark, Burroughs has to take the mark along with him on his horrific journey through the inferno of addiction and withdrawal, since the true 'wising up' consists mostly of demonstrating to the mark that this bizarre, inconceivably remote, unearthly world to which he has been shanghaied is in fact his own familiar world, the reality behind its appearances revealed only now in the carnival mirrors of allegory. (563-4)

Loewinsohn suggests that, as our metatextual Factualist, Burroughs reveals to us "marks" the sinister reality that has heretofore gone invisible.<sup>5</sup> The "horrific journey through the inferno of addiction and withdrawal" to which we are beckoned is an allegory for the *reality* of our lives to which we have become accustomed. However grotesque the images, according to Loewinsohn, the degradation is not within the context of Burroughs's

allegory but in the familiarity of our lives. The "carnival mirrors" of its pages merely reflect back to us the excrement in which we play. The first stage of our resistance lies in the recognition that we live in a context of control that "degrades and simplifies" our very humanity (Burroughs, "Deposition" 201).

In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs treats the Virus by revealing the myriad ways control manifests, all the while operating on the same basic principle—creating the face of *total need* (205). Also using junk as a metonym for the Human Virus of Control, Burroughs warns, "Junk is big business; there are always cranks and operators" (205). There are always control addicts who keep their clients desperate, hungry, and in *total possession*. Rather than selling the product to the consumer, "[the merchant] sells the consumer to the product" (205). Only in the vulnerability of possession can the peddler subsume his client and achieve the final goal of mind control. Loewinsohn asserts that, amid the various depictions of the Senders in the novel, we see them "as space aliens invading and conquering a planet, as a parasite invading and feeding on its host, eventually *becoming* the host, and as a virus that uses the very cells of the host to reproduce more of itself, until it destroys the host" (565). In each particular case, we witness the hostile takeover of "individual will and subjecthood" by the most insidious of all controllers (565).

Our Factualist narrator, Agent Lee, warns that "The Senders are notorious for their ignorance of the nature and terminal state of sending, for barbarous and self-righteous manners, and for rabid fear of any *fact*... It may be said that only a very few Senders know what they are doing and these top Senders are the most dangerous and evil men in the world" (NL 136). Since the Senders align with deception, as potential "marks" we must align ourselves with facts to both prevent infection and resist becoming Senders, ourselves. Whether we are a Sender or a "mark," in either case, the Human Virus subsumes each party. In the text, Agent Lee

describes the method of control and its lurid outcome:

Ultimately the Senders will use telepathic transmitting... instructing the workers what to feel and when...A telepathic sender has to send all the time, but he can never receive, because if he receives that means someone else has feelings of his own, could louse up his continuity...Sooner or later he's got no feelings to send. You can't have feelings alone...Finally the screen goes dead...The Sender has turned into a huge centipede. (137)

When our Factualist narrator depicts the harrowing process of "biocontrol," Burroughs reminds us of our own metatextual senders of telepathic messages (136). Throughout written history, we can certainly identify the carnivalesque aspects of reality. The grim side of human activity proves, indeed, how "sending is like atomic power...[when] properly harnessed" (141). The Sender, the disseminator of "poverty, hatred, war, police-criminals, bureaucracy, insanity," is no longer a person but the Virus, itself, that eats the human face off the individual and subsumes his "marked" identity (141).

Agent Lee reveals, in *Naked Lunch*, that the critical characteristic of a Sender lies in his "one-way telepathic broadcasts" (137). Since these "broadcasts" are essentially monologues, they cannot foster anything but homogeneity of ideas. Their systems, accordingly, only reproduce imitations of themselves. For this reason, the Factualists lie in direct opposition to the Senders since *facts* are inherently diversified in the heterogeneity of their sources. A fact, of course, quickly turns into sending when a Sender, desiring to perpetuate himself, manipulates its message. Loewinsohn elaborates: "By absorbing (or subsuming or assimilating) the other, by broadcasting his own clones, or by telepathic invasion, the world is turned into an image of the controller, who remains the only subject, everyone else reduced to the status of an object" (572).

Again, we need only to turn on our television sets, commute through a questionable area of town, or take a backward glance into recent global events to discern the various modes of control that pervade everything we do.

In *William S. Burroughs*, Jennie Skerl elaborates on how the foremost control addicts in the text are actually medical doctors who lead mankind, through science and technology, on a "downward metamorphosis" (25). She suggests, "Doctors, especially psychiatrists, who try to treat addiction in institutional settings are mercilessly satirized because they refuse to recognize the physical aspect of addiction and because their care for the sick disguises a sick need to control others" (25). We see how such figures of authority can lead mankind awry when we witness the behavior of Dr. Benway at the Freeland Reconditioning Center. After we are first introduced to Benway, by Agent Lee, as "a manipulator...of symbol systems, an expert of interrogation, brainwashing [,] control," and a master in "T.D.—Total Demoralization," we soon observe, for ourselves, his violent takeover of susceptible minds as he capitalizes on the face of total need. (NL 19). As Agent Lee passes his hand over the eyes of one addict who, under Benway's care, has been degraded to the status of an IND, one afflicted (or rather inflicted) with "irreversible nerve damage," Lee realizes "Nobody, nothing looks back" (28). Benway assures Lee, however, and wishes to demonstrate, "they still have reflexes" (28):

Benway takes a chocolate bar from his pocket, removes the wrapper and holds it in front of the man's nose. The man sniffs. His jaws begin to work. He makes snatching motions with his hands. Saliva drips from his mouth and hangs off his chin in long streamers. His stomach rumbles. His whole body writhes in peristalsis. Benway steps back and holds up the chocolate. The man drops to his knees, throws back his head and barks. Benway tosses the chocolate. The man snaps at it, misses,

scrambles around on the floor making slobbering noises. He crawls under the bed, finds the chocolate, and crams it into his mouth with both hands. (28)

Benway demonstrates his sadistic use of power over an addict who is no longer simply dependent on junk, but on him. As the IND is virtually subsumed by his Sender's telepathic messages, we see how one mechanism of control replaces another for those who are left without the facts. In this regard, Loewinsohn aligns with Skerl's argument when he suggests, "ultimately, the Reconditioning Center incarnates for Burroughs those institutions that dehumanize their members, objectifying them through a kind of thought control" (569). At this point in the text, we discover how one particular Sender accomplishes his task. The degraded, simplified, and totally demoralized IND no longer has a mind of his own with which to see his own misplaced faith in authority. While Benway certainly shames the hollow vessel of his creation as he calls for the attendants to "Get these fucking INDs outa here," from here onward, he will be of little trouble for the control addict (*NL* 29)

One of Burroughs's more blatantly graphic images for medical science's misuse of knowledge and authority through biocontrol can be seen in the routine "Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry":

Doctor "Fingers" Schafer turns to the Conferents to present his latest experiment with human life: "Gentlemen, the human nervous system can be reduced to a compact and abbreviated spinal column. The brain, front, middle, and rear must follow the adenoid, the wisdom tooth, the appendix...I give you my Master Work: *The Complete All American Deanzietized Man...*"

Blast of trumpets: The Man is carried in naked by two Negro Bearers who drop him on the platform with bestial, sneering

brutality...The Man wriggles...His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede. Waves of unknown stench fill the room, searing the lungs, grabbing the stomach... (87)

Doctor "Fingers" Schafer, we soon realize, did not intend for the man to devolve in such a manner. His "downward metamorphosis" is simply the result of a presumed mastermind's experiment gone awry. Here, of course, Burroughs draws upon the age-old struggle of man's quest for knowledge at all costs. In man's desire to control nature, he plays God, and accordingly sells his soul.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, throughout the text, the instrument of control is language. All telepathic messages are the articulation of *a priori* ideas. The same can be said for our metatextual reality. Rather than assessing our lessons and continually adjusting knowledge to firsthand experience, western civilization has folded experience back into ideology. Accordingly, the systems of classification articulated by language have somehow gained the power to tell us who we are. One instance of language's shaping power, in *Naked Lunch*, is seen in "The Examination." We see the character of Carl Peterson as a potential "mark" when he assumes the faithful authority of the Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis. When he finds a postcard in his box asking him to report for a mandatory examination, he asks himself, "What on earth could they want with me?" (155). He thinks they might be making a mistake, but, rather than trusting himself, assumes the authorities do not such mistakes, "certainly not mistakes of identity" (155).

His certainty is made ironic as Burroughs suggests the likelihood and perhaps intentionality for *mistakes*. Carl is a "marked" man precisely because of his faith in the system. Although his irritation during the examination is apparent, he is most susceptible to deception. When Benway appears as the doctor in charge of diagnosis, we see his mind



at work, again, expertly manipulating all “the phases of interrogation, brainwashing, and control” (19) and he begins the examination with deception: “You know of course that we are trying... To adjust the state— simply a tool—to the needs of each individual citizen” (157). Benway, of course, may believe that they are trying to adjust to the citizens. Since he is a Sender, he may or may not be aware of the fallacy of his messages. But, regardless of the level of consciousness, Senders inevitably reduce people to objects who will ultimately reflect their own power. In this particular case, Benway attempts to speak identity into Carl’s being. Despite Carl’s admission of heterosexuality, that he’s “always interested [himself] only in girls” and even has a girl he plans to marry, Benway uses a variety of tactics to make him confess otherwise (159). In a room filled with green light, he is asked to ejaculate into a jar beside “a cold, brutal fuck of a nurse” while “something... watch[es] his every thought and movement with cold sneering hate, the shifting of his testes, the contractions of his rectum” (160). He is shown pictures of girls, asked to choose the one he likes, then told, “these girls... are really *boys*” (163). Benway’s voice is “strangely flat and lifeless, a whispering junky voice... Carl [feels] ashamed. [He] had never been spoken to like that in his adult life” (160-61). Through language, Benway enacts control over Carl in the process of identification.

Metatextual institutions such as the allegorical Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis hold subliminal power in our own lives. Indeed, they, too, seem to flood our minds with delusory images like green flares firing off in our skulls. In our blind faith, we become disoriented, don’t know which way to turn, which door to open, until the Benways of our world are “barely audible,” yet internalized, “the whole room... exploding out into space” (165). Through textual imagery, Burroughs reveals that the true perversity lies not in his pages but in the network of discourse that seeks to define and objectify all human experience.<sup>7</sup>

In “Notes from the Orifice: Language and the Body in William Burroughs,” Robin Lydenberg further highlights Burroughs’s implications of the very violence of language when she discusses another graphic metaphor for the Senders’ hostile takeover—the talking asshole. To recall the routine, “Ordinary Men and Women,” we hear Benway describe the demise of a carny man who teaches his anus how to talk. At first, the man controls his body and treats the orifice as a ventriloquist would his dummy, but, after some time, the asshole begins speaking on his own. Soon, it wishes to partake in every sort of human activity. It wants to eat, drink, kiss, and, ultimately, demands equal rights. Benway finishes the story:

“Finally it talked all the time day and night, you could hear him for blocks screaming at it to shut up, and beating it with his fist, and sticking candles up it, but nothing did any good and the asshole said to him: ‘It’s you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don’t need you anymore. I can talk and eat *and* shit.’

“After that he began waking up in the morning with a transparent jelly like tadpole’s tail all over his mouth. This jelly was what the scientists call un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue, which can grow into any kind of flesh on the human body... So finally his mouth sealed over, and the whole head would have amputated spontaneous... except for the *eyes*, you dig. That’s the one thing the asshole *couldn’t* do was see. It needed the eyes. But nerve connections were blocked and infiltrated and atrophied so the brain couldn’t give orders any more. It was trapped inside the skull, sealed off. For a while you could only see the silent, helpless suffering of the brain behind the eyes, then finally the brain must have died, because the eyes *went out*,

and there was no more feeling in them than a crab's eye on the end of a stalk." (111-12)

Lydenberg suggests that this episode, in particular, symbolizes the violent potential of language. Interestingly, through Lydenberg's analysis, we realize that it is not only the talking anus that represents the evil of sending, but the carny man as well. Lydenberg suggests that "the carny man's routine [is] symptomatic of the mind's need to dominate nature and the body...From its superior position, the mind mocks the body's weaknesses, its needs and dependencies" (57-58). What is really at play, then, for Lydenberg, is the false opposition created by language in the mind/body dichotomy. She asserts "beneath the Rabelaisian joke of a talking anus lies an ominous tale of control and domination, a tale of the struggle between the body and mind" (57). Neither term is meant to operate as sender to the other nor is one to be privileged. It is the very slash between the two words that is tantamount to a surgeon's scalpel as it seeks to control through amputation and removal. As we look to the carny man and his anus, neither has been liberated but rather both have been conquered by language that dominates. Lydenberg, moreover, asserts:

The telegraphic urgency of these scenes reflects the eruption of chaos in this dual structure of human life. Burroughs populates [his] stories with concrete embodiments of every possible imbalance of this dual system: from paralyzed bodies numbed by the abstractions of religion and romance, to paralyzed minds imprisoned by the body's physical cravings. (59)

The subsumation of the carny man's mind by the Sender, which is, in this case, the body, is but one instance in many that implies that language as not such a civil mechanism, after all, but rather brutal. Lydenberg

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further suggests, "In the context of language as in the context of the body, all binary structures—all *relationships*—lead to dismemberment, amputation, death of the organism" (62).

When Lydenberg identifies language as the "central weapon of the struggle," we are compelled to reexamine the origins of western thought (57). Platonic *logos* and its metaphysical notions of Divine Reason, its Forms and Ideas, behold the powerful engines of civilization. As we realize how noisy they've become, we wonder how we've coped for so long without covering our ears. We may also see our own complicity with the networks of discourse that define us. Lydenberg suggests that Burroughs "liberates the reader from the mechanical fixity and stasis of conventional language as he reveals the gaps, interstices that are compulsively filled in and covered over" by Undifferentiated Tissue (70). Lydenberg indeed sees *Naked Lunch* as the offering of a cure: "The strategy of resistance of Burroughs's metonymic and cut-up prose is to turn the enemy's weapons against itself, to use these same orifices as the means for escape" (72). This is not so true for the carny man, or his anus, but it may certainly be true for us as we realize ourselves as potential "marks" and separate sending from facts.

In "The Postmodern Anus: Parody and Utopia in Two Recent Novels by William Burroughs," Wayne Pounds complicates Lydenberg's reading of the carny man episode when he sees the man's consummation by the body as evidence of a positive takeover. In a postcolonial reading, Pounds views the talking anus as an allegory for Burroughs's vision of Utopia. The carny man, for Pounds, is a Sender, a control addict, who, after teaching his anus to speak, represses its voice. Rather than seeing the talking asshole as a metonym for the vile body, or as a representative of the violence of language, Pounds views it as a voice from the margins of society, the voice of the Third-World and the inner city ghetto (626). Considering his postcolonial stance, Pounds quotes Edward Said when

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he asserts, "In opposition to this massive discourse of exclusion, expressed in the sanctioned norms of novelistic representation and authorized by the institutions of state culture, Burroughs parodies the authoritarian word and gives voice to what culture has excluded: 'anarchy, disorder, irrationality, bad taste, and immorality'" (616). The asshole in *Naked Lunch* thus represents the beginning of anarchy and the reclamation of subjective voice.<sup>8</sup>

In similar fashion to Lydenberg, Pounds also suggests how, through *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs attempts to liberate society's objects from its "fixed authoritarian discourse" (616). But, for Pounds, the talking asshole represents the possibility of future triumph. To quote Mikhail Bakhtin, he states, "the body of carnival is 'a body in the act of becoming'" (616). In the celebration of degradation, creation is possible. The otherwise vile hole actually works to consume what is genuinely vile for Burroughs, the Senders, themselves, who constitute the myriad types of authority in society. When the Undifferentiated Tissue takes over—the un-D.T. of Burroughs's text—the former "marks" are vindicated from their controllers, that is, the colonists, the white bourgeoisie, the capitalists, the media, the law, or whoever they may be. *Naked Lunch*, Pounds asserts, is the first work of many in which Burroughs "contributes its allegories to the mapping of the cultural imperialism of the world" (627).

Pounds further contends,

[T]he image in Burroughs seeks not to mimic a reality drained of political content but rather to recharge the image by revealing its political source, which is to say its function as ideology. In Burroughs's fiction the repressive forces in charge of the Reality Studios produce reality. Allegorically, they produce ideology, in the Althusserian sense, an imagined relation to real conditions. (627)

Thus, we see how even the most vile symbols in *Naked Lunch* hold

progressive value. Through Pounds's reading of the carny man routine, we realize the possibility for dialogue as opposed to the mimicry of one Sender's monologue. Resistance is indeed possible when the "marks" of the underworld become informed. When equipped with the facts, they no longer need to remain under ideology's dominion. In this same sense, as Burroughs "exemplifies [his] power to rewrite the symbolic codes and help establish alternative discourse" he offers all subjects, especially his readers, a cure (628).

Through writing and publishing *Naked Lunch* and thus treating "the public health problem number one," we realize how Burroughs considers himself our own metatextual Factualist. Paradoxically, however, as he makes us wary of all types of sending, he provokes us to be cautious of his own art. Now that we are *wised up*, we question the distinction between his form of discourse and that of the Senders in charge of "Reality Studios." On this point, Loewinsohn reminds us of the Factualist function: "[They] behave like the Bad Guys—except they don't work to maintain control. On the contrary, as Factualists, they work to expose 'the facts,' especially the scams and control systems of the Bad Guys who prey on the marks" (565). Loewinsohn views Burroughs's writing as a *point of resistance* rather than as another form of sending. On his own behalf, Burroughs states, in his "Atrophied Preface," "I am a recording instrument...I do not presume to impose 'story,' 'plot,' 'continuity'...I may have limited function" (184). In similar fashion to his Factualist narrator, Burroughs suggests his intention is to provide facts, alone. If he mediates or interprets in any way so as to color the reader's experience, he will only be another control addict sending ideology into the world in order to somehow subdue it. To further distinguish Burroughs's project, Skerl suggests that the one function of his satire is the destruction of imposed meaning and value. Traditionally, satire has been used to offer up some sort of moral standard, but *Naked Lunch*, Skerl claims, "attacks

without implying any positive standard" (46). She suggests that, when Burroughs exposes, dismantles, but *does not rebuild*, he excludes himself from the status of a Sender.

Loewinsohn recalls, however, Burroughs's own acknowledgment that concerns all works of art: "Ironically, as Burroughs makes clear, Senders also include artists who are more than capable of confusing 'sending' with 'creation': 'They will camp around screeching "A new medium" until their ratings drop off"' (576). Through his own words, Burroughs implicates himself. Moreover, the fact that we can be *wised up* to see what is *really* on the end of our forks, *wised up* to realize certain fixed and concrete facts, suggests a positive standard. When sending aligns with evil, in the novel, we can only conclude that facts align with all that is good. Burroughs indeed implies a right way of thinking in the revelation of what is wrong. Although through his form, or anti-form rather, we recognize Burroughs's strides to undermine his own authority as he desires the imagery to speak for itself without mediation, ultimately, *his* words still fill the page. The ordering of the routines and the very content of themes entail some degree of masterly manipulation. So, we have not fully escaped. Even as he claims his duty is to *wise up the marks*, concerning Factualists like himself, he admits, "You can never be sure of anyone in the industry" (*NL* 123). Since there is no vaccination for the Virus of control, as humans, our resistance can only be provisional. In our susceptibility, we must stay one step ahead of our Hausers and O'Briens, like Factualist Agent Lee, well over the heads of our fellow "marked" men. Until there are no Senders left to resist, our final "occlus[ion] from space-time" is indefinitely postponed (181).

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Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that poststructural theory allows us to make meaning. Such an implication would, of course, lie in opposition to its basic tenets. As meaning-making beings, however, we tend toward this end and somehow poststructuralism brings our awareness to the very signposts for which we so earnestly search, to see how arbitrary they are.
- <sup>2</sup>The former term references Michel Foucault's theories as discussed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The latter refers to Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Both poststructural theorists examine networks of control that are founded in Western Civilization.
- <sup>3</sup>Lifted from Burroughs's "Deposition," this line references how, with the help of Jack Kerouac, the author titled his text. He states, "The title means exactly what the words say: NAKED Lunch—a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork" (199). In other words, we see the true nature of all we consume.
- <sup>4</sup>Quoted in Ron Loewinsohn's essay, "'Gentle Reader, I fain would spare you this, but my pen hath its will like the Ancient Mariner': Narrator(s) and Audience in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*," Burroughs reveals that, "to wise up the marks," is to "make people aware of the true criminality of [the] time" (562). Hauser and O'Brien are the two corrupt cops that track Agent Lee throughout the novel.
- <sup>5</sup>A "mark," Loewinsohn defines, "is the victim or potential victim of a confidence scam, someone who has invested his faith in the world as it's presented to him. To wise him up is to alert him to the duplicity of the world" (562).
- <sup>6</sup>Highlighting the dangers of misguided knowledge and thus implying the positive values of *good* and *evil* complicates poststructural readings that tend toward the dismantling of such binary oppositions.
- <sup>7</sup>Foucault discusses the power of normalizing judgment, especially concerning the classifications and labels we place on human sexuality, in his work *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*.
- <sup>8</sup>I say "beginning," here, since Pounds focuses primarily on two later novels, *The Place of Dead Roads* and *Cities of the Red Night*, which, he asserts, play out the Burroughsian anarchy that is not yet complete in *Naked Lunch*.

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A Review of Wenying Xu's Eating Identities: *Reading Food in Asian American Literature*

(Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008)

by Jade Hidle

Wenying Xu's *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* contributes to the burgeoning awareness of and scholarship on the prevalence of food in the likewise rapidly expanding body of Asian American literature. Whereas many food studies articles focus on one to two texts, Xu's book discusses the works of seven Asian American authors. Additionally, as the existing studies in this field are centered on ethnicity and race, Xu's primary purpose of *Eating Identities* is to broaden the discussion in order to reveal how the corporeal experiences of food, hunger, consumption, and orality correspond with the abstract concepts of not only race and ethnicity, but also gender, class, diaspora, and sexuality. Further, the political objective fueling Xu's study is the subversion of Western dualism that has, in its value of mind over body, marginalized those who have grown, produced, or been associated with food, thereby "restor[ing] personhood" to those people of color (4). Taking this complex approach to food studies, Xu pays warranted attention

to how Asian Americans, more than other groups in the U.S., have a particularly “special relationship” with food because 1) the racialization of Asian Americans has been achieved through the representation and appropriation of Asian foodways, and 2) food is linked to an Asian American history of “survival, adaptation, ingenuity, and hybridization” (8).

When addressing the numerous and complex identity-forming ideologies that Xu tackles, structure surfaces as a primary problem for both reader and writer. Xu, however, confesses this difficulty in organizing her study of intersections and overlaps, serving her analysis and reader well by demarcating her chapters according to the literary works on which they focus. While doing so creates inevitable echoes in themes, the organization ultimately makes the book more useful and accessible to its audience, especially as a reference for students of Asian American literature because it covers a number of works discussed in chapters that are easy to navigate.

By opening with the infamously dense psychoanalytic theories of Slavoj Žižek and Julia Kristeva, Xu’s first chapter initially appears to undermine her refreshing vow that her methodology in writing this book was to resist the singularity and implicit colonization that result from strict adherence to a particular theoretical position. And, although these and subsequent references to theory seem doubly inauspicious by limiting the audience to the erudite reader, Xu does not linger in the theoretical world of abstracts long, quickly focusing in on a more accessible close reading of how John Okada’s *No-No Boy* and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* “link the maternal with ethnic identity formation” (19). In this comparative analysis, Xu points out how enjoyment, represented through the maternal ritual of food, is thwarted in Okada’s novel, as the protagonist Ichiro’s assimilation into American eating habits alienates him from his mother’s Japanese foodways and thus his home; Ichiro’s rejection of Japanese food

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represents his self-loathing and, in turn, the fractured Asian American identity. Whereas Okada’s novel illustrates an identity conflict fueled by hatred for the maternal, Kogawa’s *Obasan* depicts how the maternal fulfills its potential for nurturance by guiding the protagonist, Naomi, from “repression to knowledge” (28). In these two novels, not only does the focus on the maternal provide a natural point of origin for Xu’s study, but also their shared theme of ambivalent identity, however differently depicted, serve as a foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Xu admits that the first chapter operates under the assumption that food is maternal and thus feminine, so she proceeds to complicate her discussion by purposefully devoting the subsequent chapter to how the work of Frank Chin exhibits the formation of ethnic *masculinity* through food. Xu points out that, in his waking life, the eponymous protagonist of Chin’s novel, Donald Duk, perpetuates American culture’s emasculation of Chinese men, resulting in a self divided, “torn between body (yellow and foreign) and mind (white and American)” (41). It is in Donald’s dreams, though, that he is able to embrace his identity, as descriptions of food preparation parallel descriptions of war, and, as Xu avers, the Chinatown kitchen of Donald’s dreams becomes “a symbolic site of violence and destruction” (45). However, like other scholars, Xu concedes that Chin’s restoration of Asian American masculinity is tempered, if not undermined, by his ironic subscription to the very stereotypes and power structures that he criticizes. Integral to Xu’s study of the relationship between food and gender is her point that Chin’s restoration of Asian American masculinity is achieved at the expense of women—flat female characters who are relegated to the sphere of domestic cooking. The misogyny underlying the female characters’ displacement, Xu maintains, intertwine food, gender, and class, a triangulation that the chapter further explores in Chin’s short fiction.

In debunking the prevailing myth that America is a “classless,” yet

predominantly middle-class society, Xu dedicates the first half of her third chapter to David Wong Louie's "literary, culinary tour de force," *The Barbarians*, which "trop[es] food to dramatize the interlocking tensions among race, gender, and class" (62). The first half of the chapter is devoted to class and ethnicity. Here, Xu analyzes how Sterling Lung, Louie's protagonist, is ambivalent to the foodways that represent his discomfort with his ethnicity and class position; this ambivalence results in seeing food through binaries, the same "slash" between "delectable and disgusting food [that] also cuts across white America and Asian America" (65). This personal ambivalence that Louie's protagonist has toward his identity thus exemplifies the greater social division between White Americans and immigrant Americans to, Xu argues, insist that class-based hierarchies are alive and well in America. It is this consistent placement of her literary analysis within a larger socio-political context that stresses the importance of these readings of Asian American literature and makes Xu's study so compelling. Additionally, in the latter half of the chapter dedicated to class and gender in Louie's novel, Xu raises cogent points about the manner in which the Asian American male body is the site at which gender, ethnicity, and class intersect to oppress the othered self (83). Xu closes her chapter on Louie by briefly discussing the minor character Yuk, a border-traversing flight attendant, as a representation of diasporic Asian identity—the concentration of the following chapter.

In her penultimate chapter, Xu confronts the transcendentalist metaphysics that poet Li-Young Lee uses in attempt to free himself from such labels as Asian American. As Xu argues that food functions as an ethnic signifier in Lee's work, belying the poet's view that ethnicity and transcendentalism are mutually exclusive, she also emphasizes that Lee, as an exile, finds and creates home through food. Illustrating the prominent role food plays in creating identities shaped by exile and diaspora, Xu traces recurring and prominent food images in Lee's poems—the seed that

"knows no destination but only the journey itself" (99), the hybridity of an eroticized persimmon, and salt, which invokes "intertwining pangs of homelessness and the relish of remembrance" (104). Xu's attention to the weighted, culturally-specific metaphysics of food in Lee's poems points to the poet's struggle to combat the subjugation of Asian Americans by actually being nourished by ethnic traditions rather than, as Lee would have it, completely renouncing them in the name of transcendentalism.

In her closing chapter, Xu discusses Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*. The chapter centers on Ng's Ruby Lee—a young Chinese American post-grad discovering her "queerness" in "urban space" (135)—and the transgressive sexual behavior of Truong's Binh—the poverty-stricken, racially alienated, self-mutilating, gay Vietnamese chef who cooks for the fictionalized Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Interesting about this chapter is that Truong's novel, the only Vietnamese American text discussed in *Eating Identities*, features a protagonist who, unlike the other characters studied in Xu's book, is a colonized Asian, but not an Asian American. Truong's Binh forges his identity in Vietnam and Paris, France, but not in the American landscape of class, sexuality, and ethnicity. Thus, even though Truong herself is Asian American, Xu makes a questionable decision to study a character whose identity is not formed within the social structures specific to America and the framework she has set up for her own study. While it is interesting that Xu examines an Asian American author's depiction of an Asian male in the land of his European colonizer, she does not clarify how doing so pertains to her study of Asian American identity. Seeing as how the Vietnamese represent one of the more recent waves of Asian immigrants to America, literary studies must acknowledge the Vietnamese contribution to Asian American literature.

Nevertheless, despite Xu's oversight with Truong's novel, the final chapter emphasizes the salient purpose of illustrating the fluidity of

identity and imposed power structures unhinged. By ending her book on this note, Xu allows another argument threaded throughout the book to crystallize: with fixed and finite limitations unbound, the multifaceted Asian American identity is one that explodes binaries, unveiling a constant process of becoming that warrants, if not demands, further attention and study. Just as the strengths of *Eating Identities* set a precedent for and provoke further scholarship in areas Xu has not yet explored, so too does her neglect of many Southeast Asian writers beg academic attention. While Xu's book addresses Asian American novels, short stories, and poetry, she does not mention, nor make any concessions to her omission of, the growth of the memoir and non-fiction among Vietnamese writers like Andrew X. Pham, Bich Minh Nguyen, Andrew Lam, and the Cambodian memoirist Loung Ung, all of whom render memories through experiences of food as work, survival, pleasure, intimacy, culture, and, most germane to Xu's study, identity.

Though not entirely comprehensive in its attention to food in various genres of Asian American literature, Xu's *Eating Identities*, with its complex yet accessible juggling of an array of critical approaches and inclusion of works that have been extensively studied placed alongside those that have not, establishes itself as a seminal text in the field of Asian American literary studies. Overall, Xu's study of Asian American literature's unique tethering of food and the self leaves readers with an indelible point: "As much as we eat identities, identities also eat us" (168).