“If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semi-ethical criterion of ‘sublimity’ misses the mark. For it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.”

T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"
CRITERION

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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Editors’ Note

Before we thank everyone who made the Winter 2018 issue of *Criterion* possible, Makayla would like to personally bid farewell to the journal she has been working with for the past three years. “I’ve learned more about editing, publishing, and teamwork from *Criterion* than I ever thought I would know, and the insights I’ve gained have already led me to incredible opportunities. I look forward to keeping up with the journal’s publications in the future.”

*Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* is an entirely volunteer-run student journal at Brigham Young University. We have had a remarkably dedicated staff of students this semester, and this issue would not have been possible without them. Each person brought a level of skill and enthusiasm which was invaluable to the publication process. We also want to express our thanks to Professor Mike Taylor, who excelled for the second semester in his new position as faculty advisor.

The theme for this issue of *Criterion* is Indigenous literature. We would like to thank Dr. Christine Bold from the University of Guelph for providing the forum prompt, “Approaching Indigeneity, Learning Modernity.” We are publishing five articles in response to the prompt, each providing a unique perspective on interpreting Indigenous literature. Three of these specifically address the works of Yankton Dakota Sioux writer and musician Zitkala-Ša, who shares a special relationship with BYU given that she wrote the first Native American opera in collaboration with a professor here at the university; many of her personal documents are housed here as part of the Gertrude and Raymond Bonnin Collection of the L. Tom Perry Special Collections repository.

It is nearly impossible to adequately thank everyone who contributes to the production of a student journal. That being said, we would like to thank the BYU Department of English for the resources and guidance
they provide. We would also like to thank Elias Gold for designing our cover. Most importantly, we would like to thank all of our readers for their interest in our journal. We hope that you will be inspired by the pieces that we publish.

We received an impressive pool of submissions in response to our open submission call and we are excited to publish the articles that best demonstrate both intriguing criticism and excellent writing. We are pleased to present you with articles on a broad variety of topics, ranging from literary analysis of hip hop lyrics to commentary on Shakespearean cross-dressing through the lens of contemporary drag-culture. We hope you enjoy the journal that we have prepared this semester.

Without further ado, we are proud to present our readers with the Winter 2018 issue of Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism.

Makayla Okamura and McKay Hansen
Silence and Self-Harm
Understanding Unconventional Voices in The Things They Carried

Sarah Cannon

For the soldiers in Tim O’Brien’s collection of short stories, The Things They Carried, silence is a catalyst for self-harm. After Dave Jensen breaks Lee Strunk’s nose in “Enemies,” O’Brien describes “a silent tension between them” (60), and it is inside that silence that Jensen decides to hurt himself. In “Notes,” Norman Bowker never speaks of his trauma either. After his suicide, his mother says, “Norman was a quiet boy . . . I don’t suppose he wanted to bother anybody” (154). Both Jensen’s self-inflicted violence and Bowker’s suicide are coupled with descriptions about silence and a lack of communication. These moments pull readers into the critical conversation surrounding war trauma and communication, which are commonly characterized as being incompatible. In fact, critics address this concept most often as the “incommunicability of war” (Smith). The theory argues that war is impossible to articulate because of how traumatic it is. Literary critic Susan Farrell, brings in a clinical perspective, explaining that “traumatic memories tend to be . . . ‘wordless,’” but then ironically explains that the best process of recovery “must involve a narrativization of traumatic events” (186). This paradigm is based on the dilemma that in order to heal, soldiers
must use words to articulate something that is wordless, which is impossible. It places soldiers behind the seemingly impassable barrier of silence on the road to healing.

While these critics read silence as an inevitable barrier toward healing, *The Things They Carried* actually suggests a more productive interpretation. Tim O’Brien’s novel explores the problems of this narrow definition and exposes an understanding and response to silence that contributes toward healing rather than hinders it. His words inform not only the literary conversation, but also the conversation regarding non-fictional U.S. veterans, who, according to a recent veteran suicide assessment, are twice as likely to die of suicide compared with non-veterans in the general population (Darkins 272). The novel reworks our understanding of silence until silence no longer barricades conversation, but facilitates it.

Despite the claims of truth being unattainable and war being incommunicable, *The Things They Carried* actually reveals the communicative power of war. O’Brien presents trauma not as an isolated event to be articulated, but rather a dimension of space—an alternate reality—that soldiers enter through the door of a disturbing event. Language, in this dimension, is not a functional medium of communication but a rigid container inside which the truth of trauma simply does not fit. Trauma’s dimensions prove to be incompatible with the chronological normalcy of spoken language, so self-imposed violence instead assumes the role of functional communication by becoming not merely an indicator of mental instability but also an expression of complex truth. These truths have a voice—not in sound, but in silence. By perceiving silence as something to listen to, healing is made possible, since healing, in the text, is the act of being heard. Listeners can hear and respond to the trauma in whatever language it may be, producing a level of understanding that is not simply the digestion of compact squares of information, but an assumption of responsibility on the part of the listener to accept that message in whatever form it may be and respond to it. Since silence is the organic voice of these truths, it is no longer a barrier of communication but rather a facilitator of it. War, therefore, is actually communicable—not despite the silence, but because of it.

Trauma in *The Things They Carried* is not a disturbing event itself, but rather a whole new dimension of reality, with a disturbing event acting only as the door. It is a place distinct from the chronological logic of day-to-day living where time becomes muddy and stable truths become slippery. This
is what makes it difficult for the soldiers in the story to “separate what happened from what seemed to happen” (67). They are trying to comprehend their experience in the context of a dimension that is foreign to them—a dimension where reality merges with illusion until they become one and the same. Soon, the soldiers no longer try to separate reality from fiction but rather accept them as part of the same environment, which allows “what seems to happen [to become its own happening” (67). This language illuminates the idea that trauma is its own dimension, where the distinction between reality and illusion is irrelevant. The illusions become part of a new dimension—their “own happening.” The trauma is not the “subject of O’Brien’s work,” as described by critic Mark Heberle, but rather the “medium within which and out of which his protagonists are impelled to revisit and rewrite their life experiences” (xxi). In short, trauma is a destination: a world that soldiers can visit and the place they go to discover their stories. Rather than being the objective fact of the narratives, trauma is the thread from which they are woven.

O’Brien helps us see that, in this dimension, language is not a functional medium of communication but actually a rigid container inside which some truths simply do not fit. O’Brien shows us that despite the need to communicate war, “you can’t even tell a true war story” because “it’s just beyond telling” (68). War literature, as critic Lorrie Smith points out, seems to be defined by this paradox. She describes it as the “unbridgeable gap” between writer and reader that is created by the “impossibility of its task—the communication of the traumatic experience” (17). At first glance, it may be tempting to say that the reason for this communicative difficulty lies in the nature of trauma and the unfamiliarity of its dimension, but O’Brien’s emphasis on people and their inability to “tell” a true war story points directly to language as the culprit for the silence. Critic Elissa Greenwald points out that since the war, linguistic thinkers have also tackled this dilemma. She points to a particular poet—Adrienne Rich—who has actually attempted the “forging [of] a new language,” because she too recognizes the need to “form a new mode of truth-telling to counteract the distortions of official language during the war” (97). Conventional language simply cannot express the realities that Vietnam imposed on the United States and, more specifically, its veterans. Language is not an easy medium of communication, but instead a rigid non-container of truth. In the end, it is not war that is incommunicable, but conventional language that is unable to effectively communicate.

O’Brien then shows that the medium of communication for trauma is not language but action, namely self-imposed violence. Before his suicide,
Norman Bowker tries to tell Tim how frustrated he is about not being able to talk about his feelings, but the full sense of this frustration is not realized until the narrator says: “Eight months later he hanged himself” (154). This tragedy is packed with a deeply intense message of pain, which we realize too late was overlooked, despite Bowker’s attempts at explaining it through language. The suicide itself becomes a medium of communication that is able to reach depths outside the range of language. The physical body can then be considered, as critic Ashley Green describes, as “the text by which incommunicable trauma expresses its presence” (3). If the body is the form of text, communication is no longer abstract; it is tangible. It is something can be touched, heard, seen, and felt. It is a three-dimensional message, unlike language, which could be considered flat and linear in comparison. This three-dimensional quality is what makes it compatible with trauma, since it is also three-dimensional. The integrity of the message does not have to be filtered, processed, and tailored to fit the rigid container of language, but can be expressed directly onto the skin, defining self-imposed violence as a sincere form of communication for trauma.

Seeing self-imposed violence operate under this functional definition shows us that it is not merely an indicator of mental instability but also an expression of complex truth. Readers unacquainted with trauma may find it strange that the soldiers “found release by shooting off their own toes or fingers,” because we don’t normally see self-harm as serving any sort of functional purpose (21). However, this excerpt helps us see that the violence provides a functional pain through which the truth of trauma can be communicated and, in that moment, released. Sometimes the only time that outsiders will comprehend the pain of trauma, as articulated by critic Janice McLane, is “when the entire body ‘cries’—when it bleeds from a cut” or another form of pain (114). The fact that no other form of communication can accurately capture the essence of that pain reveals how complex the message is. The medium is a message of confusion and contradiction—a pain that relieves. This paradox becomes the soldiers’ medium of communication because they live in a contradictory reality, a place where trauma blurs the lines of real and imagined until they become indistinguishable. That contradictory reality is most authentically expressed as a symbol through self-harm, since self-harm is also a contradiction—a release from trauma through inflicting
another kind of pain. The paradoxical nature of self-harm exposes its communicative capabilities in the context of trauma.

Silence is the voice of this trauma; it catalyzes self-harm and thus causes communication. O’Brien describes the silence as something audible: “‘Hear that quiet, man?’ [Sanders] said, ‘That quiet—just listen. There’s your moral’” (74). O’Brien does not suggest that silence has a voice that would make noise if it had the chance, but rather that silence is the voice—the thing to listen to. This idea of silence as a voice runs parallel with McLane’s argument that sometimes “there is a voice but not coming out of your mouth,” which leads to the formation of a “mouth on your skin”—alluding again to the catalytic relationship between silence and self-harm (114). Because silence is a voice, it is not something to be ignored, but acknowledged and listened to. The way Elroy Berdahl responds to Tim’s silence in “On the Rainy River” shows how responding to silence is possible, and works as a functional means of communication. Berdahl never pries because, despite the fact that “words [are] insufficient,” he still understands—“not the details, of course, but the plain fact of crisis” (49). Tim’s silence is enough for Berdahl to assess the situation and respond in a meaningful way, demonstrating through the placement of the emergency fund on the door that “the man knew” (51). The silence itself transfers energy, tension, and other indicators of crisis that language never would have been able to explain. It does not suggest incommunicability, but rather facilitates communication. It is not a barrier to communication, but a voice.

Recognizing silence as a voice is what makes healing possible, since healing, in the text, is the act of being heard. It is not a medical transformation from broken to whole, but rather an empathetic understanding and validation that can only come from the listener. The soldier Mitchell Sanders’s observation that “nobody listens” is not a literal observation of a lack of aural activity but an acknowledgement that there are silent implications underneath his stories that he yearns for others to understand despite the fact that they cannot be adequately spoken (73). This passage implies that being heard would satisfy Sanders’ compulsive need to tell and retell stories that simply cannot be adequately expressed through language. It would provide resolution, rest, and closure. Because the message is silent, it requires a type of hearing that does not come from the ears, but rather the empathetic depths of the soul. It is the type of hearing that Norman Bowker would have benefited from had his father responded to Norman’s clumsy attempts to silently express his
pain with a simple “I hear you” (140). He could have been the “sympathetic listener” that Susan Farrell claims is necessary “for the healing process to begin” (86). Healing from trauma does not come about naturally over time, as does a physical wound on the flesh. It is not a spontaneous natural reaction, but rather a deliberate empathetic witnessing, dependent on the investigation and communicative reciprocation of the listener.

If being heard is healing, then being ignored is death. It forces a feeling of nonexistence upon he who wishes to communicate, causing a sort of emotional death which O’Brien shows is distinct from the physical. This type of death is explored in the novel during “The Lives of the Dead” (213). Linda is a friend of Tim’s who died when he was young and continues to appear and speak to him in his dreams. O’Brien exposes that ignoring is a form of death when Linda, even though she is dead, contradictorily says she is “not dead,” except for the moments she feels she is “inside a book that nobody’s reading” (232). The moment she feels the most dead is when she is being ignored. In fact, she does not even consider herself dead when she is being remembered, despite her physical decay. This dialogue shows that being ignored is itself a layer of death, one level beyond the physical, and that it is capable of afflicting all souls, whether they are physically alive or dead. This sort of death exists in all dimensions, and comes about because of the lack of responsive communication. It happens as a result of the irresponsible assumption that silence is always a void, and therefore, something to be ignored. Being ignored is an emotionally crushing death that puts the speaker inside a box that no amount of expression can free him from.

Ignoring—the refusal to communicate—introduces a new type of silence, which is not a facilitator for communication, but rather a form of war. This type of silence is not the voice of trauma; it is the silence that potential responders to trauma force onto the victim by ignoring him. It places a wall between the responder and the victim, leaving the victim alone in a fight between himself and his thoughts. Ambiguity thrives on this battlefield and drives the victim toward self-destruction. This is why Jensen says it was like “fighting two different wars” when he was trying to make sense of the silence between him and Lee Strunk after their fight (60). He is referring not only to the physical war he is fighting, but also the war going on in his mind as he attempts to find some sort of clarity in the ambiguous “silent tension” between him and Strunk (60). In this war, his mind struggles to grasp onto certainty that is being forcefully concealed. It is a war of mental role-play and
what-ifs in an attempt to stumble upon the truth, which proves unlikely since the other party is deliberately concealing it. In the battle with his thoughts, Jensen imagines worst-case scenarios: “a grenade rolling into his foxhole,” and “the tickle of a knife against his ear” (60). These scenarios eventually win the mental war, and Jensen self-destructs. The scenarios convince him it would be better to “break his own nose,” rather than seek reconciliation (60).

The ambiguity created by the act of ignoring is a dangerous space because of the war it creates between the victim and his own mind. It pits the victim against himself until the anxiety is too much to bear and he turns to self-harm as a solution—a level of pain he can control rather than the alternative which is unknown to him and possibly worse. It launches the victim onto an inescapable war inside his own mind.

When this communicative blockade happens in the text on a larger scale—between veterans and citizens—it becomes more than an internal battle; it is a civil war. Citizens block out veterans by refusing to engage in meaningful dialogue about the war effort, which creates an us-versus-them dynamic that spawns a civil war in the sense of national disunity. In their colloquial conversation, citizens in the novel silence the reality of the war by sticking to “simpleminded patriotism,” “prideful ignorance,” and romanticized “love-it-or-leave-it platitudes” (43). Despite the fact that they are speaking, they are simultaneously silencing other aspects of truth. Simpleminded patriotism silences the controversial aspects of the war. Prideful ignorance silences a more holistic and empathetic understanding of the veterans. Love-it-or-leave-it platitudes silence the soldiers’ complex moral code and simultaneous breaking of that code when they are forced to kill. By defaulting to these fallacies, civilians unwittingly silence the truth. This creates false perceptions of the soldiers’ involvement in the war, which further corrodes national unity. Citizens begin to make assumptions based on these perceptions that cause them to greet returning veterans disrespectfully with the juvenile name-calling of “baby killer,” spitting, and a general feeling of rejection, as reported by real veterans in an interview by the New Jersey Vietnam Memorial Foundation (“What Was it Like”). This was the ultimate manifestation of how far apart veterans and civilians had grown as a result of faulty communication and misunderstanding. In return, this experience taught veterans that, according to Jerry Lembcke’s review of the movie Coming Home, “this society is a lie and now this society does not want to deal with them” (68). The communicative disconnect was
no longer a matter of careless expression and inaccurate assumptions, but instead the beginning of a societal war.

In the text, understanding is more than just the digestion of information; it is an assumption of responsibility. It is a commitment from the listener to accept the message in whatever form of language it is compatible with. Understanding does not have conditions based on the articulative ability of the speaker or the functionality of the words. Exchanges in the text like the one between Bowker and the employee at Mama Burger in “Speaking of Courage” show us how unreasonable expectations in communication can prevent meaningful exchanges. The employee tries several times to get Bowker to open up about what is on his mind, but in a frustrated realization that “he could not talk about it,” Bowker declines the invitation to speak and the employee sheds all traces of responsibility in the communicative effort by saying “your choice” and tuning out (147, 146). By blaming the failed conversation on Bowker’s silence, the employee shifts responsibility away from herself. She denies the language through which Bowker’s trauma needs to communicate, which is not words, but silence. She places an unreasonable expectation on Bowker to simply “choose” to articulate something that cannot be embodied by language. As we see in the text, this only leads to misunderstanding and, later, Bowker’s suicide. Elroy, on the other hand, does not have unreasonable expectations. Instead, he takes responsibility in the communicative effort by accepting Tim’s silence for what it is and responds in a meaningful way by placing the emergency fund on the door (51). He “never pried” because he “understood that words were insufficient,” and he was committed to respond regardless of words unspoken (49). This type of understanding is not merely a cognitive processing of information; it is an assumption of responsibility in the communicative effort. It is a commitment to keep going—to keep pushing through the silence or confusion until finding the right response, which reaches toward the possibility of societal peace, veteran integration, and individual healing. This understanding is a commitment that would close the rift between veterans and citizens. As such, it is our responsibility as listeners and citizens to engage in the communicative effort.

Tim O’Brien helps us see that while trauma may be wordless, language is not the only means of communication. Silence is also a voice, and by listening to it, we can be a witness to others’ trauma, which will help them on the road to healing. Rather than forcing trauma to fit into the rigid container of language, the listener can accept its message in whatever form it communicates.
Expanding our definition of communication to include silence requires that we also consider on whom rests most of the communicative responsibility—the speaker, or the listener. Many American habits of communication place the responsibility on the speaker. We typically expect an articulate speaker and a clear message in a familiar language. However, when silence is the voice, a large part of the communicative responsibility naturally falls on the listener. By redefining communication in the context of trauma, *The Things They Carried* invites readers to assume this responsibility; it invites us to hear the voice of trauma, listen to the silence, respond to it, and, as listeners, accept the responsibility to make these exchanges matter.
Works Cited


“Sometimes I almost forget I’m a Negro,” says Irma Jefferson in *Negroland* (Jefferson 41). This statement makes it sound as if Irma was ashamed of her race. However, her daughter Margo Jefferson later avers that in saying this Irma was actually carving out a space for herself that was free from the ever-present consciousness and stereotypes of race. Irma, along with other mothers in contemporary African American literature—like Esch from Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* and Kathryn from Tracy K. Smith’s *Ordinary Light*—carves out a space for herself by declaring independence from old, deep-seated stereotypes of black women.

Why should it be necessary for these mothers to make a space for themselves in the first place? Since slave times, stereotypes of black women have been used to dehumanize black women and corner them into narrow roles. Three stereotypes in particular are lasting and pervasive. First, of Aunt Jemima fame, enters the character of Mammy. Mammy is a stereotype that portrays a good, faithful, cheerful household slave. She is a surrogate mother to the white children of the house. According to Jessie Parkhurst,
she is devoted to her white family, even more than to her true, black family (361). This stereotype was used to justify slavery by suggesting that slaves consented to and enjoyed their enslavement. Besides Aunt Jemima, most people are familiar with Mammy through the character of that title in the film version of Gone with the Wind. Maria St. John avers that this film is a twentieth-century example of white America’s fascination with Mammy (127). Hattie McDaniel received an Oscar for playing the character, though according to Frost many black Americans objected to her participating in the perpetuation of the stereotype (47). In stark contrast to the Mammy figure is the Jezebel. Rupe Simms characterizes the Jezebel figure as a promiscuous, sexually voracious black woman. This stereotype was used beginning in slave times to justify the rape of black women—an old version of “she was asking for it” (Simms 882–3). These two stereotypes, Mammy and Jezebel, allow oppressors to justify their use of black women as slaves, servants, and prostitutes. The third is a caricature that seeks to place blame on black women. Patricia Bell-Scott defines this caricature, a Sapphire, as a black woman who is masculine, angry, and domineering, especially to her husband. This stereotype has been used to explain degradation of black families (85).

These three stereotypes have been treated extensively in the social sciences, with discussion of the Mammy going back at least as far as Parkhurst’s essay in 1938. However, since these stereotypes have been around for so long, they are sometimes seen as historical stereotypes that have been replaced in modern representations by new stereotypes, such as the angry black woman and the welfare queen. It is a mistake to discount the role of these older stereotypes, though, because they continue to haunt expectations of what black women are or should be, albeit less directly than they did in the past. Because of their continued relevance, in this paper I will consider the treatment of these stereotypes in three works of modern African American literature: Negroland by Margo Jefferson, Salvage the Bones by Jezmyn Ward, and Ordinary Light by Tracy K. Smith. These works engage lingering stereotypes—these ghosts of expectations—and seek to dispel them either by debunking them or by revising and reclaiming them. The mothers in the above works construct their concept of black motherhood by making their conduct and thoughts antithetical to the stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, even when they may outwardly appear to fit the stereotypes. Two of the works in question are memoirs; one (Salvage the Bones) is a novel. They provide a case study for how contemporary
authors are grappling with stereotypes of black women and mothers. The two memoirs focus on mothers who purposefully refute stereotypes while simultaneously transcending them, whereas the novel directly engages with a stereotype in order to nuance it. This suggests that when recounting true events, black writers may feel the need to show off the best in black mothers, while fiction gives the liberty to reclaim, come to terms with, and complicate negative images and stereotypes.

Resisting Mammy

It could be supposed that black mothers, such as those being discussed in this paper, would be the most likely candidates for being Mammyesque, but the mothers in these works bear little, if any, resemblance to her. They are mothers without being Mammies. After all, a Mammy is not quite a mother. According to Maria St. John,

Mammy both is not and is the black mother of the white child she tends. That is, she is taken for the mother at the level of fantasy (where racial barriers do not hold sway) at the same time she assumes a role distinct from that of mother at the level of cultural representation (where race is regulated and reproduced). (129)

That is to say, a Mammy can never be a mother because her “children” have, or at least will grow up to have, authority over her because they are white and she is black. Though Parkhurst avers that “‘the mammy disciplined the children’ and maintained her attitude of authority toward them even after they were grown,” we cannot assume that she holds the full disciplinary and psychological power that a mother holds over her children (363). There are always limits on her influence due to her subordinate status. As Rupe Simms puts it, “Although they [the master and mistress] indulge her becoming a bit fussy at times and intruding into household affairs, she never forgets ‘her place’” (882). She may act as the mother, and the white family may feel affection for her, but she is ultimately subordinate. Certainly an infant, inasmuch as it understands abstract concepts, will consider the Mammy that suckles it as its mother, but there will always come a time when the child realizes the difference in social status between itself and its Mammy (Parkhurst 361). Additionally, the Mammy is primarily seen as caring for white children, selflessly loving the family she is subservient to while of necessity neglecting her own family. Her “selflessness” towards those not
closely related to her is seen as a virtue. However, the mothers in these texts demonstrate that their idea of virtue is caring for their own first, not clamoring for white adulation at the expense of their own children.

Irma Jefferson from *Negroland* refuses the Mammyish tendency to prefer her white “children” over her own children by refusing to nurture white children. When two white neighbor children who were encouraged by their parents “to have as little as possible to do with” Irma’s daughters nevertheless decide to make use of the Jeffersons’ swing set while the daughters are napping, Irma says, “Margo and Denise are taking their naps. They won’t be down to play, so you can go home” (85). She sends them away three times over the course of three weeks. Her words imply that had the children been playing with Margo and Denise, her response would have been different. As stated elsewhere, the two had plenty of white friends at school. However, when Irma detects that white children would lay claim on anything that she has, as a mother, given her own children, she promptly refuses them. Parkhurst says that “the ‘Black Mammy’ often nursed her master’s child at one breast and her own at the other” (358). Irma does no such thing, even symbolically, and even with something as seemingly harmless as a swing set. She defies Mammy by reserving all of her mothering (and hers is time-consuming, diligent, intentional mothering) for her own children and not consenting to being appropriated in the slightest by children that are not her own.

In contrast to the Mammy, who is doting and caring, but ultimately powerless over her adult charges, Kathryn from *Ordinary Light* commands both obedience and a reverential awe from Tracy well into Tracy’s adulthood. Kathryn is able to exert her authority because she is a black mother mothering her own black child, instead of a submissive black almost-mother trying to bring up a white child who has power over her due to race. Though Kathryn does not act the dictator, it is clear that the power in the relationship goes only one way. Thus, the book celebrates a mother who does not have to engage in the Mammy power dynamic and is free to bring up her own child by her own authority.

Kathryn’s power over her daughter results in Tracy learning from a young age to respect her mother absolutely. When Tracy is young, she and her mother read a book called *Little Conversations with God* that teaches her “how truly simple it was . . . to do what is right” (Smith 16). In one story, a girl avoids being bitten by a snake because she obeys her father’s
command to stay still. In this context of learning absolute truth and learning to obey God and parents perfectly, Tracy says, “I’d sometimes let my eyes drift across her face, taking her in out of habit, memorizing her, breathing in her smell” (17). In the context of learning obedience, Tracy also learns adoration. She also mentions that she was naturally obedient, saying, “She’d give me instructions once, and I’d do just as she said, never considering the alternative” (41).

Even as a young adult whose unmixed admiration towards her mother has turned to frustration, Tracy understands her mother’s authority. When discussing going on a vacation with her boyfriend, Tracy says, “My parents had agreed to let me go,” even though they do not approve (Smith 268). Even in her rebellion, Tracy seeks her mother’s permission. Whenever she rebels, she is acutely conscious that she is disappointing her mother. She talks of briefly returning to church, partly because “I was certainly tired of telling my mother no each time she asked if I was going to church” (247). When her mother “asks” her to help with a Bible school class, Tracy refers to it as “the favor I’d have no choice but to agree to” (260). These examples demonstrate that even during her most sullen and rebellious period, Tracy recognizes the authority of her mother.

This real authority that Kathryn holds over even an adult Tracy is a far cry from the boastful lip service adult that charges paid to their Mammies. Parkhurst records such lip service: “A Southerner of the upper class delighted in saying that he was taught his manners by his ‘Black Mammy’” (363). This boast may have had something to do with his affection for his nurse—as Micki McElya says, “black women . . . surely formed emotional ties to white family members at times”—but it had more to do with his own ego: with being rich enough to have had a mammy, with having good manners, or simply with having something shocking and interesting to say. Thus, Kathryn defies the Mammy stereotype (though she is domestic and loving as Mammy is) by being not only a loving mother but also an authoritative one.

There is little of interest to say about the relationship Esch from Salvage the Bones has with Mammy, since she is young, slight, and domestically inexperienced, has no relationship with white people worth considering, and has not yet given birth in the course of the novel; as such, she is not even in the running to be considered a Mammy. She has a more interesting relationship to the next stereotype.
Both Smith and Jefferson portray their mothers as anything but servile Mammies. They are powerful enough to command their own children and to refuse mothering white children. These mothers are purposeful and intelligent about their mothering, in contrast to Mammy, who is seen as dependent and only capable of tending to material needs. Because these books are memoirs, they declare, “This is how black mothers really are.” They argue the silliness of entertaining the concept of Mammy, when two honest-to-goodness black mothers have so very little in common with her.

Revising Jezebel
Though the pieces of Jefferson, Ward, and Smith focus on mothers, their mother figures are also women. Thus, these mothers engage with stereotypes of black women in general, not just stereotypes specific to black mothers. The Jezebel is one such stereotype, a stereotype that slanders the sexuality of black women. Jefferson and Smith record Irma and Kathryn as women who belie the Jezebel stereotype by being honorable and sexually conservative. They are both upright women who are married to the fathers of their children. Kathryn is a devout Christian who is moral in every sense of the word. She devotes her life to God. She is extremely sexually conservative and shy, witnessed by the fact that she has to have a manual (which she conceals and covers in newspaper) tell her that “Nice Girls Do” have sex (342). She reflects the example of Alice Sewell and other slaves, who snuck into the woods to worship God. Simms declares of such women, “They defied the stereotypical portrayal of themselves as Jezebels. They were not immoral women burning with sexual desire for any man—black or white. Instead, they were pious Christian women hoping to serve God and the rest of humankind and risking physical punishment to worship their Lord” (894). Kathryn considers Christianity not just an important piece of her own life but also an integral part of raising her children. She uses her own piousness as a tool for bringing up well-adjusted, righteous, and successful children. In addition, she resists sexual advances made on her by anyone other than her husband, as demonstrated when an old man in her neighborhood grabs her breast. Not only does she not enjoy the advance, but she determines to use her power and the threatened power of the police to end the problem and ensure her safety. She thus wields a power over her body that slave women
simply did not have. She does not have the heart of a Jezebel, nor will she be mistaken for one by the old men of the neighborhood.

Irma makes herself antithetical to a Jezebel, or whore, by always acting as a lady. Jefferson writes that when the Jeffersons are forced to stay in a slovenly hotel room, she attempts to wash the scummy bathtub with hotel soap and cloth. She gives elaborate parties and has a love affair with fine clothes. But most of all, she behaves with ceaseless decorum and teaches her children to do the same. In fact, a main purpose of the entire book seems to be to reveal to the world the existence of upper-class blacks who live for accomplishment and appearance. Jefferson uses her mother as a case in point to describe the society that she lives in. Irma’s status as a lady disrupts the Jezebel stereotype. However, several times throughout the memoir, Jefferson reflects that the inhabitants of Negroland try too hard to disrupt stereotypes about them. She reflects, “If we placed too high a value on the looks, manners, and morals called the birthright of the Anglo-Saxon . . . White people wanted to be white just as much as we did” (51). They are accused of wanting to be “White White White White WHITE,” and Jefferson implies that this accusation is grounded. This book, in exposing a desire to overcompensate for “perceived deficiencies,” embodies the difficulty of using nonfiction to confront stereotypes—that is, being tempted to overdo it in order to save face (52). After reading these books, many black mothers might actually be discouraged if they need to work outside the home or if they conceived out of wedlock. Though Irma and Kathryn are worthy role models, they actually do little to free black mothers from feeling that they must be twice as good as white mothers.

Esch from Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* complicates the Jezebel stereotype rather than denying it outright. She loses her virginity when she is twelve, has sex with at least six boys, and is pregnant by the age of fifteen. From all outward appearances, Esch is a Jezebel. Until she starts having sex with Manny, she is always sexually available to any boy that approaches her. She even says that only two things come easily to her: swimming and sex. However, Ward allows us to have sympathy for Esch, someone we might otherwise judge and blame, by giving us access to her thoughts. Through her thoughts, we see that the nature of Esch’s sexuality is passive and emotional, rather than aggressive and physical, as a Jezebel’s would be. She says:

[Manny wanted the] girly heart that, before Manny, I’d let boys have because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it. I’d let boys have
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it because for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved.
But with Manny, it was different; he was so beautiful, and still he chose me,
again and again. He wanted my girl heart; I gave him both of them. (16)

This quote deserves significant analysis. The key phrase “because they
wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it” shows the reader that when
Esch lost her virginity to Marquise, her brother’s friend, it was because it
was “easier” to allow him to touch her breast, to see her genitals, and to keep
going than to say no and hear him ask “why not?” (23). Esch is extremely
passive and either feels afraid of displeasing anyone or has never been
taught that there is any value in refusing. To say that Esch wants sex would
be a stretch—she merely passively accepts it. This distinguishes her from
a Jezebel. Ward shows that even though Esch consents to have sex with
multiple men, she does not have a voracious sexual appetite. Instead, Ward
makes sure that readers cannot dismiss Esch as a Jezebel by characterizing
her as sexually passive.

In addition, the “girly heart” that the boys want from Esch is not her
heart, but her genitals. This is clarified when Esch says that she gave Manny
both of her hearts. The boys are not after her heart, and she is not in love with
them. If Esch has any motivation to have sex other than for apathy or fear of
confrontation, it is to momentarily feel cherished. However, she seeks more
than a generic closeness with Manny. “He wanted my girl heart; I gave him
both of them,” she says. That is to say, she gives him both the only heart he
seeks—her genitals—and her other, more traditionally metaphorical heart—
her love. She even stops being sexually available to other boys once she falls
in love with Manny, saying, “They ask, and I walk away because it feels like
I’m walking toward Manny” (57). It becomes even clearer that Esch has little
interest in the physical satisfaction of sex as she voluntarily gives it up once
she believes her emotional needs are being met by Manny.

Esch’s desire for sex is merely a misplaced desire to be loved and paid
attention to individually, attention she has lacked since her mother died. She
has been taught by society, possibly through the Jezebel stereotype itself, that
she is valueless. When she threatens to tell Randall that Manny is her baby’s
father, Manny says, “You think they don’t know you a slut?” (204). Esch is
labeled for her sexual activity, and having started to have sex, there is no
point in stopping; she already carries a stigma that predicts that no good will
come of her. Forgotten in a family of boys, Esch has not been taught to say no,
nor has she been cherished so as to feel valuable enough to say no. The text suggests that this would have been different had her mother survived. Esch imagines her mother’s eyes saying, “Don’t do it. Don’t become the woman in this bed, Esch” (222). Had her mother lived, she might have taught Esch how to avoid becoming that woman. Esch falls victim to the continued prevalence of the Jezebel stereotype because of what her family has not taught her and because of what society has taught her. Once she believes that she is “a slut,” she sees no value in trying to avoid being one. Esch ignorantly becomes the woman that those around her expect her to become.

Ward uses Esch to combat the Jezebel stereotype, though initially she seems to be a victim of it. After reading Esch’s thoughts throughout the book and coming to love her, readers are shocked to hear Manny call her a slut. That is not the character they have come to know and love. However, it could be disturbing for many readers to discover that without the help of the novel, they too may have dismissed someone in her situation as a slut. Ward uses this disconnect in the readers’ minds to question the validity of the Jezebel stereotype, a one-dimensional portrayal of a woman that concerns only her sexuality.

Reclaiming Sapphire

Just as the Jezebel stereotype slanders the sexuality of black women, so the Sapphire stereotype slanders their temperament and character. The Sapphire, a woman who is domineering and aggressive towards her husband and others, may even be seen as necessarily emerging from the Jezebel. A woman who acts as a Jezebel will eventually have children and is unlikely to have a supportive husband when she does. This situation may turn her into an aggressive, Sapphire-like mother. This relationship between the two stereotypes plays out in all three of the books. For example, since Irma and Kathryn have kept themselves from being Jezebels, they are also under no necessity to become Sapphires by coercing deadbeat husbands or supporting families on their own. Rather, they are supportive to their breadwinning husbands and excel in the domestic sphere instead of trying to compete in their husbands’ roles. They use their homemaking status and strong, nuclear families to be excellent mothers. Irma uses her time at home to teach her girls about their black heritage. Kathryn quickly quits her job as a teacher when she thinks Tracy is being harmed by her absence, thus
showing by her actions that she cares more about maintaining her family than dominating her family.

Esch is not a Sapphire, but she would like to be. Her extreme submissiveness comes into play in her relationship with the last stereotype: that of the Sapphire. Sapphire, who gets her name from the character in the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* series, controls everything in her relationships with men and bullies them until she gets her way (Walley-Jean 70). Esch controls nothing in her relationships, but she fantasizes about being a Sapphire-type figure. Ward speaks of Esch’s inability to actively seek out Manny’s attention, saying, “This girl waited because she wasn’t like the women in the mythology book, the women who kept me turning the pages: the trickster nymphs, the ruthless goddesses, the world-uprooting mothers” (15). Because Esch does not have a mother to teach her, she seeks out substitute examples of motherhood and womanhood, namely China and Medea, who are both Sapphire figures. China is no doting mother. She has to be persuaded by Skeetah to care for her puppies, and eventually she physically fights with and dominates the father of her puppies, just as a Sapphire is rough with her children and domineering in her relationship with their father. Medea, though initially submissive to Jason, eventually lashes out to kill his new wife—and her own children—to get revenge for Jason’s infidelity. Medea, like a Sapphire, is not above brutally treating her husband and children.

Throughout *Salvage the Bones*, Esch compares Manny to Jason and herself to Medea and wonders what it would be like to be Medea. This is an odd ideal to strive for, as Medea and Jason’s relationship is neglectful, violent, and ultimately a failure. Perhaps Esch understands from the beginning that Manny is using her as Jason uses Medea, and she desires only the courage to stop loving him or strike out at him or do anything but passively wait for him to never love her. Though Esch idealizes Manny and proves herself willing to be used in the hopes that he will eventually fall in love with her, she is certainly not deceived about the nature of their relationship. She acknowledges that Manny never looks at her or talks to her or kisses her; he only has sex with her. Alternatively, it is possible that Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*, where Esch reads the Jason and Medea story, is one of Esch’s only sources for love stories; if so, she may accept this warning tale as the norm for love, if not the ideal. Esch has no examples of happy, functional relationships in her life, and perhaps she has none in literature either.
In either case, Esch eventually stops waiting for Manny and takes charge of her life. Throughout the novel, Esch essentially places her pregnancy in Manny’s hands, wondering if he will pay attention to her and support her once he finds out he is to be a father. But when she tells Manny that she is pregnant and he rebuffs her, she begins to beat him up. In this scene, she stops hypothesizing what Medea felt like and says “this is Medea” (204). Esch no longer has to say that “she wasn’t like the women in the mythology book,” because she is acting just as Medea acted when she was jilted (15). She has become like the women in the mythology book. The book ends with her owning her pregnancy in a powerful way, like Medea or China would—or perhaps like Sapphire would. In her case taking responsibility for herself is imperative, and the image of Sapphire actually becomes positive, since Manny will not support her. She says of China, “She will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. . . . She will know that I am a mother” (258). She thinks of herself as pregnant many times in the novel, but only at the end does she commit to being, and calling herself, a mother. Because she finally realizes that Manny will not support her, she stops thinking of the pregnancy as a way to have a relationship with him and starts thinking of it as the beginning of her relationship with her child. Because she finally has a relationship (with her unborn child) that she can define herself, she is not passively waiting for society, her family, or Manny to tell her who she is anymore. She knows.

Ward uses Esch to reclaim the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes. She shows us why Esch becomes sexually active and shows us her value and humanity. We come to understand and sympathize with someone we might have otherwise overlooked. And given that Esch is going to be a single mother, she shows us the power required of a woman whose child’s father refuses to be involved. The Sapphire stereotype describes a woman that drives all her loved ones away through her personal power. Ward revises this: when a woman is neglected and abandoned, she will learn to have personal power, and that will help her children survive. Through her command of fiction, Ward does what neither of the memoir writers attempt. Instead of writing her mother figures to oppose stereotypes, she has her mother figures redefine and reclaim stereotypes for the benefit of black women at large. While Irma and Kathryn solidly refute all three classic stereotypes, Esch’s relationship to them is more nuanced. It might initially seem that Esch is the weak link in the chain of impeccable black women, but she actually does more to combat
the ghosts of stereotypes haunting the lives of real black women than the two nonfictional mothers do.

Jefferson and Smith portray their mothers in essentially positive lights. As Jefferson says in her memoir, “And (I was taught) you don’t tell your secrets to strangers—certainly not secrets that expose error, weakness, failure” (6). They do not reveal any weakness in their mothers that would play into the stereotypes. Even when the authors describe their mothers as imperfect, they are imperfect in ways that oppose the stereotypes: Kathryn is too righteous (in contrast to Jezebel), rendering her a bit judgmental; Irma is too loyal to her race (in contrast to Mammy), rendering her a bit suspicious. The fact that Irma and Kathryn have so little to do with the three stereotypes (at least the way they are portrayed) makes them ideal candidates for memoirs. They are safe to write about, and they give a good name to black mothers everywhere.

But what about good mothers who have a child out of wedlock or serve as maids to white families? There may be stories of other black mothers that have gone untold because the mothers have some features of the Mammy, or the Jezebel, or the Sapphire. Many potential authors may not trust the world with a story that it may simply use to reduce loved ones into stereotypes. Might you not refrain from writing about your mother because you fear that she would not be valued for all her qualities, but be read as just a black single mother? Even though such mothers may enjoy some presence in a memoir, many may refrain from writing memoirs to protect their mothers from those who would see them simplistically. Thus, examples of real black women will not be able to fully eradicate stereotypes, because they will either confirm some aspect of the stereotype or they will try too hard not to, thus leaving the stereotype looming in the background as something that a black woman must never be. This unhelpfully creates anti-stereotypes that are just as constricting as the stereotypes themselves.

Novels like *Salvage the Bones* are important in eradicating stereotypes because working with fictional characters removes the fear of judgment. No one is afraid of throwing their own mother (or anyone else) under the bus when writing a novel. In addition, there is no danger of giving a “real” example of a stereotype to unsympathetic readers to confirm their biases. Though there may still be some fear of revealing a weakness some African Americans have, at least the fear is less personal. The character of Esch is (somewhat ironically) a powerful tool in eradicating the Jezebel stereotype. Instead of denying outright that any black women may seem like Jezebels,
Ward says, in essence, “given that sexually active, pregnant, teenaged, black girls exist, how can I help people understand them as three dimensional?” While Irma and Kathryn debunk stereotypes by proving that there are black women who do not fit them, Esch goes much further in eradicating a stereotype by outwardly fulfilling it but still being a lovable, complicated human. As a fictional character that people cannot blame, Esch blazes a trail for the acceptance of imperfect black women to be seen as more than caricatures. In a larger context, fiction may be one avenue towards correcting the need for black people to be twice as good as white people in order to be seen as equal. Fictional portrayals that engage with and carefully revise stereotypes may lead to greater acceptance of real black people who share some of their outward characteristics than nonfictional but idealized portrayals ever can.
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"Sprinkled, Cleansed, and Comforted"

The Early American Jail

Jacob Johnson

The jail, gallows, whipping post, and other structures of the penal system play a critical role in early American society and literature. As historian Daniel Williams notes, “American printers invested their time, energy, and materials in publishing criminal narratives” because publishers understood the demand for these accounts within American society (xiii). Due to the demand, the criminal narratives were “an exception to the standard practice of importing English literary products” (Williams xiii). In their works, both Williams and the philosopher Michel Foucault focus on the public aspects of the early American penal system—the public torture and execution. Williams argues that the ritual drama of public executions was “important in spreading attitudes and ideas that reaffirmed the social order and reasserted the powers of government” (11). Similarly, in Discipline and Punish, Foucault argues that in early American society—as well as many European cultures—“public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph” (34). These scholars effectively argue for the critical role of public torture, shame, and execution in the early American penal system. I, however, will focus on the role of the more private aspects of the penal system, which occurred not on the gallows, but in the jail. I will argue that the jail represents more than simply
the holding grounds before the public execution. The jail replaces the home and church, thus offering comfort, care, and religious reformation for the “outsiders” in early American society. I will examine these complexities of jail through a critical reading of the criminal narratives of Esther Rodgers, Joseph Quasson, and Patience Boston. The jail plays this unique role of home and church for the first half of the eighteenth century—by 1850, the criminal conversion narrative begins to transform into a more secular and crime-focused text.

In order to understand the role of the jail for disadvantaged citizens in early American societies, readers must first understand the identity of the convict. Daniel Williams writes, “according to the most recent statistical surveys, condemned criminals in all probability were ‘outsiders’ of some sort” (25). Each of the criminals could be considered an outsider because of his or her gender, social status, or ethnicity. One of these ‘outsiders’ is Esther Rodgers. Esther was born around 1680 in Maine, but by the age of thirteen she had become an apprentice to Joseph Woodbridge in Massachusetts. There were two different fathers, both of whom were African American, to the two different children. Though it is never stated in the text, it is possible that she was partially of African descent herself, since there is no discussion of miscegenation in her criminal narrative. Patience Boston and Joseph Quasson are also considered outsiders because of their ethnicity; they are both identified as American Indians. Though Boston and Quasson were both Protestant Christians, they were more likely to be suspected of serious crimes, including witchcraft and murder, because of their ethnic identities. This suspicion—and the general racism of early Americans towards American Indians—pushed Boston and Quasson to the outside of civil society. None of the criminals in these narratives were from the upper or even middle class; each was a member of the working poor.

Esther Rodgers’s narrative—or maybe more correctly, the narrative about her—provides a strong archetype for the criminal conversion narrative. Though her crimes are detailed, the bulk of the narrative describes her personal redemption, which occurs in a small prison in Ipswich, Massachusetts. In that prison, Esther describes the personal redemption from her sins she experiences and the physical and emotional support she receives from those who visit her. This redemption and comfort represent the roles generally played by the church and home. On the day before her execution, she tells visitors, “I have had the joyfullest day to day that ever I had in my whole life. I bless God that
ever I came into this Prison” (102). These feelings of joy and gratitude are unexpected, particularly on the day before her death. However, earlier in her narrative, she says, “It pleased God after some time to come in with much Comfort into my Soul” (Williams 103). From the phrase “come in,” Rodgers intimates that she experienced personal ministration from deity while incarcerated. However unlikely the location, Rodgers experiences profound spiritual episodes in prison.

In addition to these heavenly ministrations, many earthly ministers also visit Rodgers. Seven ministers, at least, take some credit for her spiritual conversion (Williams 61). Though some scholars use the word “manipulate” to describe the ministers’ actions, I believe that these godly servants deserve a more sympathetic analysis (Harvey 255, Williams 282–89). While she steps toward the gallows, Rodgers “takes leave of the Ministers, giving them many thanks for all their kindness to her, and this she does with a mixture of Tears” (Williams 106). These emotional expressions show that her gratitude and the ministers’ work were sincere. During Rodgers’s trial, the judge Samuel Sewall records, “by her answers she did discover a considerable knowledge of the Mystery of Christianity” (104). Considering Rodgers’s admission that she did not take her early religious study seriously, if her answers were truly impressive, as this narrative records, then her education within prison must have been useful and effective partially due to the efforts of the ministers. Her knowledge, gratitude, and peaceful perspective reveal a sincere and complete conversion. In this way, the prison plays the role of the church for Rodgers and other condemned sinners.

Not only does Esther Rodgers experience spiritual conversion but she also receives great emotional comfort in prison before her death. Her tears and words at the gallows reveal that the ministers clearly showed great kindness and offered comfort as a part of their ministry. Standing at the gallows, Rodgers declares, “I have found more Comfort in Prison, than ever before” (Williams 106). This poignant declaration of Rodgers’s narrative reveals the tragedy of her life and how the jail might, however insufficient, replace the home. Despite being born to two parents and indentured in a religious home, the greatest comfort that she experiences is found in a prison directly before her death. Considering the crimes she commits and the low status she holds in society, it is clear that Rodgers’s life was difficult and filled with sorrow. However, one can expect that she would have experienced some love and concern in her youth at home.
Instead, her greatest comfort is found in prison. Thus the prison supplants both the church as the center of conversion and the home as the source of comfort in Rodgers’s life.

A quarter of a century after Esther Rodgers’s death, Joseph Quasson was imprisoned and executed. His narrative also highlights this process of spiritual redemption for prisoners and underscores the ways the jail could become a church for prisoners. Quasson’s narrative is unique because of the emphasis on his spiritual conversion. This conversion is revealed through an interview between Quasson and an unnamed visitor in addition to a detailed description of his words and actions preceding execution. The length of his stay is also uniquely long—a total of nine months. During that long imprisonment, he struggled for his spiritual redemption with the help of the minister Samuel Moodey, who also published the narrative after Quasson’s death, and others. Moodey describes this struggle and Quasson’s ultimate victory: “for the most part he was a Prisoner of Hope . . . yet he was almost ready to despair” (Williams 11). Moodey, through his account, reveals the spiritual transformation from despair to hope in Quasson’s final days.

During the last few days of his mortal life, Joseph Quasson had an interview with a visitant that reveals the extent of his spiritual conversion. Initially, Quasson reveals his fears of going to hell, his prayers offering no avail, and not having any right desires (Moodey 11, 13–14). Despite this despair, he continues to attend church, meet and pray with ministers and other visitors, and read from the Bible “wherein he had scores of Leaves turned down” (14), indicating a serious study of the holy book. Moodey also notes that in the final week, Quasson “prayed seven times daily” (33). Even though he was despairing and hopeless, Quasson put a great effort into his own conversion through serious study of the Bible and frequent prayer. Moodey observes that though Quasson proclaims that he has no faith, Quasson holds “a secret hope Rooted in him . . . so that his Purpose of Seeking and Waiting to the End, was never quite broken off” (Moodey 19). Regardless of an overwhelmingly tragic scene—imprisoned and waiting for death—Quasson was hopeful for spiritual salvation.

While Quasson continued to seek out God and redemption, he ultimately found the object of his search—hope for salvation. “On the last Morning of his Life, his Faith and Hope was found to continue,” and as he left the prison and began to walk to the gallows he responded in the
affirmative when asked “whether he could venture upon the Ocean of Eternity in the Ark Christ” (Moodey 24).

At this point in the story, Moodey takes greater control over the narrative as the “Penitent” (Quasson) is executed. Moodey relates that Quasson’s “Countenance, his Words; for Matter and Manner” reveal the inner faith of the criminal. In addition, standing at the gallows, Quasson “prayed so freely, so distinctly, & and so pertinently, that it was to the Admiration of the Wisest and Best” (25). These descriptions reveal Quasson as a man of faith who ultimately experienced spiritual conversion. His conversion is all the more remarkable because it occurred in the darkness of the prison.

After the execution of Quasson, Moodey records the “Lessons of Instruction, Admonition, [etc]” that could be learned from Quasson’s conversion narrative. Moodey encourages “Awakened Sinners” “Not to be discouraged” because “this believing Penitent found Rest to his Soul, when he could find it no where else” (34). For Quasson, this prison played the role of the church: the site of spiritual conversion and communion with God and Christ. Quasson performed the actions found often in churches: praying, reading the Bible, and meeting with a minister. The interviews and meetings with ministers, generally unique to the church, were critical to Quasson’s spiritual conversion. Without the ministers’ encouragement and scriptural knowledge, Quasson would have been unable to find the energy or knowledge to gain faith. Quasson’s narrative—in addition to the admonitions of Moodey—provides spiritual instruction and enlightenment for witnesses of the execution, but even more for those who read the account afterwards.

In the last of the three criminal narratives, Patience Boston accentuates how the early American jail could play the role of a home for its disadvantaged prisoners. Following a trend in criminal narratives of the first half of the eighteenth century, Boston’s narrative contains the account of her conversion. Toward the end of her stay, she recounts that in prison, “I met with Christ here, and have had Communion with God in holy Duties” (Williams 131). Though the narrative offers an interesting insight into Boston’s conversion, it is best used for understanding how the early American jail was a home to prisoners and offered comfort and peace in a time of great personal turmoil. In her narrative, Boston gives details of the visitors who comforted her. This list includes ministers who have also made appearances in each of the previous narratives (Williams 126). Boston explains that the ministers
“would encourage [her] to hope” (126). In addition to the ministers, Boston recalls that “the Prison-Keeper came to [her], counseled and comforted me” and that his wife also frequently called and ministered to Boston (131). While the ministers’ support is significant, it is not surprising. Their purpose is to minister to their congregation, which would include prisoners like Boston. On the other hand, the prison keeper and his wife are not obligated to provide comfort or counsel to Boston. Out of concern for Boston—as a person, not a congregant—this couple begins to play the role of mother and father as they offer counsel and comfort in an extremely difficult time for Boston. They are not as concerned with Boston’s spiritual salvation; instead, the prison keeper and his wife focus on ministering to her physical and emotional needs.

Boston recognizes and appreciates this outpouring of love. The prison becomes more than simply a holding cell before her imminent execution and becomes something similar to a home for her. Immediately proceeding her execution, the minister records that she rejoices, “I have reason to bless God for putting me into the Hands of such as are so kind to me and tenderly concerned for me (Williams 131). In poignant words, Boston describes how in “Chains of Iron,” she is “more comfortable than I could have been with a Chain of Gold.” While she faces execution, and an unknown fate, her “Soul is carried out in Love to good experienc’d Christians that come to see me. Methinks I can understand their Language and sweetly relish it” (135). With descriptions of comfort and “Chains of Gold,” Boston records the physical and emotional comfort she received while in prison, which comfort she was not accustomed to previously in life. Further, Boston begins to understand these visitors, the ministers, the prison-keeper and his wife, and others. In speaking their language, Boston finds a group to which she belongs and “relishes” in it after leading a lonely life at the bottom of society. This early American jail has provided her with things she had never before experienced: loving and concerned parental figures, physical and emotional comfort, and a welcoming and concerned group of individuals.

The criminal conversion narratives of Esther Rodgers, Joseph Quasson, and Patience Boston reveal what role the early American jail could play in the lives of incarcerated “outsiders”—including women, the poor, and ethnic minorities. For these groups, the prison became an imperfect substitute for the home and church. Disadvantaged prisoners found in the jail good role models, a supportive community, parental figures, and potentially, spiritual redemption. When the prison doors opened and the
prisoners took their final steps toward their execution, they were “sprinkled, cleansed, and anointed,” spiritually and emotionally (Williams 95).

Somewhere between 1750 and 1770, the criminal conversion narrative began to shift from a focus on the prisoner’s spiritual state to the prisoner’s crimes before incarceration. Williams suggests that this change occurred as printers “responded to the changing interests and perceptions of their consumers” (13). The witness and reader of the criminal narrative is more secular in the second half of the eighteenth century while the conversion aspect of the criminal narrative isn’t as successful.

Along with the positive change in public opinion of the penal system, as a result of criminal conversion narratives, the penal system in America also began to change through the work of reformers, including Benjamin Rush, who signed the Declaration of Independence and argued against public punishment and executions. In 1829, the Eastern State Penitentiary opened its doors and soon after other penitentiaries were built throughout the states. In Reports of the Prison Discipline Society, published in 1852, one inspector considered the value of some aspects of the early American prison system, “That community which first conceived the idea of abandoning the principle of mere physical force . . . and of treating their prisoners as redeemable beings . . . must occupy an elevated place” (Prison Discipline Society 665, emphasis added). Over a hundred years after the criminal conversion narratives were published, the influences still had positive effects, and prisoners are seen as redeemable. Punishment may have become more private, and the prison larger, but prisoners retained much of the virtue that they held in criminal narratives. The criminal conversion narratives of Esther Rodgers, Joseph Quasson, and Patience Boston provide critical insight into this process of personal redemption within the prison system and lay a foundation for understanding the more recent developments of the American penal system. Presenting these protagonists as sympathetic criminals set the stage for future developments in the penal system that emphasized the rehabilitation and redemption of criminals.


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Reclaiming the Black Personhood
The Power of the Hip-Hop Narrative in Mainstream Rap Music

Morgan Klatskin

In response to acutely visible injustice, music has long served as a method of resistance for the Black community. From the hymns of the slaves working on plantations to the protest ballads of the Civil Rights movement, African Americans have historically used song to uplift, defend, and mobilize their community. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new weapon emerged in urban communities to fight legal and social injustices against the Black community: rap music. In its inception, rap music was closely tied to hip-hop culture. While the terms “hip hop” and “rap” are terms often used interchangeably in public discourse, a close analysis reveals that instead, aspects of hip-hop culture are actually used as thematic tools in rap music. While the presence of the hip-hop culture in rap is often only identified according to the presence of political consciousness in lyrical narratives, in fact, political consciousness is only one of three key elements of the hip-hop culture, the others being Afrocentrism and Black liberation (see Dyson, Bonnette for a larger treatment of this subject). Each of these elements is important to understanding the function and power of hip-hop themes in rap music.
At different times, the presence of these themes in mainstream rap music seems to ebb and flow. Specifically, in the face of intense legal injustice against the African American community in the 1980s, popular emcees in the “golden age of rap”—which I define as extending approximately from the early 1980s until the mid-1990s—openly leveraged all three key elements of hip-hop culture in their music in order to respond to a highly visible injustice: the Reagan war on drugs. Following this golden age of rap, these themes became much less present in the mainstream, though these themes did persist in the underground rap music scene (see Rutherford, Tibbs for further discussion). However, that move away from hip-hop culture is beginning to change course; hip-hop culture has begun to reappear in the mainstream rap music of today in response to another period of acutely visible injustice against the Black community. From 2012 to 2016, highly visible cases of fatal brutality against African American men sparked hundreds of protests across the nation, as well as new and lasting political movements: these included the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philandro Castile, and Alton Sterling. Rap music is responding in kind. These returning ripples of hip-hop themes suggest the possibility of a determined hip-hop revival in rap music. In both golden-age and modern-day rap, emcees have used hip-hop themes in rap lyrics to assert the Black narrative and effectively reassert Black personhood itself (Cooper). In their utilization of the hip-hop themes, emcees encourage their audiences to participate in the reshaping of Black America’s narrative.

Rap music’s original rise began in response to acutely visible injustice against the Black community during the Reagan administration. Although to some, Ronald Reagan has been romanticized to the point of becoming a political paragon, others have remembered Reagan’s reign less fondly. For example, Alice Walker, a Black poet, states in a 1984 poem, “We do not admire their president. / We know why the White House is white.” In an economically depressed America struggling to overcome the trailing economy of the 1970s, Reagan promised an American revival. His 1980 campaign slogan, “Let’s Make America Great Again,” gave Reagan’s pledge to improve America the edge of fiery and urgent patriotism, while also subtly introducing a narrative of fear of threatened national decline led by enemies at home and abroad.

Foreign fear in the Reagan years centered on terrorism and communism, while domestic fear often focused on a hyperbolized narrative that US inner-cities were crime-ridden, lawless, no-go zones. His White House’s reimagining of Nixon’s war on drugs—which had focused on drug
rehabilitation and treatment over incarceration—in many ways aggravated public fear of “violence, violation, and disorder” in inner cities (Rossinow 139). Inner cities seemed to mainstream America “like a land that time forgot, a postindustrial stalking ground of idle, dangerous youth” representative of a violent and threatening underclass of “other” that was “pressing at the boundaries of its desolate urban habitat” (Rossinow 139, 148). In 1981, US Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger even described escalated crime in urban areas as helming a “reign of terror in American cities” (Olson 1981). While the Reagan era did not invent the racial tension and unrest of the 1980s, the White House seemingly did little to dispel racial fears and tensions.

Leaning on the exaggerated Reagan-era narrative of African American inner cities, the bipartisan Congress passed the Anti–Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which was tough on cocaine—but only on crack cocaine, which was almost exclusively concentrated in America’s inner cities; powder cocaine, by contrast, was popular with rich, predominantly white elites. By some accounts, it seemed that “everywhere there was money, there was cocaine,” and its presence was so normalized that it was openly joked about at Hollywood film award ceremonies (Rossinow 121). Despite this, the 1986 Act punished crack cocaine offenses 100 times more severely than it punished powder cocaine offenses, a move which plainly disadvantaged inner-city African Americans and predominantly affected low-level street dealers and users. The legislation reintroduced mandatory minimum sentencing, even though there had been a “near-complete repeal of mandatory minimum penalties in 1970,” and judges were bound to rule according to the mandatory minimum sentence, which was 5 years’ jail time (USSC 6). According to the Act, sentence length was determined solely on the drug quantity carried, and the Act set the quantity thresholds for possession extremely low. To trigger the five-year mandatory minimum sentence, one would only have to be carrying 5 grams, or 0.17 ounces, of crack cocaine. To trigger these same minimums for a powder-cocaine offense, one would have to be in possession of 500 grams, or 17.6 ounces. Furthering the intensity of this law, two years following the 1986 Act, Congress passed the Anti–Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which made “first-time simple possession of crack cocaine an offense punishable by a mandatory minimum penalty,” the only drug in the history of the American criminal justice system to be so punished (USSC 6).

In its severe punishment of crack cocaine offenses and lenient punishment of powder cocaine offenses, this legislation carried with it a narrative that
inner-city African Americans were a violent and addicted criminal “other,” a significant threat to an otherwise idyllic America. Because this narrative was intertwined with an act of legal force, it had real and lasting effects on the Black community. African Americans during the Reagan era were “besieged, catching the blunt end of both social disorder and the coercive efforts to curb it” (Rossinow 139). Inner-city African Americans’ struggles with cyclical poverty, drug abuse, gang violence, and diminished educational and employment opportunities were worsened by such Reagan-era drug legislation. Breaking from the cycle of poverty was extremely difficult for many inner-city African Americans. In his 1994 song “Things Done Changed,” the Notorious B.I.G. admits, “If I wasn’t in the rap game / I’d probably have a key knee deep in the crack game / Because the streets is a short stop / Either you’re slin’ crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot.” At the time, “23 percent of all Black men in their twenties were entangled in the criminal justice system—meaning that they were imprisoned, on parole, or on probation” (Rossinow 149). One analysis found that the number of Black males aged eighteen to twenty-nine without high school degrees who were incarcerated nearly tripled between 1980 and 1989, rising from 7.4 percent to 20.1 percent (Rossinow 149). Furthermore, Reagan’s aggressive anti-drug legislation sparked the mass incarceration of African Americans, effectively diminishing African American personhood for generations.

In the face of this pejorative narrative, rap music was forming a golden age. From the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, lyrics rife with thoughtful and poignant indictments of a system that seemed to have cast wages against Black Americans were mainstream in rap music. Popular hip-hop OGs, such as KRS-One, N.W.A., Public Enemy, Mos Def, Chuck D, Run D.M.C., Ice-T, and Grandmaster Flash—“the Black CNN,” as Chuck D dubbed them—boldly and unapologetically fought the narrative that Black personhood was lesser with their music (Cummings 18). These emcees, along with others, drew connections between slavery, police brutality, and incarceration, tackling issues of underfunded education and the racist hypocrisy of the American Dream. In exposing legalized racism, in demanding acknowledgement of African Americans’ grand history and ancestry, and in remembering the aid of a liberating God, hip-hop themes in rap music fired back at an overarching legal narrative which institutionalized racism and recklessly devalued Black personhood.
Author and academic Eric Michael Dyson agrees that in golden-age rap music, words served as a “means of upward mobility, or as a means to escape suffering . . . to grapple with a white supremacist society that refuses to acknowledge [African Americans’] fundamental humanity” (76). But Dyson also acknowledges the influence that a shift toward materialism in American culture in the 1990s had on rap’s divergence from its hip-hop roots. The economic deprivation of the time, he notes, created a “hungering for material emblems, trinkets, symbols, and rewards,” and mainstream rap music responded to that hunger (76). Priorities began to shift away from racial justice as rap music entered what emcee Talib Kweli called rap’s “rock ’n’ roll phase,” in which mainstream rap music became recklessly decadent, misogynistic, violent, and even somewhat nihilistic (NPR Staff 2013).

To be clear, hip-hop themes were not totally lost; underground rap did retain its hip-hop roots. A few emcees, such as Lauryn Hill, were noted as popular hip-hop–centric artists. However, these artists’ music was not as popular or lasting in the mainstream as the commercialized rap music of the time. Some argue that the promotion of such rap music was a response to the failed censorship efforts of the 1980s and early 1990s that aimed to suppress rap music’s rise: since rap music’s popularity could not be stopped, “corporate America sought to reap the benefits and exploit [rap] music for its own gain” (Rutherford 326). As the legal tensions of the 1980s waned in visibility to mainstream America, it simply became “difficult to sell” rap music that openly used hip-hop themes in its narrative (Tibbs 55). Emcees who honored rap music’s hip-hop roots even commented on the absence of hip-hop themes and questioned the validity of new and popular rappers whose music ignored its own roots. For example, in his song “Hip Hop,” released in 2000, Dead Prez declares:

I’m sick of that fake thug, R&B–rap scenario, all day on the radio
Same scenes in the video, monotonous material
Y’all don’t hear me though, these record labels slang our tapes like dope
…You would rather have a Lexus, some justice, a dream, or some substance?
A Beamer, a necklace, or freedom?

Debates over the authenticity and place of commercialized rap music are present in the work of Lauryn Hill, Rakim, Killer Mike, Nas, Ice Cube, J. Cole, Yasiin Bey, and Kendrick Lamar, among others. Rap music was changing, and
the rap music that was rising to the top was not always received well by those whose music was driven by hip-hop themes.

Top-selling singles year by year mark these changing tides in mainstream rap. Since 1989, rap music has consistently claimed the highest-selling singles, but beginning in 1994, those singles demonstrate a departure from hip-hop culture. In 1989, the number-one highest-selling single was “Self-Destruction” by Stop the Violence Movement, a star-studded collection of the most popular East-Coast emcees, which formed in response to rising gang violence in Black communities. Rapper D-Nice reminds the audience of the control they have over the African American narrative as individuals, saying, “It’s time to stand together in a unity / Cause if not then we’re soon to be / Self-destroyed, unemployed / The rap race will be lost without a trace.” The emcee asks that they come together as a community to “stop the violence” and go “Down the road that we call eternity / Where knowledge is formed and you’ll learn to be / Self-sufficient, independent.” D-Nice warns his audience that “Society wants to invade / So do not walk this path they laid,” and reinforces his affirmation that Black Americans have the power to shape their own narrative. Later in the song, Rapper Kool Moe Dee goes on to remind his audience of the violence committed against their people in the fight for civil rights—“Back in the sixties, our brothers and sisters were hanged / How could you gang-bang?”—and contributing emcees encourage the African American community to “leave the guns and the crack and the knives alone” and “get a grip, and grab what’s wrong.”

The top-selling singles of the following four years show the rising influence of the party-oriented materialism of commercialized rap but overall retained their connection to hip-hop culture. In 1994, there was a more visible break from rap music’s hip-hop roots. The Notorious B.I.G.’s “One More Chance / Stay with Me,” the top-selling single of 1994, opens with the lines “First things first: I, Poppa, freaks all the honeys / Dummies, Playboy bunnies, those wanting money,” and themes of misogyny (“I’m not only a client / I’m the player President”), violence (“Don’t see my ones, gon’ see my guns, get it?”), and materialism (“I stay Coogi down to the socks / Rings and watches filled with rocks”) are woven throughout. This period of commercialized rap dominated airwaves for decades, but in recent years, hip-hop themes have once again begun to emerge. Like in golden-age rap music, emcees are again leveraging hip-hop themes to forge a narrative that
reasserts African American personhood in the face of highly visible injustice toward Black Americans.

Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of unarmed Black teen Trayvon Martin, there were six other highly visible cases of fatal brutality against African Americans—most at the hands of police—in the span of only four years. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling were viscerally painful illustrations of ongoing injustice against the Black community and the continued devaluation of Black personhood. These deaths were especially poignant because several occurred within weeks—sometimes merely days—of each other. Furthermore, each death was made visible to mainstream America in a way that many similar deaths of African Americans had not been before. News of these fatal incidents dominated news outlets and social media for weeks, strengthened calls for police reform and legal reform, and ignited lasting political movements such as Black Lives Matter. For example, the fatal shooting of unarmed teen Michael Brown in 2014 and the subsequent acquittal of Officer Darren Wilson sparked protests across the United States as well as prolonged protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown’s death sparked months-long protests and riots in Ferguson that were aggravated by a militarized, local police force who used rubber bullets, tear gas, smoke bombs, and flash grenades against protesting locals. Emcees such as J. Cole, Talib Kweli, P. Diddy, Macklemore, Killer Mike, Jay-Z, and Q-Tip joined in protest on the ground in Ferguson, in their own cities, and on social media. Most notably, emcees began to protest louder in their music. Mainstream rap music is increasingly hearkening back to its roots in narrative themes of political consciousness, Afrocentrism, and Black liberation, demanding its audience to consider another narrative of the Black community.

Political consciousness in the rap narrative often takes the form of indictment of an unjust criminal justice system by centering on physical representations of it—such as the police, the president, or legislation—or by analyzing the effects of institutionalized racism on the Black community—such as mass incarceration, cyclical poverty, or implicit prejudice. In their own narratives, rappers expose a reality of the inner city that disrupts simplified and hyperbolized narratives of urban areas as one-dimensional, crime-ridden, violent neighborhoods, and reasserts the humanity and complexity of inner-city Black communities. In his 1992 song, “Changes,” 2Pac reveals the reality of inner-city life for many African Americans, lamenting, “I see no changes,
wake up in the morning and I ask myself, / ‘Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?’ / I’m tired of being poor—and even worse, I’m Black / My stomach hurts so I’m looking for a purse to snatch.” On top of the struggle to meet necessities such as food, he reminds the audience that inner-city Black lives are in danger of a sinister player, the American criminal justice system. 2Pac accuses it of not only treating the Black community unjustly, but also of egging on inner-city problems, rapping, “Cops give a damn about a negro / Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he’s a hero / ‘Give crack to the kids—Who the hell cares?! / One less hungry mouth on the welfare!’” 2Pac asserts that these entities have intentionally worsened inner-city problems by introducing crime and squashing the Black Panther movement: “‘First, ship ’em dope and let ’em deal to brothers / Give ’em guns, step back, watch ’em kill each other!’ / ‘It’s time to fight back,’ that’s what Huey said / Two shots in the dark, now Huey’s dead.” The emcee asserts that it is these baleful tools—cocaine, guns, assassination—that have kept the Black community oppressed. He directly contradicts the Reagan-era narrative that the war on drugs would help reduce crime and better American life, reminding the audience of the war’s lingering and weighty presence in the Black community.

Discussions of governmental oppression in hip-hop narrative often consider the history of Black enslavement as it is reinvented in a superficially and supposed “post-racial” America. KRS-One weighs in on the idea that policing is a recycled method of slavery in his 1993 release “Sound of Da Police.” The emcee cites continued injustice against the Black community as a method for keeping African Americans from rising up against an establishment that shields itself from responsibility for its own egregious crimes while severely punishing African Americans for lesser crimes. He raps, “Your laws are minimal / ‘Cause you won’t even think about lookin’ at the real criminal.” KRS-One goes on to reveal the multiple facets of this modern-day oppression by drawing connections between slave overseers and police officers, noting, “The overseer rode around the plantation / The officer is off patrolling all the nation / The overseer could stop you what you’re doing / The officer will pull you over just when he’s pursuing.” As law professor Donald J. Tibbs asserts, KRS-One’s narrative suggests that “policing Black people is actually the cornerstone of anti-Blackness under American law” (Tibbs 71). The emcee continues in this vein, “The overseer has the right to get ill / And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill / The officer has the right to arrest / And if you fight back, they put a hole in your
chest!” Despite the time elapsed between times of literal enslavement and the modern-day, KRS-One declares that “after 400 years, I’ve got no choices!”

These same connections between literal enslavement and modern-day methods of oppression echo in the mainstream rap music of today. In his 2016 track “Black America Again,” Common cracks the veneer of America’s supposed “post-racial” criminal justice system to similarly reveal its role as a contemporary form of cyclical Black enslavement. From literal enslavement to the obstacles facing Black people today, Common first frames the murder and enslavement of the Black community as foundational to the systematic devaluing of the Black personhood through cultural and physical imprisonment before ultimately asserting that a counter-narrative is the salve:

Here we go, here, here we go again
Trayvon’ll never get to be a older man
Black children, they childhood stole from them
Robbed of our names and our language, stole again
Who stole the soul from Black folk?
Same man that stole the land from Chief Black Smoke
And made the whip crackle on our backs slow
And made us go through the back door
And raffled Black bodies on the slave blocks.

Common then draws a connection between imprisonment of the past and present, exploring the effects of such bondage:

Now we slave to the blocks, on ’em we spray shots
Leaving our own to lay in a box
Black mothers’ stomachs stay in a knot
We kill each other—it’s part of the plot
I wish the hating will stop and the battle with us
I know that Black lives matter, and they matter to us
These are the things we gotta discuss!
The new plantation: mass incarceration
Instead of educate, they’d rather convict the kids
As dirty as the water in Flint, the system is . . .
Common frames narrative as a malleable tool, reminding his listeners that though African Americans cannot control that which imprisons them, they can be active participants in their own enfranchisement.

Emcees often pair this idea of self-liberation with other empowering themes of Afrocentrism, especially as they relate to Black nationalism and Black power. Ab-Soul’s 2012 track “Terrorist Threats,” samples themes of Afrocentrism, Black nationalism, and Black power, all in just a few lines. Ab-Soul references the ancient Ethiopian emperor Selassie, whose third eye gave him the wisdom and power was able to keep his people free, rapping, “Wish I could see out of Selassie eye / Maybe my sovereignty would still be mine.” In the following two lines, the emcee dips into ideas of Black nationalism as he calls out to his audience, “If all the gangs in the world unified / We’d stand a chance against the military tonight.” Ab-Soul uses the US military as a symbol of the institutionalized racism that keeps the Black personhood oppressed. He also considers the idea of Black separatism: in declaring, “I ain’t got no gavel; I ain’t tryna fight nobody battle,” Ab-Soul asserts that he refuses to judge or participate in the battles of his oppressor. The emcee stresses the importance of regaining his freedom from that which seeks to enslave both him and the entire Black community, rapping, “I just wanna be free; I ain’t tryna be nobody chattel.” As they did in golden-age rap music, these themes aim to remind listeners of the power that the Black community has to determine its own fate and to lead its own liberation.

Themes of Black liberation in hip-hop–centric rap music often references God’s role as a liberator of the African American community. The Five-Percent Nation and the Minister Louis Farrakhan have espoused the idea that emcees have been given by God the power to shape Black American culture toward enlightenment and liberation. Rappers and groups such as Wise Intelligent, Rakim, RZA, Brand Nubian, Poor Righteous Teachers, Common, and Nas all weave themes of Black liberation throughout their lyrics. In addition to Kendrick Lamar, perhaps the most visible artist in the resurgence of Black liberation themes in rap music is Chance the Rapper. In his 2016 song “Blessings,” Chance considers the role God has given him as a leader in the liberation of African Americans, saying, “I don’t make songs for free; I make
’em for freedom / Don’t believe in kings; I believe in the Kingdom.” Chance has suggested that his allowing of free downloads of entire albums is his way of supporting the freedom of the Black community. Chance draws directly from imagery in the Bible, referencing verses from Psalm 119:133 and Ephesians 6:17—Chance’s “He has ordered my steps, gave me a sword with a crest”—to illustrate the power that believers have to utilize God’s tools of salvation to gain deliverance. Using his “trumpet” or voice to continually praise God, Chance believes that he is helping liberate his community.

In Kendrick Lamar’s 2017 track “DNA,” these ideas are again at play. Lamar here directs his attention at Fox News, aiming to shatter what he considers a false narrative of the issues plaguing the Black community. Lamar blends hip-hop era themes of Black liberation with the image of governmental figures as unrepentant players in the plight of Black America. Lamar samples an audio clip of the political pundit in which Geraldo Rivera takes issue with rap. Lamar uses the clip as an opportunity to counter Rivera’s narrative, while also leveraging scripture to hint of a coming African American emancipation:

I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA
[Rivera] “This is why I say that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years” . . .
[Lamar] I’d rather die than to listen to you
My DNA not for imitation
Your DNA an abomination . . .
These are the times, level number 9
Look up in the sky, 10 is on the way
Sentence on the way, killings on the way
. . . I got winners on the way.

Lamar not only refuses Rivera’s narrative but also hints at a coming liberation of African Americans, suggesting that those who oppress the Black community are abominations in God’s sight; Lamar draws parallels between the ten plagues of Egypt and the persecuted Israelites to the struggles facing the modern-day African American community. He equates the enslaved Israelites to African Americans and suggests that the ninth plague, a period of darkness, is occurring today. With the line “10 is on the way,” Lamar hints that this period of darkness will soon end and that the firstborn sons of America—the privileged, the favored—will fall. Following the conclusion of
the plagues, African Americans will be delivered and will experience their long-awaited freedom at the hands of a liberating God.

The return of these hip-hop themes to the mainstream rap music of today reinforces the power that hip-hop themes have to empower, embolden, and uplift the Black community toward the reclamation of the Black personhood. Just as the narrative of the Reagan era had the power to negatively impact the Black community and devalue Black personhood, the hip-hop narrative has proven to be a powerful tool for mobilizing rap music’s audience to positively impact the Black community and reclaim Black personhood. Studies on rap listenership in 1993 and 2005 illustrate the power that hip-hop themes have to politically mobilize and inform listeners. Results of a 1993 National Black Politics study demonstrated that listening to rap music in 1993 was a statistically significant correlate for attitudinal variables such as signing petitions and participating in protests and marches (Hemphill 46). Rap listenership in 1993 also indicated support for Black nationalist ideologies and for the belief that Black representatives in government “can best represent the interests of the Black community” as opposed to the ability of non-Black elected officials to do so (Rossinow 48).

However, the golden-age rap audience was far more involved in political matters than listeners after the mid-1990s. As hip-hop–centric rap music fell out of the mainstream, the power that rap music had to politically mobilize its audience also waned. One study found that listening to rap was a statistically significant indicator of political involvement in 1993 but not in 2005, at which point commercialized rap music had dominated airwaves for nearly a decade (Hemphill 11). In 2005, consumption of rap was not a statistically significant correlate associated with any of the previously mentioned attitudinal variables, but listening to rap did indicate “endorsement of the opinion that police overwhelmingly discriminated against Blacks” for Black, Latino, and white listeners alike (28). So while mainstream rap music had largely converged from hip-hop culture after the mid-1990s, rap music as a whole did retain an underlying narrative that institutional racism existed in the American criminal justice system. The lingering presence of this basic principle laid the foundation for the current revival of hip-hop–centric rap music, and the increasingly frequent presence of hip-hop themes in the mainstream rap narrative of today have the same power that the golden-age rap narrative had to empower African Americans to reclaim the Black personhood.

These hip-hop themes do empower listeners to action, but Michael Eric Dyson reminds that “the music can only go so far. It can help alter
the mind-set of the masses; it can help dramatize injustice; and it can help articulate the disenchantment of significant segments of the citizenry. But it cannot alone transform social relations and political arrangements. Politically charged music can reinforce important social values, but it cannot establish them” (67, emphasis in original). Rapper Kendrick Lamar shares worries that participation in political matters will grow cold on his 2017 track, “LUST.” Lamar contemplates the power that familiarity and ritual has in the Black community and considers the power that time has to weaken the advances that the Black community has made to reclaim its narrative and, thus, its personhood.

With the election of President Donald Trump, protests occurred throughout the United States and in major cities internationally. Lamar illustrates the reaction of many Black Americans to the conclusion of the presidential election, saying, “We all woke up, tryna tune to the daily news / Lookin’ for confirmation, hopin’ election wasn’t true / All of us worried, all of us buried, and our feelings deep / None of us married to his proposal, make us feel cheap” (“LUST”). He explains that while the Black community was initially quick to mobilize—“Still and sad, distraught and mad, tell the neighbor ’bout it / Bet they agree, parade the streets with your voice proudly”—complacency and acceptance could keep the Black community from actively reshaping its own narrative as it falls back into a cycle of outcry and placation. He raps, “Time passin’, things change / Revertin’ back to our daily programs, stuck in our ways.” To fully regain personhood, Lamar observes, the Black community has to keep up the fight and continuously demand justice.

Given rap music’s total dominance of the American music industry, key aspects of the hip-hop culture have the potential to reach hundreds of millions more than golden-age rap music was able to reach in its time. Christian D. Rutherford asserts that “this phenomenon of poetry put to music is perhaps the most prominent and relevant illustration of literature operating as ‘law’ today,” noting that rap has become the “paradigm used by many young people to order their lives” (306). Hip-hop–centric rap music is, in many ways, “a compelling brand of political activism that joins aesthetic expression and social awareness” that has “a strong bearing on political understanding”—especially for a rising generation that gets news updates from programs like The Late Show and uses social media platforms such as Twitter to energize political movements (Dyson 67).
Though the return of hip hop to mainstream rap music is indicative of a shift in mainstream cultural concerns, we are still in the beginnings of that shift. As popular as artists like Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Talib Kweli, Lupe Fiasco, Common, and Chance the Rapper are, for every artist whose music is reviving the hip-hop culture in mainstream rap music, there are more artists whose music remains unchanged. Even within the track lists of these hip-hop revival rappers, there remain elements of commercialized, bling rap. The return of hip hop to the rap narrative can only serve to strengthen a Black reclamation of personhood, and if current trends continue, the hip-hop culture will make a fuller return to mainstream rap music, encouraging a new generation of Americans to stay woke—if not, the hip-hop revival will sputter out, and hip-hop themes will again be relegated to the underground rap game.
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During the mid-nineteenth century, as waves of religious devotion swept across New England, Emily Dickinson was intent on finding her own answers to imposing philosophical and spiritual questions. Many of Dickinson’s poems focus on questions of the self—what it is, and what its connections are to the soul, the body, other people, and itself. In typical Dickinson fashion, her poems explore the topic from many angles, and this diversity of approaches means that continued study of Dickinson’s treatment of the self is both useful and warranted. Dickinson scholars have focused on the self as it is manifested in a variety of contexts, including with regard to religion, consciousness, and immortality.

Dickinson and her poetry were doubtlessly influenced by the religious practices of her Protestant Massachusetts upbringing. While Dickinson never publicly affirmed her faith, the religious context of her time is reflected heavily in her poetry. Linda Freedman, a scholar of nineteenth-century literature at University College London, considers Dickinson’s poetry as the work of a poet fascinated with the “structures of faith” rather than as evidence of a staunch belief in or aversion to religion (2). Freedman advocates understanding the poems as a mechanism through which Dickinson works out philosophical and theological questions (2). Religion gave Dickinson a “vocabulary” for investigating these complex
issues, but it did not dictate her views completely (2). Still, many scholars, including Freedman, Christopher E. G. Benfey, and Shira Wolosky, identify religious embodiment as a key theme in Dickinson’s work. The theological problem of Christ’s embodiment through incarnation was of great significance to Puritans and Calvinists in Dickinson’s time (Freedman 22). Christ’s human incarnation, or the “Word made flesh,” was foundational to Calvinism, but this idea also inherently created a gap between concepts of the absolute and the relative—the “thing-in-itself and the image of the thing, the Word and the flesh” (22). This gap refers to the disparity between the way religious concepts were represented in the teachings of faith and the way in which those concepts were actually experienced. Calvinists were preoccupied with the problem of how to square the subjective nature of lived experience with a spiritual, inherently unknowable world. Many of Dickinson’s poems reflect a similar tension between subjective experience and unknowable aspects of faith; they oscillate between the corporeal and the metaphysical (27). This tension was likely influenced by the theological conflicts of the time. Similarly, Dickinson’s poetry can also be interpreted as reflecting the Calvinist focus on the hypostatic union, or the duality of God and man, embodied in the incarnated Christ (28). The hypostatic union is the mystical union of Christ’s physical body and Christ’s nature as the Holy Spirit—as God in human form—and was essential to the Calvinist understanding of Christ’s divine nature. Freedman and Wolosky point out that Dickinson’s poetry, too, grapples with the fundamental divide between spirit and flesh, the outer/inner and mortal/immortal selves of man. Wolosky cites “I am afraid to own a Body—” as evidence that Dickinson was “profoundly torn” throughout her work about the metaphysical hierarchy of body and soul (132).

Dickinson’s focus on the divide between body and soul sometimes extends to examinations of the physical body itself, as Benfey points out. He argues that Dickinson’s focus on the physical expressions of the body after death—such as her “fascination” with death masks—shows the poet was greatly concerned about the conflict between rational anatomy and unknowable faith (96). Benfey reads “The Body grows without” as showing how the body houses the soul and physically reflects its expressions, thereby making it difficult to imagine the two as able to exist separately (96). Further, Dickinson’s frequent focus on the biblical resurrection of Christ might
provide additional evidence that the separation of body and mind was a significant issue to the poet (99). Dickinson’s discomfort over the idea of the self is also shown, Benfey argues, in her frequent attention to the questions of how the boundaries of the body divide a person from others and how the emotions and minds of others are unknowable (84). If one cannot truly understand others, how can one understand the self?

For Wolosky, though, poems about embodiment address more than the connection between body and soul—the poems are also ways in which Dickinson grapples with her own identity. Wolosky identifies four perspectives from which Dickinson explores identity and embodiment: a poet who is embodied by her own words; a woman who struggles to maintain her identity in a time when women’s bodies are owned by men; an American whose personhood is validated by ownership of property; a faithful believer, who must distinguish between bodily autonomy and submission to God (135). These four tensions complicate the relationship between body and soul, allowing for a struggle that is rooted in religious conflict but explored in religious and secular ways.

E. Thomas Finan argues that a separate theme in Dickinson’s poetry is a fascination with consciousness and its limits. While Calvinists struggled with the mystery of the hypostatic union, writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Noah Webster were focusing on a more secular duality: the duality of the self and consciousness. Consciousness here means the way that humans interpret the world and “typify and describe the self” (Finan 24). The ever-present nature of consciousness, Finan explains, means that humans have no direct knowledge of the world—only knowledge gleaned by perceiving the world through the lens of their own perspective. Emerson drew from French sensationalists to describe how consciousness always “mediates” human interaction; consciousness helps people relate to themselves and others, but at the same time, it also limits because it locks one into constant subjectivity (25). Philosophers and writers of the time also explored the “instabilities” of consciousness—the ways in which people push at the limits of their subjective minds (34). To Emerson, the very act of thinking about one’s subjectivity challenges the idea that consciousness is truly fixed and inescapable (Finan 34). Finan provides close readings of half a dozen Dickinson poems, including “The Soul unto itself,” to support the argument that Dickinson was deeply interested in consciousness and its limits. Finan
points out that Dickinson would have had ample opportunity to read and listen to the ideas of Emerson and his contemporaries, either in the numerous periodicals her family subscribed to, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, or from guests in their home, as her father’s friends included many professors of philosophy (26). Leading philosophical questions of the time likely influenced Dickinson in the same way as religious issues.

It is this more secular attention to the self, its limits, and its relationship to body and soul that constitutes the focus of this paper. Because of Dickinson’s religious environment and the close parallels between the hypostatic union and the poetic focus on the body and soul connection, it is valuable to keep Dickinson’s religious background in mind during analysis. However, while much has been written on the influence of religion on her poetry, less has been said about the influence of the strain of philosophical thought prevalent in her time. Through a close reading of four of her poems ("I am afraid to own a Body—;" "The Body grows without;" "I cannot see my soul but know ‘tis there;" and "The Soul unto itself"), this paper will explore Dickinson’s treatment of the self and the ways in which she addresses philosophical issues of her time: the physical location of the self, one’s relationship to the self, and the connection between self, mind, and body. Dickinson approaches the subject from many angles, writing from positions of division, suspicion, curiosity, ambiguity, and even awe at all that can be contained in a single person. However, one idea prevails throughout Dickinson’s work: the speaker’s constant iteration of discomfort with the idea of the self.

The poems in this paper were selected based on their varying approaches to the topic of the self. The first poem, "I am afraid to own a Body—," provides a broad look at the basic fear of the duality inherent in human life: having a body and soul. The second poem, "The Body grows without," has a slightly narrower focus, working to define the roles of body and spirit by describing their physical situations. The third poem, "I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there," also seeks to define the role of the soul through physical situation, but this poem moves to the interior, focusing on the relationship between soul and self rather than soul and body. Finally, the fourth poem, "The Soul unto itself," provides the narrowest approach to the topic, focusing on one soul that is internally divided. Thus, this analysis moves from a broad, exterior look at the subject to a gradually narrowing focus with each subsequent poem.
Dickinson’s discomfort toward the idea of the self is shown perhaps most obviously in the first poem, “I am afraid to own a Body—.” The poem takes a wide approach to the subject of the self, examining the fear of owning a body and a soul through the lexicon of physical ownership:

I am afraid to own a Body—  
I am afraid to own a Soul—  
Profound—precarious Property—  
Possession, not optional—

Double Estate, entailed at pleasure  
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—  
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness  
And God, for a Frontier. (472)

The poem’s unique positioning of the speaker as an owner of the body and soul shows Dickinson’s struggle to understand the relationship between body, self, and soul. If the speaker is “afraid” to own a body and a soul, which part of ownership is he or she afraid of? Is it mortality? And what part of the self is afraid of the ownership—can the self be afraid of owning its own soul? Further, the idea of owning a soul suggests that there is some self that exists outside the soul—a self that is capable of fearing the prospect of owning the soul. The theme of fear and discomfort with the body and soul duality is maintained throughout the poem, but it is complicated by a lexicon of possession: to “own,” a “property,” a “possession,” a “Double Estate,” “entailed,” an “Heir,” a “Duke.” This vocabulary is typically based on physical commodities that can be purchased, passed on, and inherited, which contrasts the metaphysical subject of one’s relationship to the body and soul. With this language, Dickinson seems to attempt to ground a difficult abstract concept in everyday language based in physical ownership. If such an abstract idea can be harnessed in easily understandable terms, perhaps the uncomfortable subject can become easier to grasp.

Dickinson’s focus on bodily ownership is indicative of the poet’s engagement with controversial political issues of her time. For a female poet in Dickinson’s time, physical ownership of the body would have been a radical notion. Women could retain legal ownership over themselves primarily by refusing to marry; however, for an unmarried woman, taking
claim to oneself rather than entrusting oneself to God through religious devotion was an even more radical statement. Ownership of any property at all, let alone the self, was a largely unfamiliar concept for nineteenth-century women. When considering the role gender plays in the poem, it is important to note that Dickinson refers to a “Duke in a moment of Deathlessness,” not a duchess. This male-oriented language might simply be a product of the time—a duke was more likely to inherit property, so the male word makes more sense for the context of the poem. On the other hand, perhaps the point is that men _did_ typically own property, not women, and it was only by assuming traditionally male traits—for example, male attitudes and male entitlement—that a woman could take possession of herself. Equally important to consider is that the poem is dated 1865, the year slavery was abolished in the United States, bringing an entirely new awareness of the ownership of the body to freed slaves and white citizens alike. What did it mean to own one’s body? Dickinson’s marital status, the preponderance of waves of religious devotion, and the influx of newly-freed slaves were likely all at work to make the poet acutely aware of the ambiguity of bodily possession.

The language of ownership and the emphasis on possession of body and soul draws attention to the fact that this duality is an inheritance rather than a choice. Everyone is an “unsuspecting heir” of the body and spirit. To own one’s body and soul can be a sign of liberation, but there are also inherent constraints; no one has control over which body or soul to possess—or, for that matter, for how long. All _must_ accept their lot in life (“Duke in a moment of Deathlessness”) and their inevitable death (“And God, for a Frontier”). The ending to the poem suggests that owning a body and soul means that God, and therefore death, is always in one’s future. Could this be the implication of inheritance that Dickinson is most “afraid” of? Perhaps the “Double Estate” is owning a body and soul while simultaneously knowing that the adventure always ends in death. Somewhat uniquely, the grammar at the end of the poem is relatively straightforward. In many Dickinson poems, words or phrases seem to have been omitted from the last stanza, but “I am afraid to own a Body—” ends clearly and without much room for speculation, perhaps suggesting that to be conscious of the duality of body and soul is an unavoidable aspect of being human.
Dickinson takes a slightly narrower look at the topic of the self in the second poem, “The Body grows without—,” a poem that defines both the body and spirit by physically situating them:

The Body grows without—
The more convenient way—
That if the Spirit—like to hide
Its Temple stands, alway,

Ajar—secure—inviting—
It never did betray
The Soul that asked its shelter
In solemn honesty (176)

The poem starts with the assertion that “The Body grows without—/The more convenient way.” The body is portrayed as a physical dwelling place for the spirit, suggesting that the two are separate entities and introducing the possibility of a divided body and spirit. The body provides protection for the soul “that asked its shelter” and might “like to hide.” The spirit is physically located, then, in the body. At first glance, the opening phrasing of this poem might seem to suggest that this arrangement of body and soul in a person occurs only by chance—because it is more convenient, easier, simpler. On one hand, this blasé word choice could be an attempt to feign disinterest in a complex, overwhelming topic. On the other hand, perhaps Dickinson means that the spirit is literally inaccessible on its own, that to understand the spirit, one must go through the body; it is literally more convenient to access the spirit via the body. Dickinson’s word choice plays a key role in how the reader perceives the speaker’s perspective on the connection between body and soul. Dickinson addresses a topic that modern neuroscientists still debate—what physical elements separate the body and the mind, and to what extent is it possible for one to exist without the other?

Dickinson’s choice of language in this poem also introduces the possibility of betrayal and conveys that the nature of the spirit involves aspects of danger and uncertainty. At first, the poem seems to suggest a kind of bodily loyalty toward the spirit by providing it with shelter, but in the second stanza, the reader learns that it is possible for the body to “betray” the soul. The body can provide shelter, but perhaps it can also refuse. In the final line of the poem,
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Dickinson considered using the word “timid” instead of “solemn,” which suggests heightened peril; the spirit is timid by nature, perhaps because it has learned to be afraid. If the spirit is accustomed to hiding because it has reason to be afraid, it seems possible to damage or injure the spirit—otherwise, it would have no reason to seek shelter. The poem further suggests that the shelter of the body is imperfect; the body is a “Temple,” but one that paradoxically stands “ajar—secure—inviting.” While Dickinson sometimes uses dashes to provide alternate words that further illustrate the topic described, in this case, the use of dashes seems to suggest multiple, competing interpretations of the shelter provided by the body. “Ajar” might be a neutral word by definition, but not when used to describe a hiding place that is also meant to be “secure.” A door that is secure should not be left ajar; the concepts are directly at odds with one another. Then, Dickinson introduces a third word: “inviting.” It seems impossible that a shelter might simultaneously be inviting, secure, and ajar, which suggests an instability of the body as a shelter and, by extension, perpetual insecurity for the spirit. As she does in “I am afraid to own a Body—,” Dickinson frames the concept of the body and soul in “The Body grows without—,” with a sense of timidity and fear. “I am afraid to own a Body—” is about a fear of both body and soul, while in “The Body grows without—,” the sense of fear belongs to the spirit alone. Despite their diverging focuses, though, it is notable that both poems convey discomfort inherent in the duality; no matter how the duality is situated, it is always paired with anxiety.

While the second poem, “The Body grows without—,” seems to situate the body as a home for the soul, the poem “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there—” situates the soul as a home for the self:

I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there—
Nor ever saw his house, nor furniture—
Who has invited me with him to dwell;
But a confiding guest, consult as well,
What raiment honor him the most,
That I be adequately dressed—
For he insures to none
Lest men specifical adorn—
Procuring him perpetual drest
By dating it a sudden feast. (709)
The speaker says the soul has “invited me with him to dwell,” implying a sense of shelter. The speaker goes on to describe his or her desire to be properly attired in order to honor or please the soul. This structure introduces a new duality. If the soul has invited “me” to stay, “me” must be an entity separate from the soul, such as the self. Whereas other poems address the physical distinction between body and soul, in this poem, the clear delineation between the soul and the self suggests a metaphysical duality: a division of self and soul. While this duality might at first seem too granular, the relationship between the soul and itself can also be described as one’s “inner voice” or as “reasoning with oneself,” phrases that are still common more than one hundred years after Dickinson’s death. The duality of self is a relationship that is continually questioned and explored, which bespeaks the universality of Dickinson’s poetry.

In “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” Dickinson again uses the image of a shelter or a home to convey a sense of unease. The speaker has been invited “with him to dwell,” but has never seen “his house, nor furniture”—or, in fact, the host himself. Nonetheless, the speaker is preoccupied with honoring the unseen host, wondering what “raiment honor him the most” and how to ensure that the speaker is “adequately dressed.” The soul, it seems, is a grand figure who must be impressed. The line “for he insures to none” is grammatically tricky to unravel, but seems to suggest that there is a danger that the soul might evict the self if he is not paid the appropriate honor. The poem feels like an examination of a power structure where the host expects to be honored, and not doing so has consequences. Overall, the tone of the poem conveys a clear sense of intimidation.

Chiefly because of the speaker’s use of the male pronoun, some critics have suggested that the poem shows Dickinson reflecting on the idea of marriage. Scholars like William Valentine Kelly point to the male pronoun, the concept of being invited to dwell with him, the clear power differential, and the mention of a “sudden feast” as evidence for this argument. Kelley suggests that Dickinson’s poetry frequently reveals how her “imagination lives through the transition from girl to wife” (247) and that in this poem, her “raiment” refers to “the wedding garment” (271). However, this argument is not entirely supported elsewhere in the poem. Lines such as “lest men specifical adorn” (emphasis mine) work against this theory; men would not have been trying to “adorn” themselves for a wedding to an unseen, male soul. In addition, the poem is believed to have been sent to Dickinson’s
cousins, Frances and Louisa Norcross, who later made a name for themselves in intellectual and political circles that included Ralph Waldo Emerson (Emily Dickinson Museum). While this information does not independently disprove the idea that the poem is about marriage, it seems more likely that Dickinson would have been writing to her cousins about a more philosophical issue than an imagined marriage. It seems that the unseen male is the host to multiple guests or “selves”—similar to the way Christians think of God as the “host” of all souls on earth. A religious interpretation, though, raises further questions about the nature of this God, like why the speaker would refer to God as “my soul.” This framing also contributes to the metaphysical duality; it suggests that humans have both a personal self and a spiritual self that is related to God.

The form of this third poem is slightly different from the first and second poems discussed in this paper, particularly in its use of capitalization and dashes. In some Dickinson poems, almost every line contains or ends in a dash, and subjects are frequently capitalized. However, in the third poem, capitalization occurs only at the beginning of lines, and dashes are significantly less prevalent, occurring only at the end of four lines. Overall, these differences in form make the poem flow more quickly than others (such as “The Body grows without—”) and suggests that at the time the poem was written, the poet had a firmer focus on this topic.

No matter how the duality is framed, the second poem, “The Body grows without—,” and the third poem, “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” can be read as two approaches to defining and situating the self. In “The Body grows without—,” the body charitably provides shelter for the spirit, which seems to be the same thing as the soul. The spirit is subordinate to the body, which allows the spirit to hide within it. In “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” the soul is the charitable provider of a home, offering it to a “me” figure that can be likened to the self. This soul might be a human representation of a religious spirit, or it might represent a divided inner self. These repeated and varied attempts to locate the self and define it in contrast to the soul, body, and spirit show that Dickinson devoted considerable attention to working out the meaning of the self. As in the first poem, “I am afraid to own a Body—,” both contrasting poems share an inherent sense of fear or intimidation in their perceptions of the soul and the self.
Dickinson continues to explore the ideas of division between self and soul and the fear inherent in duality in the fourth poem, “The Soul unto itself.” The poem takes the narrowest approach to defining the self by describing a soul that is internally divided:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend—
Or the most agonizing Spy—
An enemy—could send—
Secure against its own—
No treason it can fear—
Itself—its Sovereign—Of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe— (264)

As in the third poem, “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” the duality in “The Soul unto itself” is not between body and soul, but rather between the soul and itself, again suggesting a metaphysical duality. The focus of “The Soul unto itself” is how one’s relationship with oneself can be either beneficial or detrimental, depending on how “secure against its own” the soul is. The relationship between the soul and itself can provide either “an imperial friend” or “the most agonizing Spy—/An Enemy—could send.” Unlike “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” however, there is no distance between the soul and the speaker—instead, the duality is between two halves, both equally capable of sabotage.

Throughout the poem, Dickinson’s lexicon brings an unsettling feeling to the relationship between the soul and itself. Words and phrases like “imperial friend,” “Spy,” “Enemy,” “Secure,” “treason,” and “Sovereign” call to mind statehood and espionage. The poem is believed to have been written in the summer of 1863, at the height of the Civil War. It is likely that this poem was influenced by Dickinson’s experience of witnessing the war, particularly because Dickinson sent the poem to her friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who at the time was a soldier for the Union Army. Dickinson’s attempt to work out the relationship of the soul to itself through the lexicon of war might have especially resonated with Higginson, while also reflecting that Dickinson’s own mind was divided between philosophical issues of the self and political issues of the war.
By posing the self as divided, Dickinson may be working through the implications of self-reflection and personal subjectivity. As suggested by the vocabulary of espionage, the soul’s relationship to itself is fraught with doubt, mistrust, and once again, fear—only this time, the soul’s greatest fear is itself. It is only when the soul becomes “Secure against its own” that “no treason it can fear,” but how can one be secure against one’s own mind? This phrasing questions the extent to which the soul can be trusted. Further, if the soul is divided and is at risk of self-sabotage, how reliable are one’s own perceptions? This calls to mind Emerson’s idea of subjectivity—that everything is seen through the subjective lens of consciousness. Consciousness is an “imperial friend” in that it mediates one’s perceptions, but it also limits the self from true objectivity. Knowledge of one’s own subjectivity might indeed make one feel like consciousness is “the most agonizing Spy—/An Enemy—could send.” Critically examining one’s subjectivity creates a kind of double surveillance—the self is studying the self. The awareness of constant scrutiny from within might indeed be “agonizing.”

Although the first stanza introduces the idea of a divided and untrustworthy relationship to the self, the end of the poem takes a positive turn. Rather than fear of treason, the last lines posit that the soul “should stand in Awe” of itself. There are several ways to interpret this awe. As Dickinson points out in another of her poems, “No Rack can torture me,” the freedom of the soul gives one a sense of “Liberty.” Whatever befalls one in the physical world can be borne by the soul, which remains unaffected. In the last poem, “The Soul unto itself,” Dickinson might be repeating this sentiment—the power of the soul lies in its ability to keep company with only itself. A second interpretation might concern the actual function of the self or soul. One’s ability to reason, to perceive, to think, and to have agency over one’s life independent of others (“Itself—its Sovereign—Of itself”) can be powerful and awe-inspiring, too.

“The Soul unto itself,” is unique in the group of poems studied in this paper in its examination of the internal relationship between the soul and itself rather than between soul and body or the distance between the soul and the self. Unlike the first poem, “I am afraid to own a Body—,” and the second poem, “The Body grows without,” this poem does not attempt to situate the self. Instead, the lens has moved closer, examining the way in which the soul defines and relates to itself. And unlike the third poem, “I cannot see my soul but know ‘tis there,” this poem does not situate the self
outside of the soul, but rather sees the soul as divided, “unto itself.” Another unique aspect of “A Soul unto itself” is that it ends on a positive note—the idea of standing in awe of oneself, rather than in fear or intimidation. However, despite the differences in content, the poem’s references to distrust, fear, and discomfort with the self are consistent with Dickinson’s other poems on the subject. The narrow focus of “The Soul unto itself” highlights a central question underlying all four poems: what does it mean to be a self? Dickinson’s answer is complex: being a self means being divided and sometimes distrustful of that division, but it also means standing in awe of what is contained in one person.

These poems represent a sample of Dickinson’s varying approaches to the topic of the self. Driven, perhaps, by curiosity and a desire to define the ambiguous philosophical and religious lines between the mind, body, soul, and self, Dickinson attempts to understand the self by exploring it from many angles. Her approaches range from examining the idea of ownership to exploring the interior division of the self. Across approaches, though, the poems are unified in their emphasis on discomfort, which is conveyed via fear, timidity, and power struggles. No matter how Dickinson frames the subject, she cannot entirely escape from its uncomfortable nature. Throughout her life, the poet returns to the subject—reflecting, perhaps, that near-universal human desire to make sense of the unknown.
Works Cited


In his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Langston Hughes penned the phrase, “My soul has grown deep like rivers” (1254). Weaving the profound pain of the African American experience with the symbolism of the primordial river, Hughes recognized the inherent power of water as a means of spiritual communication and religious significance. Branching off from the traditional notion of the American pastoral as typified by poets such as Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, African American poets emerging from the Harlem Renaissance established a more nuanced pastoral landscape embedded within urban cultures, utilizing water in particular as a reflection of African American spirituality, identity, and experience. In drawing upon writers such as Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps, the fluid pastoral is revealed as a mechanism of spiritual, cultural, and physical renewal, even in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance’s urban landscapes. Through a discussion of Harlem’s collective reinterpretation of the American pastoral, this paper conjectures that the literary landscapes of the Harlem Renaissance not only evolve American poetics and modern natural aesthetics to be increasingly inclusive of multiple understandings
of the pastoral, but also widen the understanding and scope of nature to include transatlantic and urban environments through the ideas of rebirth, survival, and conservation.

From violent thunderstorms to crashing waves, water is an ever-moving element that mirrors the constant flow of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance era and America’s Great Migration. As floods of African Americans traversed from the Black South to urban centers like New York City, Harlem became the heart of Black culture—what civil rights leader and prominent writer James Weldon Johnson called “the Negro capital of the world” (Gates and Smith 930). Accordingly, Johnson’s poetry anthology, *Book of American Negro Verse*, seeks a divergence from dialect verse and encourages a more modernist approach to poetry, instigating an increasingly unstructured form within African American poetry: a movement from tradition into modernity (931).

Along with heavily influencing the form of poetry within the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson promotes engagement with African heritage as one of the pivotal movements of this era, transitioning the African American literary tradition through his close association of water and religion in his poem, “The Creation (A Negro Sermon).” He writes, “The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground / And the rivers ran to the sea; / And God smiled again” (Johnson 77). The personification of the water intermingled with joyful religious overtones reveals water as a source of happiness and a connection to a higher power. The rivers and lakes inherent to creation, as Johnson intimates, are thus intertwined with the birth of humanity. In braiding African American religious values with the nature of water in Johnson’s poetry, this literature reflects a broader shift in America’s evolving understanding of the pastoral to include fluidity.

Johnson’s union between American ideologies of religion and the pastoral, specifically the pastoral images of water, is further echoed in Countee Cullen’s poem, “The Shroud of Color.” In this poem, Cullen melds physical and spiritual realms when he describes his experience as a colored individual, writing:

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For whom the sea has strained her honeyed throat
Till all the world was sea, and I a boat
Unmoored, on what strange quest I willed to float;
Who wore a many-colored coat of dreams,
Thy gift, O Lord—I whom sun-dabbled streams
Have washed. (1307)
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Cullen draws on the iconic images of biblical narratives, including allusions to Joseph and Noah in particular, in order to stress the sincerity of his religious beliefs and the spiritual cleansing he feels. Additionally, envisioning a future where land no longer exists, he implies the inevitable apocalypse and the equivocal nature of water, signifying a recognition of spiritual purpose and the necessity of an ascetic, almost monastic, lifestyle. The “sun-dabbled streams” have a purifying, baptismal effect on the narrator, adding another facet to his relationship with water and deity as an uplifting, edifying influence. Water is thus utilized by Cullen to illuminate his theological impetus in finding isolation and purpose in life, communicated through the spiritual and biblical symbolism inherent to water.

Cullen’s state of uneasiness toward water is not atypical in the historical sense because of the double meaning of the ocean as a source of terror and solace within African American history. The genesis of hardships for African Americans on the North American continent lies in the travel of Africans across the Middle Passage, where Black hostages suffered “psychological terror and torture at the hands of whites” as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean (Glave 21). Yet simultaneously, the ocean could provide a place of solace for Black seamen, as a place of racial equality with everyone equally subject to the overpowering force of nature. Scholar Dianne Glave conjectures that “from ancient Africa to the modern-day United States, people of African descent have continued the legacy of their relationship with the land,” revealing that despite facing unbearable circumstances crossing the waves of the Atlantic, the contemporary African American community interprets the ocean as a means of inspiration and a transatlantic connection to a longstanding natural heritage and tradition (3).

The rekindling of connection between a common African ancestry, the pastoral ideal, and the modern African American through water is a common motif in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, a notion revealed in exploration of the image of the river as a symbol of African heritage. Hughes heavily emphasizes the significance of rivers in providing the poetic transatlantic connection between Africa and the United States in his deliberate use of this heavily signified image. His rhythmic, musical words provide insight into the challenging nature of a dual heritage, a heritage from both Africa and America. He captures the depth and the wide, transatlantic scope of the river in juxtaposing his “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” with a literary exploration of rivers both in Africa and America. He writes, “I looked upon the Nile,” and follows this with “I heard the singing of the Mississippi” (Hughes 1254). Positioning these rivers in such
close proximity to the narrator and to each other within the poem diminishes the physical distance between these bodies of water, successfully connecting the two continents and conveying the challenges of dual pasts.

As Hughes reveals, the modern African American struggles to maintain a sense of identity with fluctuating definitions of ancestry and Americanism and the tension between balancing these cultural influences in the face of modernity. Gwendolyn B. Bennett’s aptly titled poem “Heritage,” continues to invite these ideas into the collective African American cultural consciousness, drawing on images of water similar to those of Hughes. She describes a scene, saying, “I want to breathe the lotus flow’r . . . With tendrils drinking at the Nile” (Bennett 1228). The personification of the flower and river’s relationship heightens the spirituality eminent within the poem, giving the pastoral a spiritual consciousness. Her inclusion of the Nile represents her yearning for her African American heritage, a longing for the past in an attempt to connect to a sense of home. Countee Cullen’s poem of the same name reiterates these feelings by relating images of water and Africa with religious symbolism, evident when he begins his poem with, “What is Africa to me: / Copper sun or scarlet sea.” In the culminating stanza he writes, “Quench my pride and cool my blood, / Lest I perish in the flood,” implying the didactic relationship between nature and God (Cullen 1314). “Perish in the flood” refers to the biblical story of the prophet Noah while the “scarlet sea” alludes to the Red Sea nestled between Africa and Asia and can also connote Moses’ turning of water into blood. In their delineations between religion and water, both Cullen and Bennett effectively portray the spirituality attributed to African heritage and fluid nature.

The transatlantic connections between Africa and America are further intensified by the use of water as a mystical property, endowing it with an ambiguous, yet effective spirituality. James D. Corrothers develops this image in his poem “The Negro Singer,” where he illustrates the African setting through water-filled descriptions, “Fetch water, dripping, over desert miles, / From clear Nyanzas and mysterious Niles” (29). The use of the Bantu word for river in the plural form, “nyanzas,” alongside the “mysterious” Nile, a river imbued with a longstanding tradition of religious significance, incites within the reader an awareness of the plentitude of these bodies of water not only in Africa but within America as well, connecting these two fragmented continents through water and poetry. The mythology often associated with rivers only strengthens their efficacy within Harlem Renaissance poetry as symbols of ancient cleansing, and in some cases, the afterlife. Alongside Corrothers’s transcendent use of
water, esteemed poet Fenton Johnson similarly mentions, “Gin is better than all the water in Lethe” as the concluding line in his poem titled “The Scarlet Woman” (123). Lethe refers to the Greek mythological river of the underworld, associated most closely with oblivion and truth (Robinson 79). The motif of the arcane nature of rivers, so intimately related with the longstanding tradition of African American spirituality, thus only intensifies water’s symbolic significance.

The rejuvenating, mystic properties of water and religion are native to notions of untouched nature, but certainly not to be separated from the modern environments of urban settings where they retain their inherent magic. Contemporary African American and environmental scholar Kimberly A. Smith writes that, “the writers of the Harlem Renaissance portrayed the city as a potential reservoir of energy and creativity that could revitalize American society” (164). Smith describes the aesthetic climate of the Harlem Renaissance with language that is associated with water, namely “reservoir” and “revitalize,” to demonstrate the spiritually rejuvenating qualities of the urban landscape that Harlem provided to the African American communities of New York. While early representations of cities in relation to the African American are often associated with corruption and bleakness, the Harlem neighborhood effloresced into a center of African American culture and life. Smith elaborates in saying, “Thus the city landscape, perhaps even more than the rural landscape, is a field for the play of human creativity: it is an opportunity for humans to fulfill their co-partnerships with God in finishing Creation” (185). Engaging in this transcendent act of creation, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance entertain both spirituality and the rejuvenating and life-giving effects of the city, particularly Harlem, in their presentations of water. As water gives life to creation, so too does the city of Harlem give life to the African American communities and cultural rebirth.

This need for water to sustain human life parallels the necessity of Harlem’s culture as one that provides a creative outlet for twentieth-century African American poetics. As lakes, oceans, and rivers are vital to the health of ecosystems and humanity, literary portrayals of rain and storms similarly sustain poetry through their symbolism. The deep sense of spirituality imbued in water that descends from the sky to the human level has significant implications in that rain saturates all it touches without bias or motivation, affecting the bucolic as well as the urban landscape. Poet Joseph S. Cotter Jr. connects rain directly to God in his rhythmic verse featured in “Rain Song,” which begins, “On the dusty earth-drum / Beats the falling rain” and ends with “God, the Great Musician / Calling life anew” (156). The burgeoning of life and water in relation to God
directly designates rebirth and new life within nature as connected to spirituality, a notion not unnoticed or forgotten within Harlem’s urban communities. Rain’s musical qualities are emphasized alongside religion, a particularly meaningful notion in the context of the intense musicality that defines African American Christian tradition. Cotter’s steady beat of rain serves to celebrate the power and reliability of God, a joyous reminder of heavenly awareness and creation. Another perception of rain is one of spiritual warning, as expressed in Alex Rogers’s “The Rain Song.” In this poem, rain is repeatedly used as a signal for the Christian idea of the Second Coming, a symbolic cleansing of the Earth, and is thus associated with spirituality as both a baptismal and life-giving symbol within Harlem Renaissance poetics.

While rain can symbolically represent the crying of the Earth, bodily tears present another form of water within Harlem Renaissance poetry as vessels of spirituality, inextricably connected to the aesthetics of the somatic. Ecocritic Anissa Wardi notes that “Bodies of water articulate a double registry of meaning, referring to oceans, rivers, lakes, and swamps and simultaneously to the human body, which is comprised primarily of water” (4). Harlem Renaissance poets consistently place images of tears alongside representations of religious fervor, and these personal waterways are the most intimate and individual of all. Jessie Faust writes “prayers and tears” (166) and “Oh little Christ, why do you weep / Why flow your tears so sore” (162) in the poems “Oblivion” and “Christmas Eve in France,” respectively. W. E. B. Du Bois places “the tears of our mothers” in the middle of his poem, “A Litany of Atlanta,” which acts as a prayer addressed to God (49). Similarly, Arna Bontemps’s “Golgotha Is a Mountain,” a poem revered for its contemplative spirituality, portrays water as spiritual in saying “Some women wept heavily that night; / Their tears are flowing still. They have made a river” (1240). Here, a body of water, the river, takes upon itself a more literal interpretation of “body” in the formation of a river from the tears of women. The consistent pairing of tears with praying and religion is a recognition of the spirituality inherent to the human body. The human body is dependent on water physically, and as witnessed in these poetic examples, spiritually as well.

The human body’s dependency on water mirrors the human reliance on global pollution, an ever-present force manipulating the natural landscape. While pollution is global in its influence, it permanently resides within the constructs of urban areas that have the highest populations of poor people of color, affecting them disproportionately (Thomas and Ritzdorf 220).
Illustrations of water by Harlem Renaissance writers, who would have intimately faced this pollution firsthand, present an early spiritual recognition of the importance of preservation in the midst of urban modernity. Nature writer Wendell Berry outlines two forms of environmentalism: the preservation of wild spaces and the conservation of limited natural resources. (28). Defining conservation as “good work,” Berry writes that “it cannot ignore either the nature of individual places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known” (36). The essence of nature is largely ambiguous, rapidly evolving and unknown, as Berry describes. However, in a literary fashion, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance strive to make the spirituality of nature, African American history, and the beauty of the urban environment known through honoring it. As Berry informs, this is the “good work” inherent to conservation.

Like ancient rivers shaping the deep canyons of America, the alterations of Harlem Renaissance literature upon the cultural consciousness of America alter the modern conceptions of landscape and the American understanding of nature. The cyclical, connected patterns of water’s movement in nature reflect the interconnectedness of the Harlem Renaissance poets and their poetry. Thus, this interrelated literature mirrors the rivers, oceans, and lakes of the terrestrial sphere in an ideological one. Contemporary novelist and essayist Toni Morrison clarifies the connection of literature to water in writing:

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.” (qtd. in Zinsser 89)

Morrison’s words echo the poetry and the rhetoric of memory found in Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” where Hughes says that he knows “rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human veins” (1254). Indeed, there is something inexplicably transcendent and ahistorical about water, a force that makes up the majority of the human body, the element that covers the majority of the world. Ever-present and surrounding, water is the spiritual nourishment that enlivens the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, perpetually suffused into the literary memory and pastoral identity of America.
Works Cited


Criterion
When Evelyn Waugh released *Brideshead Revisited* in 1945, literary critics attacked the text with a firestorm of scathing reviews; they could not stomach the overtly religious material presented in his new novel. The most notorious of these came from the American critic Edmund Wilson, who referred to *Brideshead Revisited* as a “Catholic tract” and claimed that in *Brideshead* “something essential [had] been left out of Waugh.” That “something” Wilson referred to was the biting satire that Waugh was so widely known for (Stannard 246–47). Wilson defined the difference between *Brideshead* and Waugh’s early satires: “In the earlier novels . . . there was always a very important element of perverse, unregenerate self-will that [gave] rise to confusion and impudence.” He then explains that in *Brideshead*, Waugh transforms this “perverse element” into sin (247). Wilson, astonished at the explicitness of Waugh’s Catholicism in *Brideshead Revisited*, overlooks allusions to Waugh’s faith in his earlier works. After all, Waugh had been a Catholic since 1930, and a close reading of his early satires reveals that the direct religious elements in *Brideshead Revisited* are present, yet subtle in works that Waugh produced before his official reception into the Catholic Church. *Decline and Fall*, published
in 1928, follows Oxford student turned schoolteacher turned jailbird Paul Pennyfeather as he fumbles his way through a rapidly de-civilizing England. *Vile Bodies*, one of Waugh’s most lucrative satires, depicts a world that has lost all of its moral bearings; the plot consists of a myriad of 1920s-era British “Bright Young Things” involved in parties, rampant infidelity, and shallow religion. These early satires portray Waugh’s moral convictions and prefigure his advocacy of a thoroughly Catholic worldview by holding up a critical mirror to the kind of society that promotes such “perverse element[s]” (Stannard 247). Broadly speaking, the goal of this paper is to examine the underlying moral convictions that make up the narrative worlds of *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* and to consider how those convictions may have assisted Waugh on his route to the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roots of Theological Modernism

The Modernist theological controversy that frames the moral world of *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* is essential for a thorough understanding of how Waugh related to that world. At the start of the twentieth century, Modernist theology started to gain traction within the Catholic Church. Proponents of theological Modernism aimed their efforts at diminishing the influence of the scholastic tradition and incorporating elements of higher criticism, both historical and biblical, into the teaching of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, advocates of theological Modernism promoted ideologies that undermined crucial Catholic doctrines like the divinity of Christ, the Incarnation, a literal resurrection, and the inspiration of scripture. In addition, Modernists tended to emphasize the experience of personal faith over dogma. Father George Tyrrell, one of the foremost leaders of Modernism within the Catholic Church, explained the theological positon as such: “To complete the reconciliation of the old Catholic tradition with the new thought and the new social aspirations” (137). Debates about Modernism were certainly not limited to Catholicism, and many of these issues were being explored within other Christian denominations during this period, especially high church Protestantism. In 1922, the Anglican vicar C.W. Emmet described the Modernist in his own tradition as one who “agrees that we can no longer appeal to the authority of the Bible, creeds or church as something fixed and decisive” and who acknowledges “that the Spirit of God is speaking in diverse channels and by diverse voices . . . and that the church must be
brave enough to suffer a great variety of opinion within its walls” (Emmet 563). Clearly aware of the similarities between Catholic Modernism and Protestant liberalism, St. Pope Pius X denounced the following position in his 1907 encyclical Lamentabili Sane, which he composed with the intention of officially condemning the movement: “Modern Catholicism can be reconciled with true science only if it is transformed into a non-dogmatic Christianity; that is to say, into a broad and liberal Protestantism” (65). In other words, St. Pope Pius X believed that any acceptance of Modernism within Catholicism would ultimately lead to a conflation of traditional Catholic theology with liberal Protestantism—an outcome he tried to thwart by condemning Modernist positions and, ultimately, by excommunicating priests like George Tyrrell. Curiously, another religious development was occurring in American religion during this same period: Pentecostalism. The “bedrock” of this branch of Christianity was “the emotional power of conversion, the suddenness of its transformative effects, and the unmediated character of the individual’s direct encounter with God” (Jacobsen 7). While Pentecostalism remained decidedly non-doctrinal, it manifested a full-blown belief in the personal experience of the individual as the ultimate definition of faith. Indeed, the Modernist controversy extended far beyond the bounds of one particular denomination and certainly beyond the bounds of the 1910s.

The Implications of Theological Modernism

Two central characteristics of theological Modernism are a belief in the uncertain nature of truth and the reliance on subjective human experience to define faith. In his novels, Waugh turns a satirical eye toward these Modernist ideals and presents his readers with a multitude of characters who roam aimlessly through decadent and meaningless lives. His characters amusingly display the emptiness of a world that has lost its moral compass, an illustration of the “lamentable results” that a world without any religious principle is bound to have. For Waugh, the foundation of Western Civilization is as inextricable from Christianity as Christianity is inextricable from the Roman Catholic Church. He says as much in a 1930 letter to the priest under whose instruction he entered the Church: “I realize that the Roman Catholic Church is the only genuine form of Christianity. Also, that Christianity is the essential and formative constituent of western culture” (as qtd. in Patey 41). The fact that Waugh titled one of his early works Decline and Fall, an allusion to Edward Gibbon’s famous text, The History
of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, indicates his disillusion with the state of England in 1928. Yet unlike Gibbon’s six-volume piece, it is not Christianity that is to be blamed for England’s decay in Waugh’s Decline and Fall. In fact, it is the curious lack of faith, especially among clergymen, that has added to the nation’s deterioration. While Waugh was not yet advocating for a total return to established orthodoxy, his representation of paradoxical clergymen and shallow evangelists indicates his convictions about the problems of modern religion, including its chaotic effects on civilization.

Early in Decline and Fall, the reader is introduced to a former Anglican churchman named Mr. Prendergast, a satirical-portrait clergyman who rejects tradition in favor of religious modernization. After losing his faith and forfeiting his position as a vicar, Mr. Prendergast is now employed as a schoolteacher alongside the novel’s protagonist Paul Pennyfeather. Almost immediately upon Pennyfeather’s arrival to Llanabba Castle in Wales, Mr. Prendergast informs his new acquaintance of his former life as a parson and the moment that his “doubts” began:

I’ve not known an hour’s of real happiness since. You see it wasn’t the sort of Doubt about Cain’s wife or the Old Testament miracles or the consecration of Archbishop Parker. I’d been taught how to explain those things at college. No, it was something deeper than all that. I couldn’t understand why God made the world at all. … You see how fundamental that is. Once granted the first step—Tower of Babel, Babylonian captivity, Incarnation, Church, bishops, incense, everything—but what I couldn’t see, and what I can’t see now, is, why did it all begin? … I asked my bishop; he didn’t know. He said that he didn’t think the point really arose as far as a parish priest was concerned. (Decline and Fall 38–39)

This speech comically sums up the dangers that theological Modernism posed for orthodox believers. The type of Modernist biblical interpretation that Mr. Prendergast learned in college is the exact type of biblical criticism that Pope St. Pius X condemned in the Pascendi—another denunciation of Modernism—in which he wrote that Modernists take the Bible as a “human work, made by men for men,” and denies its inspiration in the “Catholic sense” (Pascendi Domini Gregis 24). Modernists believed that they could innovate biblical interpretation and categorically deny the historicity of the sacred texts. The consequence for Mr. Prendergast is that after being “taught how to explain” away the Old Testament miracles as merely symbolic, he
can no longer “grant the first step” (Decline and Fall 38–9). Something as fundamental to the Christian religion as God’s purpose in creating the world is now completely abstruse to Mr. Prendergast. Even Prendergast’s bishop is at a loss to answer his questions and believes such concerns to be irrelevant for a parish priest, comically revealing the state of both local parsons and clergymen of authority. Ironically, Mr. Prendergast follows this speech by an acknowledgement that it is time to “go down for prayers,” as if Waugh is pointing out the comedy in a former parson wishing to retain religious formality after losing all of its principle (39). As the narrative progresses, Mr. Prendergast’s doubts never cease, but his conscience is “comforted” when he hears that there is a new class of theologians called “modern churchmen,” who “draw the full salary of a beneficed clergyman and need not commit [themselves] to any religious belief” (188). Mr. Prendergast’s realization that his lack of faith no longer precludes him from a religious career is comical because it draws attention to the contradictory practice of employing clerics who no longer hold to tenets of the Christian faith—an irony that Waugh could not overlook nor reconcile.

Mr. Prendergast possesses similarly ironic views on Christian marriage. When fellow schoolteacher and implied child molester Captain Grimes complains of his impending marriage to the daughter of the school’s headmaster, Prendergast expresses a thoroughly negative view of the institution. Referring to procreation and companionship as “nothing short of disastrous,” Prendergast reveals his utter incompatibility with traditional Christian thought on marriage and family (Decline and Fall 131). Not only is Prendergast unable to understand why God made the world but he is also unable to comprehend any benefits of matrimony. The irony accelerates when this former parson returns to his religious career as a “modern churchman” and winds up ministering at a prison where he finds that “criminals are just as bad as boys” and is unable to conduct orderly chapel services (223). Waugh casts Prendergast’s death as mockingly satiric when the parson is murdered at the hands of a violent religious extremist, who claims that the mysteries of scripture, while inaccessible to most, are perfectly “plain” to him (239). Prendergast, who accepts the mutability of scripture and adheres to no specific doctrines, has his head sawed off by a fanatic who believes in his own personal revelation. The news of this “modern churchman’s” demise is spread irreverently during chapel, and passes “almost unnoticed” (248). Indeed, the narrator satirically points out that any serious investigation into
Prendergast’s murder may have “discouraged” the novel prison reforms that the jail was undergoing (248). In other words, it was better that the murder of this modern parson go unpunished than the progress of improving the prison be stalled by an inconvenient murder. If Anglican churchmanship was once a venerated and respectable profession, Waugh satirically points out that by the early twentieth century it is so no longer. Furthermore, Waugh illustrates the flaws of using modern theology to thwart the onset of humanistic, progressive secularism.

**Faith as Experience**

Another distinctly modern Christian phenomenon that developed parallel to theological Modernism is the explosive growth of the Pentecostal movement that spread rapidly in the twentieth century. Waugh uses his satire to comment upon this emerging religious development, and creates one of his most memorable characters in the form of Mrs. Melrose Ape, a preacher who sells her brand of religion through the means of entertainment and cheap, empty theology in *Vile Bodies*. The character of Mrs. Melrose Ape is indeed based on a real woman evangelist that took Hollywood by storm in the 1920s: Aimee Semple McPherson. Waugh names his female evangelist “Melrose Ape” both as a play on the double surname of his real-life model, and as an insulting blow to the nature of McPherson’s faith. An ape is not only categorically non-human but it also engages in imitation; the assertion is that McPherson’s gospel is only an imitation of a more substantial faith. Waugh later wrote in 1949 that “if the Christian revelation was true, then the [Catholic] Church was the society founded by Christ and all other bodies were only good so far as they had salvaged something from the wrecks of the Great Schism and the Reformation” (*Come Inside* 130). What separates this specific imitation of a deeper faith from the theological Modernism debated within the Catholic Church and High Anglicanism is that its objections to tradition are not primarily theological at all. Unlike Father George Tyrrell, Pentecostals were not interested in reconciling “tradition with new thought,” but instead valued religious experience above both theology and modern ideas. And while American Pentecostals generally interpreted the bible more literally and rejected most Modernist theological innovations, they had no essential unifying doctrines outside of generalized ideas about the work of the Holy Spirit and the practice of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues.
This meant that for early Pentecostals like McPherson, “dance did precede dogma” and religion as experience prevented many congregations from even adopting a statement of faith, much less taking coherent positions for or against doctrines like theological Modernism (Barfoot 497). In his book on Semple McPherson and the roots of Pentecostalism, religious studies scholar Chas. H. Barfoot offers a helpful definition of the movement that developed and spread so quickly in the twentieth century: “Pentecostalism may be best understood theologically as Pietistic spirituality. With roots in the German and English Protestant movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Pietistic spirituality is concerned with direct, inner experience with the Divine that transcends dogma or institutional religion” (Barfoot 502). This definition is similar to the Modernist theology reproached by St. Pope Pius X in Pascendi Dominici Gregis, in which he explains the Modernist definition of faith as a “certain special sense . . . implied within itself both as its own object and as its intrinsic cause” and condemns outright the idea that faith rests in the “experience of the individual” (7, 14). While Pentecostalism does not fall under the umbrella of theological Modernism in any official sense, some Pentecostal practices do align with Modernism in that they seek to redefine dogma and the nature of faith whilst placing an ever-increasing emphasis on the religious experience.

Mrs. Melrose Ape, like Aimee Semple McPherson, relies on this sort of religious experience to produce the faith that her movement stresses. If personal experience is the locus of faith, it is inevitable that the preaching of the gospel message become an enticing experience itself in order to produce the feelings that precipitate a change in perception. The necessity of enticement helps to explain the importance of personality and charisma in early Pentecostalism, and sheds light on why both McPherson and her caricature Mrs. Melrose Ape are referred to as “magnetic” (Vile Bodies 3). Like Semple McPherson, Mrs. Melrose Ape relies on entertainment value to spread her message, and employs an array of young women dressed up as “angels” to help her cause. The real Aimee Semple McPherson used nontraditional mediums like the radio and stage to reach a large population. In his book, Barfoot chronicles what he calls the “parallel” growths of Hollywood and Pentecostalism, and defines Semple McPherson’s ministry by its ability to “blend the secular with the sacred” like “no other Pentecostal evangelist of people’s religion before or since,” which included the raising of “red velvet curtains” prior to her sermons and an increased emphasis on
the collection plate as a means by which to support McPherson’s religious endeavors (Barfoot 172). All of this is humorously satirized in *Vile Bodies*, where Mrs. Melrose Ape and her “angels” quite literally perform aboard ships and at a party given by the Lady Metroland. During a rough sea voyage, Mrs. Melrose Ape questions a group of passengers about whether they are ready to meet their Maker, and her performance is telling: “We’re going to sing a song together, you and me . . . You’ll feel better for it body and soul. It’s a song of Hope . . . I know all about England, and I tell you straight, boys, I’ve got the goods for you. Hope’s what you want and hope’s what I got . . . Five bob for you steward, if you can shout me down” (*Vile Bodies* 17). Mrs. Melrose Ape’s literal advertising and selling of Hope, her claim that she has the “goods” for England, as well as her monetary bet with the steward, comically enact Semple McPherson’s notorious emphasis on donations as a means to continue her preaching. Nevertheless, this forced hymn does cause the partakers of her chorus to “feel the better for it” (19). It seems that Mrs. Melrose Ape partially succeeds in selling her version of Hope because these Bright Young Things are lacking something to hope in. The underlying assertion here is that without a substantial moral framework with which to build one’s life, people are apt to fall into various intellectual and emotional traps of imitative yet ultimately unsatisfying ideologies.

Mrs. Melrose Ape’s detection of this void in society and her inability to fill that gap culminates in the scene at Lady Metroland’s party. That an evangelist is selected to perform at a house party at the invitation of a brothel-owner is ironic enough, but the method of Mrs. Melrose Ape’s preaching is even more revealing. The sermon begins with the simple imperative, “Just you look at yourselves,” a statement that compels all of her listeners to reflect on their lives and to feel a degree of remorse for their behavior (*Vile Bodies* 137). Yet these moments of “self-doubt” are short lived, and that “favorite opening” of Mrs. Melrose Ape’s falls flat (137). Rather than produce any lasting religious sentiment, Mrs. Melrose Ape’s speech only impels the Bright Young Things to briefly recognize their wrongs and then continue their self-centered lifestyles. Nina, the protagonist’s on-again, off-again fiancée, thinks about how she once loved Adam, but will go on to marry another and proceed to commit adultery with Adam in spite of her vows. Another socialite, Mary Mouse, “shed two little tears” at the speech but still agrees to become one of the Maharajah’s official concubines (*Vile Bodies* 137). This behavior is fittingly summed up by the
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resident gossip columnist as “fashionable piety” (137). Any moments of clarity are quickly clouded when all break into censure and laughter, glad that the “awkward moment” has passed (138). For all her talk of having the “goods,” Mrs. Melrose Ape sells nothing (17). The failure of Mrs. Melrose Ape’s evangelistic endeavor represents the more general failure of purely emotional appeals to moral or religious reform, and suggests that people who may be initially won by such appeals are ultimately lost. In this, Waugh agrees with Pope St. Pius X “that faith is not a blind sentiment of religion welling up from the depths of the subconscious under the impulse of the heart and the motion of a will trained to morality” (“Oath Against Modernism”). Due to her emphasis on faith as experience, Mrs. Melrose Ape’s preaching is ill-equipped to produce any long-lasting effects on individuals. Whereas religion that relies on appeals to emotion is fleeting and malleable, religious thought informed by inspired scripture and church teaching is stable.

An Alternative to Modernism

Waugh’s satirical opposition to theological Modernism extends beyond his caricatures of modern churchmen and charismatic preachers. In both *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, Waugh presents his readers with a world devoid of objective morality, where characters exist in a dizzying combination of meaninglessness and decadence. Contrary to what some critics have argued concerning the frivolity and joust with which Waugh treats the modern, Waugh is serious in his rebuke. By definition, the satirist is almost always a moralist, since to criticize without implying an alternative perspective would be fruitless. The fact that Waugh presents the world of the early twentieth century in such a mocking manner proves his own discomfort and disapproval of many of its principles, which aligns him with the sort of traditionally orthodox views affirmed in the aforementioned anti-modernist papal documents. In addition to rejecting the Modernist proposition of faith as experience, Waugh also rebuffs humanism and utilitarianism while subtly affirming traditional Christian views on original sin, the sanctity of human life, and marriage through a variety of characters and circumstances in these two early novels.

That Waugh rejects both humanism and utilitarianism is evident through his portraits of the prison reformer Sir Wilfred-Lucas Dockery and the architect Otto Silenus in *Decline and Fall*. Sir Wilfred Lucas-Dockery
naively insists that all criminal activity is simply the result of the “repressed desire for aesthetic expression,” and therefore forces every event in the prison to fit within his theory and expects prisoners to be grateful for the opportunity to be part of his experiments (*Decline and Fall* 226). Clearly, Lucas-Dockery’s humanism has its limits. After the unnamed religious madman saws off Prendergast’s head, Lucas-Dockery attributes the act to the former carpenter’s “frustrated creative urge,” and is relieved that no investigation will endanger the continuation of his experiments (244). While daydreaming about the future accolades his research will receive, Lucas-Dockery is interrupted by a report that men are eating paste because it tastes better than their porridge (231–32). Lucas-Dockery proceeds to reprimand the messenger because he has not “ascertained all the facts” as to whether or not the paste has any nutritional benefit, and proceeds to ignore the obviously inhumane food being served at the facility (232). The irony of Lucas-Dockery’s self-serving humanism displays Waugh’s own sense of the shallowness of that ideology. Neither does Waugh affirm the cynical viewpoint of Professor Otto Silenus, an ultramodern architect who prefers to construct buildings that “house machines, not men” (159). Contrary to Lucas-Dockery’s modern humanism, Otto Silenus represents a uniquely modern disparagement about the state of mankind: “How obscure and gross [man’s] prancing and chattering on his little stage of evolution! How loathsome and beyond words all the thoughts and self-approval of this biological by-product!” (160). He also calls humanity “equally alien from the being of Nature and the doing of the machine, the vile becoming!” in reference to its position between animal and machine (160). Silenus longs for the “elimination of the human element” in art and claims that “man is never beautiful; he is never happy except when he becomes the channel for the distribution of mechanical forces” (159). The seriousness with which both Lucas-Dockery and Silenus take their ideologies is comical precisely because of the absurdity with which Waugh invigorates their characters, and by extension, their ideas. Both humanism, which stresses the innate goodness of human beings, and utilitarianism, which defines value only in terms of function, are distinctively modern philosophies. Both are also fundamentally opposed to orthodox Christianity, and especially to Catholicism, because one elevates the human to a position of natural goodness and the other desecrates the human to the level of a machine.
Through Waugh’s rejection of these modern ideologies, he discreetly upholds a worldview that aligns with traditional Christian doctrines, like the concepts of original sin and humans being made in the image of God. When Paul Pennyfeather learns of Grimes’s alleged death, he confesses that he cannot truly be dead and locates the former schoolmaster as of the “immortals”:

He was a life force. Sentenced to death in Flanders, he popped up again in Wales; drowned in Wales, he emerged in South America; engulfed in the dark mystery of Ergon Mire, he would rise again somewhere at sometime, shaking from his limbs the dusty integuments of the tomb. Surely he had followed in the Bacchic train of distant Arcady, and played on the reeds of myth by forgotten streams, and taught the childish satyrs the art of love? Had he not suffered unscathed the fearful dooms of all the offended gods of all the histories, fire, brimstone, and yawning earthquakes, plague and pestilence? (*Decline and Fall* 269)

This illustration of Grimes as a “life force” is an acknowledgement of a universal human corruption—one that persists despite all natural and personal tragedy. In other words, Grimes’s immorality reflects a sinful nature that is embedded within all of humanity; one that is more grievously demonstrated in Grimes than in most. Contrary to the philosophy of modern prison reformers, crime is not merely a “frustrated creative urge” but the natural propensity of the human heart. Yet the acknowledgement of a corrupt human nature does not mean that “man is never beautiful” as Silenus claims, and this extreme is just as opposed to orthodox theology as Lucas-Dockery’s philosophy (*Decline and Fall* 159). That Waugh does not adhere to Silenus’s line of thought is clear through his treatment of death in his satire. For all his callous handling of deaths and suicides in these early works, Waugh calls the reader’s attention to the grim reality of how death is perceived in his own generation. In the world of *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, life is cheap and death is taken lightly. That this is at all comic to readers exhibits the erroneousness of a society that does not value human life. Countless characters in Waugh’s early satires suffer tragic fates, and their demise is almost always handled with brevity and lightheartedness, revealing how far modern society has strayed from the traditional beliefs associated with the human person. Take, for instance, Flossie’s death at a hotel in *Vile Bodies*. It might seem amusing when the owner of the hotel selfishly comments on the passing (“what I mind, is having a death in the house and all the fuss. It
doesn’t do anyone any good having people killing themselves in a house”), but by exposing the levity with which characters observe tragedy, Waugh is exposing their unethical outlook (Vile Bodies 78).

Waugh does not only satirize modern ideologies; he also pokes fun at modern conceptions of sex and marriage in Vile Bodies. After the on-again, off-again couple Nina and Adam first have sex, Nina hates it. Even after Adam assures her that she will grow to enjoy it, she claims that she would rather do almost anything else. In order to show the degree to which premature sex can ruin relationships, Waugh writes of the couple’s treatment of one another after their rendezvous: “Adam was inclined to be egotistical and despondent; Nina was rather grown up and disillusioned and distinctly cross” (Vile Bodies 121). Both also take marriage relatively lightly, in stark contrast to the Catholic affirmation of its sacredness in the “Syllabus of Errors,” a Papal document that reasserts the sacred nature of the marital union despite Modernist tendencies to undervalue the sacrament. After several engagements, break-ups, and re-engagements, Adam tells Nina, “I don’t know if it sounds absurd . . . but I do feel that a marriage ought to go on—for quite a long time,” as opposed to the traditional idea that marriage should extend until death (169). Concerning happy marriages, Nina doesn’t believe that “divine things like that ever do happen,” and both go on to participate in an adulterous affair after Nina marries a competing love interest (105). The ultimate culmination of this affair is the conception of a child, which Nina complains is “too awful” (315). Nina’s lack of moral grounding has not prepared her for the self-sacrifice that raising a child necessitates, and she cannot conceive of a world in which her own desires are not at the center. Once again, Waugh’s satirical treatment of all this implies that he at least recognized the misplaced desire that the modern world imbued sex with, and was perhaps beginning to consider alternative views of human sexuality.

Evelyn Waugh once likened his conversion to “stepping across the chimney piece out of a Looking-Glass world, where everything is an absurd caricature, into the real world God made” (Pearce 210). The worlds of Decline and Fall and Vile Bodies are a good indicator of what Waugh meant by the phrase “absurd caricature.” Waugh recognized the absurdity of a world without God—a mindset clearly visible in his early satires with how he depicts amusing but empty characters. It is naïve for critics like Edmund Wilson, therefore, to think of Waugh’s early literature as merely jovial and
overlook the clear moral implications that his satire produced. If one looks closely, it is overwhelmingly clear that from his earliest work that Waugh took issue with religion that was more fashionable than traditional and that the moral convictions that led Waugh to embrace a Catholic faith only became more explicit in *Brideshead Revisited*. 
Works Cited


How Drag Culture Resolves Tensions in Victorian Shakespearean Cross-Dressing
Or, Slay, Feste, Slay

Isaac Robertson

Madame Le Gateau Chocolat sashayed onto the Globe stage during Emma Rice’s production of Twelfth Night during the Summer of Love 2017. Combining sequins and chest hair, this gigantic drag queen dominated the stage as Feste the clown, portraying the usually manic character as a solemn and maternal guide—a fringe prophet. This production, part of Rice’s final goodbye due to the political pressures that often follow unconventional performances, brings to attention (and to criticism) the use and possible misuse of contemporary drag culture within Shakespeare adaptations.

Shakespeare and cross-dressing have a rich historical relationship. Beyond the Elizabethan tradition of men playing all female roles, several of his characters specifically cross-dress in various plays. Shortly after Shakespeare’s death, at least partially due to a “steady attack on the practice” by “preachers and polemicists” (Howard 418), cross-dressed acting fell out of favor and women played their own parts (the calls against cross-dressing in acting
were being made long before Shakespeare, as “provocative to sin” [6], as characterized in Phillip Stubbes’s *The Anatomie of Abuses*). However, even cross-dressed characters (which remained in the script) continued to be reviled, at least in Victorian England, as evidenced by the infamous story of Boulton and Park. After loitering in their costumes following a performance, these two actors were arrested for cross-dressing. The original charge allowed police to search both Boulton and Park, which subsequently led to their incarceration for being gay men. It should be made clear, however, that “Boulton and Park were not arrested for sodomy. Boulton and Park were arrested for crimes of fashion” (Carriger). Of particular interest to my project, however, is not only the negotiation of cross-dressed characters in Victorian adaptations of Shakespeare plays, but how these tensions complicate a claim made by Lynn Voskuil in her revolutionary book on Victorian theater, *Acting Naturally*.

Within the book, Voskuil refutes the assumptions made by performance theorists and post-structuralists that there is a divide between the theatrical and the authentic. Instead, she claims that in Victorian England, “theatricality and authenticity often functioned dynamically together to construct the symbolic typologies by which the English knew themselves as individuals, as a public, and as a nation” (2). Instead of theatricality undermining the authentic experience, Victorians found an authentic mode within theater and theatricalized those things which were most authentic to them (3). So how does this conceptual shift interact with cross-dressing? It was, after all, an identity-bending practice seen not only as inauthentic but as directly signaling deviance. By any means, Boulton and Park were not seen as authenticating themselves through their performance by the authorities who arrested them. Thus, while *theatrical* cross-dressing was permitted, *authentic* cross-dressing was not. An important factor here lies in the two-tiered nature of performance for cross-dressed characters, a factor for which Lynn Voskuil’s theory does not fully make room. In the first instance of theatricality, an actor inhabits a character—Portia or Innogen or another. However, there is a second step, wherein the character on stage (Portia) enacts another, ambiguous theatricality (e.g., Balthazar, Fidele). Although this third-tier theatricality was not widely accepted in Victorian times (the implication of authenticity would have been too damaging), paradoxically, when today’s ideas of cross-dressing, drag, identity, and culture are taken into consideration and performance, many of these inconsistencies are resolved and Voskuil’s vision is restored.
In making this argument, I will need to transition through different spaces of temporality. To do this, I take up the banner of Madhavi Menon by calling upon a kind of homohistory, a “straddling [of] chronological periods—[Shakespeare] is the past-in-the-present”; Menon further writes that “by existing in more than one historicist moment at a time, . . . Shakespeare is uniquely positioned to confound this paradigm of temporal difference” (4–5). Although differences exist between Elizabethan, Victorian, and contemporary cross-dressing, Shakespeare is nevertheless a figure whose status in the literary canon allows for what Menon terms a “homotemporal” effect, which folds past and present into each other. I will begin this traipe through history by addressing cross-dressing theory directly as a foundation for further analysis. I will then dive into Victorian reactions to cross-dressed characters as seen in the context of these theories, how these reactions create tension with Victorian character illustrations, and where these reactions and illustrations intersect with the tensions between authenticity and theatricality. Finally, I will relate how these tensions are actually resolved through modern drag ontology and how drag can validate new readings of Shakespeare through performances like Le Gateau Chocolat’s.

Cross-dressing has become so culturally interrelated with other concepts of gender and desire that it becomes necessary to take time parsing it out. To begin, cross-dressing is not a sign or signifier of homosexuality, as was seemingly suggested by the Boulton and Park case; however, gender and desire do hold a complex relationship. According to Simone Chess, cross-dressed characters “become subjects of the erotic gaze from both men and women and participate in sexual encounters that are technically heterosexual/opposite sex . . . visually homosexual/same sex . . . and undeniably queer and grounded in a queer heterosexuality” (101). Gender and desire function dynamically together while existing on separate, related spectra. This type of cross-dressing desire will figure into my last section concerning the validity of drag culture in Shakespeare. To add another note, in addition to not signaling homosexuality, cross-dressing also does not correspond to transgenderism or transvestism (themselves different categories), although cross-dressing may factor into both of these choices. Neither of these concepts will feature in my argument, but both are vital to cover at the outset.

One final ambiguity worth parsing is in cross-dressing’s relation to androgyny. Again, although not all characters who cross-dress are explicitly androgynous, there is an interesting and important connection between the
two ideas. According to Dreher, “The concept of androgyny was prevalent in the Renaissance, appearing throughout alchemical lore, poetry, and the visual arts. . . . Androgyny liberates individuals from conventional stereotypes, offering them a wide spectrum of behavior and expression.” She relates this androgyny to Shakespeare (apparently an androgynous character himself), and then concludes that “he [Shakespeare] equated androgyny with emotional balance” (116). Thus, cross-dressed characters represent not only a complicated sense of desire, but they can also embody an emotional balance that allows them to stand outside of the gender spectrum and bring wisdom to those within rigid social constructs. These will be important ideas when discussing Shakespeare’s characters both in Victorian times and today.

With these ideas in mind, authenticity would require that cross-dressed characters (especially Shakespeare’s) inhabit a separate and distinct identity while cross-dressing: Rosalind should fully become Ganymede, just as Viola should fully become Cesario. But in Victorian representations of these characters, uncommitted modes of desire and androgyny throw out any certainty of actual identity by refusing a full move from character to cross-dressed character. Hereafter, I will refer to the state of the character as the second tier of theatricality (the actor herself being the first tier). The third tier would be, then, the cross-dressed character that the second-tier character portrays while on-stage, such as Balthazar or Fidele. While Voskuil’s analysis is completely valid for the second tier of theatricality (actors finding authenticity in the theatricalization of characters), Victorians drew ambiguous lines between the second and third tier of performance, collapsing the authenticity-in-performance of the third tier. The Victorian Innogen tries to authentically become Fidele, but fails, instead falling somewhere in between, ambiguous and with confused desire. This is not to say that such characters do not attempt the step, but the bid often obscures authenticity by losing track of any semblance of real identity for either the second or third tier. I should make clear here that this ambiguous gendering is separate from the androgyny theory that I proposed earlier. Beyond the fact that it was typically seen as a gender-transgression to be androgynous (Green), any androgyny found in these characters generally derives from resistance to gender transformation, not from an intentional move towards “emotional balance.” I will refer to characters as androgynous if they stand outside of societal constructs in order to be balanced and offer a view of humanity, and as ambiguous if they are unintentionally forced outside of gender norms because of a refusal to find authenticity in cross-dressing performance.
Victorian theater seems to refuse authentic cross-dressing in both criticism and performance. In a Victorian review of *Cymbeline* starring Helen Faucit as Innogen, one critic complains that “there is a greater fault of excess in the first part of the representation of womanly fear when, as Fidele, she calls at the mouth of the unoccupied cavern, and runs from the sound of herself had made. Miss Faucit’s voice is more often at fault; it fails her whenever she has a violent emotion to express” (Morley). He thus criticizes her for being too female while portraying Fidele, both in “womanly fear” and in vocalization. But his own assessment betrays his paradigm: while his conception that fear is womanly illustrates the gender divisions present in Victorian England, it also shows that the critic is only willing to interpret Fidele’s actions through the lens of Innogen. In other words, Fidele’s fear does not reveal something authentic about Fidele, but rather is proof of Fidele’s lack of Fidele-ity.

Similar to this critic, just four years later, another commends Ellen Terry for her portrayal of Portia, who, while dressed as Balthazar, gives an address to the court. He remarks, “A very noteworthy point in the performance was the womanly interest in Shylock—the endeavor to win him, for his own sake, from the pursuit of his grim resolve” (Knight). In contrast to the first example, here Ellen Terry is praised for allowing the female character (Portia) to come out in her performance of Balthazar. In both instances, the critics reveal the prevalence of seeing the character within the cross-dressed character (the inauthentic cross-dressed one) simply as masquerade, as far as possible from authenticity. Actors are placed in an impossible situation of never striking the perfect balance between character and cross-dressed character because ambiguity is denied as a valid position. If they are too male, they are not authentic to their status as women-saviors; if they are too female, they are betraying the character they are meant to be playing. Victorian critics here both condone and condemn the ambiguity evident in cross-dressing performance. They applaud when the character comes out from behind the mask and censure when they try to play both parts. Ambiguity is not seen as a valid position, but instead as inauthentic and betraying true identity.

Beyond critics’ hegemonic views of rejecting authenticity, the actual representations of cross-dressed characters during this period also seem to show a remarkable amount of ambiguity in their representations. Drawing from a compilation of Shakespeare’s plays published in 1886, filled with illustrated engravings of Shakespearean scenes and photographs of Shakespearean actors, the third-tier cross-dressed characters are hardly even
disguised (“Clarke”). Six separate illustrated engravings of Innogen dressed as Fidele keep her long blonde hair flowing past her shoulders, and often blowing up in the wind. In one image, her tunic is cut well above that of her disguised brothers, while in another one, she is cross-gartered. In an image of Rosalind dressed as Ganymede, hair flows down past the shoulders as well, with the Orlando of the same engraving series with cropped hair above his ears. In fact, six other images of Rosalind show long hair, one flowing well past her elbows. Furthermore, her tunic is draped in folds and ruffles, in contrast to Orlando’s straight tunic (this is also true of the Innogen described earlier). A few images of Viola and one of Rosalind show a corseted body shape. An important reminder here is that all of these images are engravings of scenes, not photographs of actual performances; in a production of As You Like It, it would not make sense to rid Rosalind of hair, since she would need it for another performance; however, in unstaged iterations, the representations could potentially be more free. In each case I have described, Victorian female characters trying to inhabit the third tier end up resembling their second-tier selves much more than they resemble the fashion of male representations within the same images. This refusal to incorporate full male fashion, opting instead for female traits, substantiates this ambiguity.

So representations (even fully conceptualized ones) portray cross-dressed characters as ambiguous, while critics condemn both ambiguity and full gender transformation, preferring characters more authentic to their pre-cross-dressed selves. This illustrates an inherent anxiety with authenticity while the characters are cross-dressed; after all, a full identification with the opposite gender would be seen as deviant. Thus, the tensions between criticism and illustrated representations show an inability to maintain authenticity-in-performance, and instead relegate truly cross-dressed characters the identity of the original self—Innogen over Fidele, and Viola over Cesario. Put another way, if it is true that the “trial scene [of Merchant in Venice] is a masterpiece of dramatic construction, a play within itself,” as one critic puts it (Halliwell-Phillipps 346), then we would suspect Portia’s playing of Balthazar to be authentic in and of itself. But the hesitancy present behind Portia’s full inhabiting of Balthazar in these representations proves the ontological validity of Portia as actor and the inauthentic theatricality of Balthazar as character. Once again, the step from the second to third tier of theatricality is inhibited by social concerns concerning cross-dressing (and thereby gender and desire), paralyzing the character in ambiguity.
Paradoxically, these tensions of theatricality, authenticity, androgyny, and ambiguity are resolved in the context of modern drag culture (even though modern scholars and theater practitioners typically buy into the authentic/performance dichotomy that Voskuil writes against). This resolution is not only due to the increased social awareness and acceptance of new ideas of fashion, gender constructs, and desire, but more importantly to the philosophical constructs that arise from drag culture.

Drag culture, originating out of the drag balls of the 1980s, became its own subset of American culture, with a modern lexicon and linguistic markers to call its own, and has since spread throughout the world (Simmons). This culture has become even more mainstream in Western media with the help of TV shows like RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, documentaries like *Paris Is Burning*, and even Broadway musicals like *Kinky Boots*. One of the most notable aspects of this growing drag culture (the most pertinent to the discussion raised here) is the idea of “realness.” “Realness” within drag circles refers to the idea of a drag performer experiencing and inhabiting the reality of the performed character regardless of her constructed nature. This claimed yearning for truth and honesty (perhaps authenticity?) in performance echoes Voskuil’s Victorian construct. Of course, this conception is not without its problems. One scholar notes how “drag queen performances possess a duel role of undoing heteronormative gender ideals while also reinforcing the current heteronormative social image of a woman” (Greaf). While subverting gender’s constructed nature, drag queen performances simultaneously support the “real,” or authentic (by this point, stereotypical or strawperson) representation of women. “Realness,” in this light, becomes a complicated reinforcing of the social order for females while allowing men to play around with gender constructs. However, this is neither the only sense of “realness” nor the only way of being real.

Androgyny also plays an important role in modern drag culture, this time in the sense that I described above—intentional and distanced. This can be strongly seen in none other than Le Gateau Chocolat herself as a part of Emma Rice’s *Twelfth Night*. She wore sequin dresses (midnight blue and gold), her face was painted in an over-the-top bravado common in drag, and she had a wig in the ilk of Diana Ross. But she also had a full beard. And chest hair. And sometime during the performance, the wig came off, revealing a completely shaved head. This androgyny is far from the tenuous Victorian negotiation between the script’s call to full “realness” and the critics and audience’s social pressure of gender norms. This even goes beyond
Dreher’s “balance” between male and female traits, for this is not a character in the process of transitioning from one gender norm to another. This is a category completely outside of either, an amalgamation of opposite sides of the spectrum to show the inconsistency of gender itself and to present a third option: pure androgyny, devoid of gender tensions. This places her outside of gender itself, along with its obligations and expectations. This is androgyny “realness,” authentic androgyny.

Drag culture attempts to satisfy the mono-istic authenticity-in-theatrics by fully committing to “realness” in gender or in androgyny, which rivals the ambiguous and anxious choice of gender presented in Victorian representations and criticisms of Shakespearean cross-dressing. However, there is a significant difference here. In Victorian modes of Shakespearean representation, I mentioned the two-step process of theatricality: characters inhabited the first tier while the second tier was muddled and undercut authenticity. No such two-tiered system functions in modern drag culture. The performer enters theatricality only once—as the drag queen. But in doing so, she exhibits an authenticity that certainly could be used in Shakespearean productions during this second instance of theatricality. This functions elaborately in Rice’s production, and not only in the figure of Le Gateau Chocolat.

A drag queen’s presence necessarily draws attention to costuming and gender, which play intersecting roles for several characters in *Twelfth Night*. This is seen most obviously in Viola, one of the second-tier cross-dressing Shakespeare characters I have been discussing. Viola’s choice to disguise herself in the traditional costume of a man embroils her in a desire triangle between herself, Orsino, and Olivia. Olivia is enamored by the costumed Cesario (only because he/she is costumed as such), while the hidden Viola is in love with Orsino, in turn in love with Olivia. These complex elements of desire, referenced above, are dependent on costuming and gender “realness” between each pair, showing the importance and complexity of cross-dressing and authenticity.

Other characters also enact second-tier theatricality, not through cross-dressing, but still with gendered simulations. For example, Malvolio dons flamboyant yellow, cross-gartered stockings in an attempt to woo Olivia. Could we see this costume choice in the sense of authenticity, of “realness”? Or might Malvolio fall into the same trap as the Victorian illustrations, not quite committing enough to his project, trying to portray all in ambiguity? How would a reading of the character differ in either case? Feste, likewise, also receives another costume—another identity—in the course of the play,
while portraying Sir Topas (Sister Topas, in the case of Le Gateau Chocolat). And once again, the question is asked: is Sir Topas authentic in the third tier of theatricality? What would it mean either way? (The third-tier celibate Sir Topas is particularly striking in the contexts of cross-dressing, androgyny, and desire, but that is something I will not go into here.) A drag queen’s presence within the play requires these questions of any character who chooses to create a new identity through costume. But beyond simply her presence, her committed androgyny creates particular meaning within the play.

But why Feste? The character’s status as clown already allows him to stand outside society to offer a unique perspective to those within the structure. As I have shown, Chocolat’s characterization as an androgynous drag character furthers this role. But the character also stands outside of conceptions of desire. Other characters are allowed to love in the play, as long as they commit to one ideal of gender or another. Cesario still receives love despite the heteronormative environment that would claim to constrain such a relationship (even if he does need to don his “maiden weeds” to claim it in the end). Desire is only allowed to function for those in specified places within society. However, for those on the fringe, who do not fit neatly into categories—queer characters, such as those who are committedly androgynous—desire is not even an option. Le Gateau Chocolat, then, as Feste, becomes a champion of sexual and gender (as well as other) minorities. As a black drag queen, she can stand for those who do not have a place that is readily accepted, for those who are not societally relegated love, attention, and affection. Le Gateau Chocolat gives illumination to the tension between pariah, desire, and gender, and allows for a reconsideration of both androgynous and asexual figures and their roles within literature, while lending validity to the authenticity-in-theatricality exhibited by Viola and others who dress in second-tier costume and identity.

Drag culture has a place within Shakespeare studies. This is not only true in reformulating ideas of society and disenfranchisement, but also in terms of rethinking the possibilities and illuminating the tensions of cross-dressing. This second point can be seen most vividly in contrast to the Victorian era, in which cross-dressing was simultaneously allowed onstage but prosecuted off of it. These tensions have always shaped cross-dressing in theater, and pose problems to current scholarship concerning Victorian theater. To be able to navigate paradigms of cross-dressing and gender relationships in any age, drag culture should be taken into consideration as a powerful modern form of authenticity and theatricality.
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In Blackfeet author James Welch’s novel, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000), a Lakota performer in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show is stranded in France, accidentally left behind on the show’s 1889 tour. As Charging Elk stumbles around this alien landscape, he encounters many people who view him through the lens of their own expectations and respond to him accordingly—among them an American vice-consul in Marseille, a reporter, members of a French family, and other performers from his own Lakota community. What might these interactions suggest about our encounters, as scholars and students, with Indigenous figures—on the page, on stage, in film, in the archives—especially historical figures, and particularly (but not only) when their images are circulated through popular media? With Welch’s novel as something of a guide, I’ll move towards the question of how our various positions affect our approaches to Indigenous creative expression, especially in the case of non-native scholars such as myself.
It’s no secret that non-native representations of “The Indian” have long been a mainstay of popular culture. Cherokee scholar Rayna Green and Dakota historian Philip Deloria have called the phenomenon “playing Indian.” Think of almost any mid–twentieth-century western film with its German-American and Italian-American actors playing American Indians, or come forward to the controversy around Johnny Depp playing Tonto in 2013. Go back almost 200 years to the literature that was heralded as distinctively American: James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking series with its alternately noble, stoic, and evil Indians, or, a few decades later, Beadle and Adams’s dime novels proliferating and exaggerating those stereotypes. Public culture has been littered with wannabes and imitators; go back earlier still, before the American Declaration of Independence, to the revolutionaries who dressed Mohawk to throw tea into Boston Harbor. The logic of these representations is that Native peoples inevitably could not survive the onset of modernity—the sleight-of-hand by which settler colonialism both dispossesses peoples and appropriates their identities in its own interests. This is sometimes called the “vanishing Indian” trope.

Charging Elk, as written by James Welch, gives us access to a very different, more hidden, history. This is the history of how peoples Indigenous to Turtle Island (North America) have long been central to modernity not just as figures of representation but as agents in its making. Charging Elk is not simply the victim of others’ gaze; nor do he and his fellow Wild West performers remain passively trapped within the stereotypes of “Indians.” These are real threats to their existence, but the novel also shows how these highly skilled Indigenous performers return the gaze, how they make community within the Wild West show, how they come to know and negotiate audience expectations. These are creative acts of “survivance”—the term coined by Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) which includes Indigenous forms of survival, endurance, and resistance in the face of genocidal policies and practices.

There is increasing scholarship on the centrality of Indigeneity to modernity; the scope is huge, as one title by Jace Weaver (Cherokee) suggests: The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927. Charging Elk’s story lies within the period often considered key to the emergence of modern culture as we now know it—approximately the 1880s to the 1930s. Even if we keep our focus trained on this one period, there turns out to be a host of “Indians in unexpected places” (to cite another book by Deloria)—as writers, performers, film-makers, musicians, statespeople, athletes, and more.
One form of expressive culture that emerged during this period was motion pictures. Early moving pictures are rich with Indigenous presence, as documented by Michelle Raheja (Seneca), Joanna Hearne, and others. The film industry’s first “power couple” was Ho-Chunk film star Lillian St Cyr, who performed as Red Wing, and her mixed-race Nanticoke husband, producer, director, and actor, James Young Deer. Throughout the silent film period and into early talkies, critical contributions were made by Indigenous stuntmen and women, actors, screenwriters, directors, and directors’ advisers. “Indian and Western” films (as they were then called) were key to the success of the American movie industry. Even the first western film—The Great Train Robbery of 1903—which is often said to have no Indians (as in, no Indian roles) turns out to profit from the riding and dance skills of Mohawk actors.¹

What about writing, both popular and more literary? Kirby Brown, scholar and citizen of the Cherokee Nation, recently addressed the period known as Modernism, identifying the “Indian Problem” in how this field of artistic innovation has been construed. Partly by naming a host of Indigenous writers at the turn of the twentieth century, Brown shows how even more recent, revisionist definitions of Modernism erase Native creativity. A small selection of these names drives home his point: Mourning Dove/Humishuma (Okanagon) and Tod Downing (Choctaw) working with popular genres; Lynn Riggs (Cherokee), D’Arcy McNickle (Salish and Kootenai), and John Joseph Mathews (Osage) developing innovative theatrical and narrative forms; Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux) fusing her individual writing with collective political organizing (whose larger rhetorical implications have been explored by non-native scholar Michael Taylor). Dakota/Apache scholar Kiara M. Vigil pursues four Indigenous intellectuals from the same period: Charles Eastman (Santee Sioux), Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai), Luther Standing Bear (Oglala Lakota), and, again, Gertrude Bonnin. She argues that Native writing and oratory forged new genres of public expression in the face of the reservation system, boarding schools, allotment practices, and other forms of cultural genocide. Such recoveries don’t just “fill a gap” in literary and cultural history. They demand fundamental rethinking of periods, movements, and definitions. Vigil’s work challenges assumptions about the definition of a public intellectual. Brown leads us to ask, who made modernity? Raheja places early Indigenous cinematic innovations
centrally within Native peoples’ “visual sovereignty.” Scott Lyons (Leech Lake Ojibwe) similarly discusses writers’ “rhetorical sovereignty” as a key part of Indigenous self-determination.

This brings me to very challenging questions about the position of non-native scholars in this conversation—whether we identify as “settlers,” “arrivals,” uninvited guests on stolen land, or non-native allies, or in some other terms. From a non-Indigenous position, there are myriad complications in contributing to recovery efforts, or even developing reading practices, in relation to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Yet it is equally problematic to dodge the challenge, to not engage with First Peoples’ creative expression, especially as they so forcefully challenge the fields in which we work. There is much to be learned from what are often called Indigenous Research Methodologies. Indigenous scholars working with Indigenous worldviews and cultural protocols teach us about the building of relations between scholar and subject-matter. Core principles are often articulated as relationality, responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and usefulness. Researchers do not work “on” subjects; they engage with communities.

The best book I know which brings these issues directly to literary studies and grapples with their implications for students and scholars at different stages is Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures, edited by Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder and non-native scholar Linda M. Morra. The work gathers a large range of Indigenous and non-indigenous thinkers and artists from across North America; I’ll here paraphrase just some of the pressing questions and practices which they advocate. In any approach to Indigeneity—as reader, scholar, researcher—remember to reflect on our own positions and purposes without decentring the Indigenous work. To what community does any of us feel accountable in doing this work? Do we mean to critique stereotypes and misrepresentations, contribute to the recovery of Indigenous voices, or pursue some other goal? What cultural assumptions frame our responses; what mythologies or stereotypes do we need to look beyond? Pay attention to Indigenous scholarship and sources. Be specific—in citing the source of information or analysis and in respecting the rich diversity of cultures by naming particular Nations or tribes when possible. Start from where we are, which may mean starting small. Although collaboration with Indigenous community is a key component in a settler scholar building relations, that may not be feasible in a student’s or scholar’s particular situation. What difference can it make, however, to conceptualize
our scholarly purpose as preparation towards such solidarity? Can that self-positioning alert us to appropriative or extractive approaches? Changing our vocabulary is a small but significant step, not just in naming Indigeneity in respectful language but in thinking about our own processes. Critiques of Columbus, for example, remind us that, even when we work in archives, we don’t “discover”; we learn or encounter or listen to pre-existing presences. One of the touchstone questions which I find most helpful comes from Cree Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach, who asks us always to ask ourselves: “Am I creating space or taking space?”

Such challenges can seem daunting to the point of paralysis, so let me say a word about my own attempt to follow these principles. My current research project is situated in another sphere of popular culture which is widely recognized as central to modernity and turns out to be infused with Native artistry: vaudeville in the 1880s–1930s. This work began from my position as a non-native scholar who had long researched the history of US popular culture but only gradually realized the centrality of Indigenous peoples to that story. I’m now focused on helping to recover the community of entertainers, Indigenous and non-indigenous, who “played Indian” on global vaudeville circuits, in the process forging compelling performance strategies of survivance and trans-Indigenous networks. Much of my time is spent in archives, trying to piece together these stories, but my identification of leads and analysis of implications depend heavily on the building of research relations with contemporary Indigenous theatre artists. In particular, I am developing forms of research exchange—through archive and memory, financial and physical resources, listening and telling—with the founding members of Spiderwoman Theatre (1976–) and Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble (1999–2008), whose family and performance techniques connect to the vaudeville moment. I have learned from them a great deal about how Indigenous performers and audience members forge kinship lines and intergenerational community in spaces of popular performance. One of my purposes is to return these performance stories to their communities through digital and other forms of recirculation whenever possible. Another is to develop forms of oral and written presentation that make transparent the relationality across Indigenous–settler divides underpinning this recovery project. A third is to contribute to reorienting the study of popular culture around such Indigenous presences.
These reflections are as much for myself in my own ongoing, always incomplete, efforts as an invitation to Criterion readers and contributors. The journal seeks submissions which engage with any of the questions, concepts, or authors discussed above. How do or might these principles of respectful relations between student or scholar and subject-matter shape your work, whether your focus is an Indigenous text or some other material? These principles are, after all, applicable to any field of criticism or research. However, they hold a special charge in approaching Indigeneity, given the long reach of the objectification of Indigenous peoples—as in the case of Charging Elk.

Endnotes

1 See Galperin.

2 “Settler scholar” is commonly used in Canada; for “arrivant,” see Byrd.

3 See, among others, Kovach, Simpson, Smith, Wilson.

For more sense of these relations of research exchange, see Bold, with Monique Mojica, Gloria Miguel, Muriel Miguel. I particularly thank these Guna-Rappahannock artists along with Michelle St. John (Wampanoag). Also, this project would not be possible without funding from many sources, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the U of Guelph, and a John Topham and Susan Redd Butler Faculty Research Award, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young U.
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Criterion
In 1927, the prominent Lakota author and activist Zitkala-Ša spent much of her time writing to Natives across North America imploring them, despite their financial difficulty, to hold on to their inherited reservation land at all costs. In one such letter to Alaskan Native S. G. Davis, she wrote “it is imperative for us to join hands, unite our forces, to save our race from dying out, by actual starvation and landlessness” (Letter to S. G. Davis). This desperate plea contains echoes of sentimentalism, a rhetorical tactic that privileges passionate (and sometimes exaggerated) appeals to emotion rather than reason. Indeed, the same kind of sentimentalism that inspired this letter can also be found in her earlier and much better-known autobiographical work.

As Native studies critics including P. Jane Hafen and Susan Bernardin have shown, Zitkala-Ša’s conscious use of sentimentalism mirrored popular literary trends of her day, and was useful for bridging cultural gaps and educating non-Natives about issues such as cultural assimilation. Though scholars continue to explore this aspect of her work, contemporary criticism has given much less attention to one of the most important realities of this sentimental rhetoric: the fact that it was intimately connected to the ongoing fight for indigenous land rights. This is best seen in her 1921 short story “The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman,” wherein
she draws a link between starvation and the loss of Native American lands by employing the same sentimental language she used later in her letter (*American Indian Stories* xxvii). In this story, Zitkala-Ša addresses the catastrophic consequences of federal land policy by examining it through this sentimental lens. By highlighting contrasting cultural attitudes about the value of land, she more powerfully communicates sentiments about land ownership and sovereignty to her primarily non-Native audience. This sentimental language of starvation allows Zitkala-Ša to reframe the conversation surrounding Indigenous land, shifting the debate’s focus away from mere legality to emphasize more nuanced and personal dimensions of indigenous land ownership. Her work in “Blue-Star Woman” exposes the harm inherent in addressing Native land disputes without a correct understanding of those lands’ cultural significance, and warns that the careless treatment and appropriation of Native land leads to cultural starvation, atrophy, and death.

The intended function and actual effect of Zitkala-Ša’s grounding in Western sentimentalist tradition have been widely explored. American Indian literature specialist Susan Bernardin describes Zitkala-Ša’s sentimentalism as a sort of literary vessel, designed to carry Indian agendas past the defensive reflexes of non-Natives by packaging them in a familiar and attractive format. Taos Pueblo critic P. Jane Hafen concurs, but also notes in Zitkala-Ša’s literature the “complexity of popular sentimentality mixed with [Native] oral tradition and political indignation” (32; emphasis added). According to Hafen, Zitkala-Ša’s use of sentimentalism is more than pretty wrapping paper for her challenging Indian narrative, or even a conscious stylistic choice; it is inextricably connected to her Native American identity. As she argues, “despite high emotion and the sentimentality of popular culture, Bonnin remains faithful to the Yankton sources of her work, presenting an amalgam of traditional culture and contemporary accommodations [while] her commitment to Indian issues continued throughout her life” (40). In other words, Zitkala-Ša’s sentimentalism transcends the usual social scope of the genre by presenting and emotionalizing real issues. With sentimentalism as her background, she can address crucial questions pertaining to Native American identity, culture, and even survival.

Foremost among these Native issues is unquestionably that of land. Cherokee writer and Native Studies expert Thomas King succinctly identifies this problem, which lies at the heart of all disputes between Natives and non-Natives: “If you
understand nothing else about the history of Indians in North America, you need to understand that the question that really matters is the question of land.” He goes on to point out land’s importance as “a defining element of Aboriginal culture,” citing its inextricability from language, ceremonies, livelihood, tradition, water, shelter, food, etc. He then contrasts this with non-Natives treatment of land primarily as an economic commodity (218). According to King, land is to Native Americans much more than a means to some financial or political end. To them, land is in fact sacred, vital, and inseparable from culture. Zitkala-Ša understood this connection all too well, and she wrote “Blue-Star Woman” under constantly mounting pressure as more and more Native American land was sold to and seized by Westerners. This is why it is crucial to examine her sentimentalism in the context of the fight for land rights; to remove any of Zitkala-Ša’s work from this context is to fail to recognize the most immediate concern that she faced in her day.

Zitkala-Ša’s personal correspondences confirm that she was preoccupied with starvation, the loss of Native American land, and the way in which they are both literally and symbolically connected. In the previously cited 1927 letter, she wrote impassionedly about saving Native Americans from both “actual starvation and landlessness.” The words “actual starvation” in this sentence imply the coexistence of a metaphorical starvation—in this case, the landlessness she mentions. She thus indicates that not only are the two issues are connected, but that the survival of all Native American people hangs on that connection. This overt concern with landlessness and starvation propelled Zitkala-Ša’s political agenda as well her personal correspondence. She composed another letter in the same year, this time addressed to the Chairman of the government’s Committee on Indian affairs, describing the issues plaguing Native American communities. She writes that “a casual visit on most any reservation [is enough to] see the Indians living in huts and rags and half-starved,” using her own experience to call for the immediate revision of U.S. government Indian policy (Letter to Lynn G. Frazier). Such claims by Zitkala-Ša are not hyperbole. Not only did she observe reservations and their hardships firsthand during her extensive travels as an activist, but she also received letters from correspondents who continually informed her of the horrific conditions there (LaPointe). The urgency of her political entreaty combined with that of the previous letter suggest that Zitkala-Ša’s priorities centered on these two issues, and, as she attempts to convey
to Native and non-Native allies alike, addressing both is essential to their correction. These ideas were fully-formed by 1927, but it is in “Blue-Star Woman” that Zitkala-Ša’s sentimental treatment of them is most evident.

Zitkala-Ša establishes hunger as a sentimental metaphor for dispossession very early on in “Blue-Star Woman.” The very first paragraph features the eponymous protagonist frying a traditional cake, and as the plot progresses the same cake is mentioned repeatedly in different contexts. First, the elderly Blue-Star Woman reflects on her Native friend’s generosity in saving her from starvation by donating the ingredients she needed for the cake. Later, corrupt salesmen determined to obtain her land for themselves devour most of her food, leaving her with barely a scrap for herself (144, 147). Both details exemplify instances in which food and hunger are related to some aspect of land ownership and communal culture, grounding the general symbolism in social reality. Unlike that of other sentimental literature, Zitkala-Ša’s emotionally-charged language addresses specific, concrete concerns about land and politics. The hunger she describes also sentimentalizes—and thereby legitimates—the urgency with which Native Americans still lobby for land rights, allowing her non-Native readership to vicariously experience attitudes about land different from their own. The motif of starvation is remarkably consistent throughout “Blue-Star Woman,” and Zitkala-Ša uses it to establish a context in which she engages readers emotionally while also serving as a cultural window through which to examine the complexity of Native land-related issues. In doing so, she not only evokes sympathy, but also informs non-Native readers about the real significance and value of land in Native American culture.

Zitkala-Ša further emphasizes the importance of Indigenous land by describing the abandonment of traditional values as a side effect of its dispossession. In “Blue-Star Woman,” she writes from the perspective of an old Indian chief who sees in his own tribe “a slowly starving race . . . growing mad.” The observation that leads him to this chilling pronouncement is the cultural shift he perceives in the younger generation, for “those days were gone when moral cleanliness was a chief virtue; when public feasts were given in honor of the virtuous girls and young men of the tribe” (emphasis added). With this statement, Zitkala-Ša compares positive Native American cultural values to feasts and abundance. She then proceeds to contrast that prosperity with the imagery of “the pitifully weak sell[ing] their lands for a pot of porridge” a few lines later (151). She portrays her characters—and
by extension the Sioux communities they typify—as so desperate with starvation that they are willing sell their birthright of land in exchange for scraps of food. This is a problem because, though actual starvation is certainly a pressing concern, the cultural starvation that arises as a result of abandoning traditional values doesn’t only threaten individuals; it threatens the continuity and integrity of the entire race. Through this symbolic contrast of feasts and hunger, Zitkala-Ša warns that the values of traditional Native American life that promote abundance and sustain identity are lost as a direct consequence of the loss of tribal land, thereby underscoring land’s broader importance in the lives of all Natives.

Zitkala-Ša’s use of starvation as a metaphor for dispossession is a useful critical lens through which to read “Blue-Star Woman,” but in the same story she shows how literal starvation also plays a role in the dispossession of Indian land. In so doing, she demonstrates the injustice inherent in contemporaneous Indian land policy. Zitkala-Ša published “Blue-Star Woman” thirty-four years after the implementation of the infamous General Allotment Act of 1887, which broke up, privatized, and redistributed communal reservation land to individual Native Americans. She highlights one of the allotment system’s problems when she describes Blue-Star Woman’s reaction to it. Early in the story, the lawyers who wolf down her cake offer to help Blue-Star Woman obtain her legal share of land—but only in exchange for fifty percent of the total property. She is persuaded by the phrase “wouldn’t you rather have half a crust of bread than none at all?” She agrees, thinking to herself that “a little something to eat [is] better than nothing” (147). Zitkala-Ša sets up a hopeless predicament; while her character is certainly entitled to much more than “half a crust of bread,” her age, her inexperience with government policy, and her legally unverifiable ancestry leave her unable to lobby for that right. Through this fictional case study, Zitkala-Ša confirms one of the manifold negative consequences of the allotment program; though it theoretically guaranteed every Native American a plot of land somewhere, circumstances prevented them from claiming and retaining those lands.

If plots of allotment land are comparable to crusts of bread, then “Blue-Star Woman” paints a bleak picture of Natives turned against each other to fight over crumbs. Indeed, one of the most devastating side effects of the Allotment Act was the way in which it pitted individual tribes and families against each other in land issues, undermining tribal cohesion and weakening communal solidarity. In an analysis of a similar piece of Native literature
set in the allotment era, multicultural studies specialist Dr. Janna Knittel confirms that “whereas once land was held communally and members contributed to each other’s survival, the Dawes [Allotment] Act encouraged competition” instead (195). Although the characters in “Blue-Star Woman” never reach full-scale feud like the those in the subject of Knittel’s study, they face comparable quandaries. Though the chief and his tribe acknowledge that helpless, homeless, and starving Natives like Blue-Star Woman deserve to be taken care of, they are understandably infuriated that the government would “without their knowledge and consent [give] their property . . . to a strange woman.” Everyone agrees that of course Blue-Star Woman deserves a plot of land somewhere, but it is “certainly not here” (149). Zitkala-Ša shows that, in a privatized land system where resources are scarce to begin with, Natives simply don’t have the means to provide for themselves—let alone for others. In short, the privatization of land forces Native Americans to prioritize either their own economic needs or those of the community. There are, after all, only so many crusts of bread to go around. This traps traditional Indians in a disastrous paradox because, to them, personal stability is a natural extension of communal well-being.

Zitkala-Ša addresses the importance of this communal solidarity more directly in “Blue-Star Woman” by showing how it keeps the titular characters from both physical and metaphorical starvation. Though Blue-Star Woman herself owns very little land and few resources, her kindly neighbor provides her with materials she needs to eat well, and, Zitkala-Ša says, it is this liberality “that had often saved her from starvation” (144). When the word “starvation” is read as a metaphor for loss of land and the resulting loss cultural identity, this exchange between Blue-Star Woman and her neighbor represents her reliance on other members of the Native community in maintaining that identity. Alone, Blue-Star Woman is a penniless old woman in need of firewood and food (148). With the support of her community, however, she is capable not only of feeding herself but also providing and caring for other members of her community (147). In other words, Zitkala-Ša shows that a strong sense of community and willingness to be generous to one another—even and especially in concerns about land ownership—greatly increases the chances of the culture’s survival.

This lies in stark contrast to the passage following it, wherein Zitkala-Ša shows how hunger and loss of land can also sow communal discord. In it, she tells of an Indian chief whose own family’s tribal land is confiscated
and handed to Blue-Star Woman, who is not of his tribe, when she files independently for a land claim. Affronted, he protests, “I thought we made good treaties on paper, but now our children cry for food . . . We cannot give even to our own little children” (150). Here, Zitkala-Ša reconnects hunger to the loss of land and shows that taking from one hungry child to feed another does nothing to solve the problem of starvation—it merely shifts the problem’s locality. In doing so, she emphasizes that land is a communal asset and that the issues of land ownership cannot be solved by simply funneling all Indigenous nations into one generalized “Indian” and then indiscriminately redistributing land between tribes. By calling attention to the physical hunger of people already struggling to survive on inadequate plots of land, Zitkala-Ša warns of the damage that such futile government intervention causes, again emphasizing that cultural factors must be considered when discussing Native land ownership.

With her poignant depiction of Indians’ post-allotment struggle with starvation, Zitkala-Ša asserts the importance of treating land disputes individually, based on the culture and values of those involved. In her article on how Zitkala-Ša’s work influences legal discussions surrounding Native Americans, law scholar Kirsten Matoy Carlson argues that laws do not exist in a cultural vacuum, and that legal matters cannot and should not be approached uniformly because, where cultural pluralism is involved in land disputes, there will always be differing opinions about what constitutes just compensation. What is merely an economic commodity to some may represent food and livelihood to others, and that which appeases one community may be inadequate or inappropriate to another. For example, a $1.3 billion-dollar settlement in exchange for land confiscated over a hundred years ago would seem like more than a fair deal to most Westerners. But, incredibly, Natives rejected that same settlement when offered in 2011. They showed unequivocally that they valued the sacred Black Hills of South Dakota—the same land that now hosts the Mt. Rushmore monument—more than even such a staggering sum of money. This is even more impressive considering that these were the poorest American Indians in the United States (Carlson 685). Clearly, Natives and non-Natives approach land from completely different directions. Though fictional, Zitkala-Ša’s “Blue-Star Woman” effectively demonstrates these differing value systems in action. Zitkala-Ša reminds her readership that land holds greater cultural significance for aboriginals than it does for Westerners, and that making assumptions about
land’s legal treatment based on Western ideas of justice would, ironically, be unjust. In using the language of hunger in “Blue-Star Woman,” Zitkala-Ša breathes vitality and urgency into an issue that is sometimes marginalized as one of mere legality.

Though Susan Bernardin and P. Jane Hafen have produced excellent scholarship on the value of Zitkala-Ša’s sentimentalist literature, its usefulness in developing arguments for Native land rights has yet to be fully acknowledged. Despite its publication in the early twentieth century, Zitkala-Ša’s “The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman” expands contemporary discussion about the importance of land in Native American culture and politics by reminding readers of land’s necessity to the survival of indigenous cultures, as well as pointing to specific failings of past federal land policies. Her narrative of hunger presents a unique and passionate Native perspective affirming that Native land is still inextricable from Native identity. As evidenced by her fervent letter to S.G. Davis, the same concerns addressed in “Blue-Star Woman” went on to inform not just her fiction but her political activism as well, laying the ideological groundwork for arguments she would make for years to come. Though today’s Native Americans face somewhat different concerns than Zitkala-Ša did in the immediate wake of the Allotment Act, there is no question that land disputes continue to dominate contemporary Native and non-Native relations. In fact, even the Native rallying cry at recent and well-publicized Standing Rock land dispute controversy declared that “water is life,” reaffirming Zitkala-Ša’s claims about land’s role in survival and nourishment of Indian culture (Medina). Even today, Zitkala-Ša’s sentimental framework of landlessness and starvation remains valuable because it provides a useful and timely lens through which to approach Native land issues.
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Criterion
In his 1994 book, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor coined the term “survivance” (1). A portmanteau of “survival” and “resistance,” this term reflects a shift in study of Native American culture. Rather than measuring the homogenizing effects of white colonialism, survivance suggests that Native culture is far more than a reaction and submission to physical and cultural domination (Vizenor 1). Rather, there is a subversive element in Native cultural output that supersedes white infringement. Instead of being victimized, Native authors demonstrate pride in their heritage and a refusal to assimilate through language, art, religious experience, and so on to white expectations. Survivance suggests an active effort by Native Americans to reclaim their various cultures and determine the direction of their futures.

Thus far, critics such as Vizenor and literary scholar Alan Velie have focused primarily on how contemporary Native literature expresses this attitude of survivance through disputation of the image of the hyperreal Indian while also highlighting the importance of traditional trickster narratives. However, there has been a lack of recognition and study of earlier literature and other works of art as forms of survivance, leaving a sizable portion of active Native voices unheard. For example, eighty years before Vizenor introduced the term survivance, Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux) collaborated with Brigham Young University professor William F. Hanson in
1913 to compose the first Native American opera, *The Sun Dance Opera*, a dramatic depiction of Sioux life and the then-outlawed religious Sun Dance. Studying Zitkala-Ša’s work reveals early expressions of survivance through her use of Sioux-specific music, language, regalia, and Native American performers, and the traditional trickster figure, while also reflecting the works of other artists engaging with similar themes in a variety of mediums. This paper argues that *The Sun Dance Opera* won its awards and achieved its success because its use of these elements portrays survivance in ways otherwise impossible in literature. As such, the scope and relevance of survivance expands to include a broader array of voices and experiences throughout time that otherwise go unnoticed by literary scholars.

The current conversation surrounding survivance revolves around a few prevalent ideas found in Native literature, namely counteracting the hyperreal Indian and emphasizing the importance of trickster narratives. Vizenor writes about the poststructuralist theory of simulation and how Native Americans are typically caricatured as one-dimensional stoic and feathered braves rather than multifaceted individuals and communities that grow and evolve with the world’s cultural trends. His dubbed “postindian” serves as the counterpart to the hyperreal Indian painted by white culture and stands as a symbol of presence and life as opposed to the mythic and dead. Alan Velie and other scholars, have further studied this concept within the framework of the “heyoka” or trickster figure, a common literary trope used to subvert stereotypical representations of Native Americans. Quick and resourceful, these ironic and witty characters provide a voice and body for retaliation against white oppressors. The trickster acts as a rebellious figure—amoral, possessing strong appetites, footloose, and callous, yet also sympathetic (Velie 122). He acts as a point of access for audiences, a means by which to better understand stereotypical Native American characters before subsequently subverting them in a refreshing manner that illustrates the characters in a new light. While Zitkala-Ša employs both the postindian and heyoka in her opera, she builds on these ideas by using her own experiences and skills as a musician to undermine images of the hyperreal Indian. Consequently, her unmatched work reached audiences that literature could not, and it would go on to be named opera of the year by the New York Opera Guild in 1938 (Hafen 103). By presenting her work as an opera, Zitkala-Ša utilizes her unique skill set to boldly claim authority and artistic
control over the portrayal of her people in such a way that is neither passive nor reactionary but rather proud and resistant to cultural assimilation.

While opera, the supposed highest form of art, was traditionally a white sphere, Zitkala-Ša embraces the medium to assert her own cultural dominance. Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen argues choosing to develop the story in the context of an opera gives the work a sense of credibility to white audiences, forcing them to look beyond racial stereotypes and to consider Indian people for their own value (105). In operatic form, *The Sun Dance Opera* appeals to audiences who may have typically overlooked the work of a Native artist. Instead, it gained enough steam to move from performances in Vernal, Utah, to Provo and Salt Lake City and eventually to New York City, exposing itself to audiences of a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Having already achieved a level of recognition for her collection of short stories *American Indian Stories*, it might have seemed more logical for Zitkala-Ša to present the story of the Sun Dance through literature. However, by putting it in the context of an opera, she claims space for a Native presence in high culture while demonstrating her viability as a musician as well as Native American cultures in general. *The Sun Dance Opera’s* very existence actively resists cultural stereotypes and societal expectations of Native Americans, marking it as a work of survivance.

By elevating her work to the sphere of high art, Zitkala-Ša also lifts herself out of Native American stereotypes alongside *The Sun Dance Opera*. White audiences were accustomed to seeing “Show Indians” in the immensely popular Wild West shows of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries (Hafen 105). Zitkala-Ša could also be classified as a “Show Indian,” having won awards in public speaking and trained in classical European-style violin. However, Hafen argues that “rather than continuing as trained Indian on exhibit, she may have been trying to assume artistic control with composition and direction of the opera and to present her own cultural viewpoint. The performance of the opera allowed her personal and cultural validation” (105). By taking artistic control, Zitkala-Ša’s opera effectively pushes against expectations of how “civilized” Indians should act. The opera facilitated the means by which she could demonstrate resistance against the hyperreal image of Native Americans that white culture expected. Far from being reactionary, Zitkala-Ša uses the opera to withstand and rise above any sense of passive victimry.

In addition to its position as a piece of high art, the opera as an act of survivance is immediately apparent through the cast’s actual performance of
the Sun Dance. The federal government had long since banned the religious dance as an act of rebellion and would continue to do so in the United States until the 1930s. The opera centers on the Sun Dance and its importance for the two lovers, Winona and Ohiya, who can only wed if Ohiya survives and conquers the grueling five-day ritual. As he and the other braves perform the dance, they demonstrate not only the strength, perseverance, and deliberateness required to win the approval of the Indian maiden’s father but also the qualities needed by Native people to resist governmental pressure and a stifling dominant culture. Completing the dance brings honor and pride, something that white America failed to recognize in Native American communities. This intense display of physical prowess represented another psychological blow against assimilation and the victimization of Native people. However, the powerful effects of the performance of the Sun Dance would not be what they are were it not for its authentic demonstration on stage. A simple retelling in literature could not create the same effect as the actual performance. By opting to stage the ritual, Zitkala-Ša entreats the audience to recognize and celebrate the continuance and ubiquity of Native survivance.

Zitkala-Ša further promotes survivance through her resolution to keep the Sun Dance in the Sioux language. She and Hanson had previously observed Ute tribes performing the dance and used members of the Ute nation to perform in the original staging of the opera. However, for Zitkala-Ša, the ritual was Sioux, the words were Sioux, and the hardships reenacted were Sioux. Insisting that the performers learn and represent her Sioux roots demonstrates her reluctance to submit to the white ideas of tribal ambiguity and demand instead to be recognized for what she is, a Sioux woman. By claiming her individual commitment to her tribe, she asserts its sovereignty as a separate entity from other Indian nations and the United States itself. In doing so, she elevates her Sioux culture and actively defies white assimilation.

Moreover, in claiming tribal sovereignty through her use of tribal customs, Zitkala-Ša does so in a manner that written word alone could not fully express. A Native author could choose to write in their native tongue without question. However, since the opera is a group effort, and as the majority of the original performers were not Sioux, it might have seemed simpler to conform to other interests. On the contrary, she uses not only the Sioux language, but also their melodies, dances, and stories. By so doing, she takes the concept of survivance a step beyond what is possible for a limited author and exercises her tribal sovereignty in all aspects of the opera, for the Sioux is, as Zitkala-Ša
states, her “first love” (Hanson 76). The very representation of her people defies the way traditional proponents of survivance expressed such in their own works. The complete visual, musical, and theatrical package heightens the reality of the active Sioux presence.

While the Sioux script necessarily determines the plot of the production, another way Zitkala-Ša furthers themes of survivance in her opera is by allowing the performers to ad-lib the chants sung throughout the work after the tradition of oral storytelling. In a time when the country sought to assimilate Native Americans through education, religion, and stamping out indigenous languages and traditions, this method stands out in stark contrast to traditional contemporaneous European stage performances. Zitkala-Ša coached the performers in the language and phraseology, but then allowed them to perform at will (Hafen 106). By allowing traditional chants to extend beyond the script and pull from individuals’ experiences, the performers demonstrated their own acts of active resistance against a homogeneous society. Again, the vital element necessary to make this act of survivance unique and relevant is the life the opera takes on stage. By creating a fluid script, Zitkala-Ša allows performers to deviate in unexpected ways. Without the songs and dances, there would not be a medium to express dissent from the stereotypical Indian tribe to the heartfelt and living individual and community.

One of the greatest examples of Sioux sovereignty in the original production of The Sun Dance Opera was the casting of Old Sioux, the centenarian cousin of Sitting Bull, and his impromptu performance of the outlawed Sun Dance. Zitkala-Ša and her husband had taken in this recluse after spending fifty years separated from society, and he eagerly joined their family and the production (Hanson 72). The performers respected this old Native’s knowledge of Sioux culture and experience with the sacred dances, and audiences felt similar curiosity toward this relic of what seemed a distant past. Meanwhile, Old Sioux thrived in his new position in the opera. Co-author and composer William F. Hanson records in his memoirs a certain performance in the Salt Lake Theatre where Old Sioux delivered an unplanned performance: “The unusual incident occurred in Act V, at the finale-climax of the opera. . . . an eerie guttural [sic] moaning ejaculation (molto religiosus) came from back stage. This gust of emotion was not in the routine of the opera score. It was a spontaneous outburst from the heart of the real, the inner Old Sioux. He was uncontrollably excited” (Hanson 86). Old Sioux took center stage and
fervently began the sacred dance, engaging not only his fellow actors but also the audience as the cast echoed his chants. When he finally retreated from the stage, “the applause was loud and long” (Hanson 87).

This physical representation of open rebellion against white cultural oppression held even greater impact because of its live performance. Overcome with emotion, Old Sioux commanded the stage and entranced the audience, who in turn were moved by his heartfelt performance. Far from being passive or reactionary, Old Sioux actively took control of his role and performed the dance that had long been outlawed by the white government. Simply reading a description of the Sun Dance or Old Sioux’s unexpected performance pales in comparison to what people in attendance witnessed that day. Zitkala-Ša’s chosen medium allowed audiences to more fully participate and invest themselves in the Native ritual, thus becoming privy to living and evolving Native traditions and not just the hyperreal version white culture has perpetuated.

In addition to the actual performers, characters in Zitkala-Ša’s *The Sun Dance Opera* also demonstrate subversion to the larger outside society. As scholars have pointed out, trickster figures are important characteristics of stories of survivance. That remains true in the opera as well. In the story, Hebo, a friend of the male protagonist, Ohiya, continually gets the better of the Shoshone Sweet Singer, the story’s villain. Sweet Singer, an outsider who has previously taken advantage of maiden from his own tribe, enters the Sioux camp with the intent to woo the chief’s fair daughter, Winona. Hebo, however, takes it upon himself to mock and frustrate Sweet Singer to the point of anger and who then vows he will make Ohiya pay for the mockery (Hanson 144). Meanwhile, Hebo remains carefree. While acting as a form of comic relief, Hebo the trickster also plays an important role in promoting survivance. As a typically immoral and incendiary character, he highlights the human error and imperfection in those he interacts with. Engaging in a humorous way, he also invites audiences to band against the antagonist and those who typically seek to harm the Native American people in general. He makes fools out of them, demonstrating the tribe’s power over their enemies. In this sense, Hebo mocks those who seek to impose on the Sioux as they begin their sacred dance ceremony. Implied in this action is the Native American response to a government and white culture that repeatedly tries and—as demonstrated here—fails to overrun and destroy Native sovereignty and viability.

As important and pervasive as trickster figures are in Native literature, Hebo’s role is especially relevant and necessary in this musical drama. As
he prepares to harass Sweet Singer, he sings a song informing audiences of his character:

My name? My name is Hebo.
Your yes, my contrary no.
Your tears Laugh I away
I turn dull toil into play.

He continues:

So contrary am I
‘Tho scalped I could not die.
When you ask me to eat with you
I turn, and bid you adieu. (141)

From his introduction, audiences know what to expect from the mischievous heyoka. Like any jester or fool found in European productions, he uses clever word play to get the better of enemies. These tricky lines are further enhanced by adding music, dance, staging, and so on. The delivery is what gains sympathy for and trust in this conniving yet useful figure of chaos. His influence diminishes when left to written word. Without the additional elements of music and spoken script, Hebo loses his overall effect. Conversely, with those extra elements, Hebo becomes a force of survivance.

As demonstrated by the trickster figure Hebo, the music, libretto, staging, and dances combine to give Zitkala-Ša’s *The Sun Dance Opera* all the more power and impact for audiences. From its characters and storyline to the circumstances under which it was composed and performed, it emanates themes of survivance, the active Native American presence over victimization by dominant culture. The opera helps to overcome the image of the hyperreal Indian by allowing individual experiences—from Old Sioux’s impromptu performance to the cast’s ad-libbed chants—to determine the course of the narrative. However, *The Sun Dance Opera* is only a case study of how one particular artist has incorporated elements of survivance into her work. By looking beyond the limits of literature, scholars find evidence that Native American artists of all kinds and backgrounds have long engaged in acts of survival and resistance. Through more intensive study, archives of survivance will expand to include a greater array of experiences. As they grow, they can only help to build and empower Native voices that have long spoken but have previously gone unheard.
Works Cited


Prior to European interference in the New World, Native women held powerful roles in their communities as essential contributors to tribal economy and politics. The European explorers observed Native women working in the fields and holding sexual agency and assumed that Native men were “less masculine for failing to exert authority over the women in their tribes” (Slater 39). As scholars and the Western academic community studied Native femininity within Euro-American frameworks throughout the following centuries, similar Western gender constructs were imposed on Natives. Throughout recent decades, however, there has been a powerful shift in Native studies as scholars like Ruth Spack, Dorothea Susag, and Gary Sligh have sought to apply Indigenous concepts of gender roles to analysis surrounding Native femininity. As part of the change in conversation, scholars have analyzed the ways Native female writers such as Zitkala-Ša and Ella Deloria use storytelling to reclaim the traditional role of Native women as transporters of cultural values through the oral tradition. It is important to address the critical role of Native females as dispensers of traditions. However, these roles include more than powerful storytelling, since Native women have long been economically, politically, and sexually autonomous contributors to their communities. Contemporarily, Native women are reclaiming their femininity in holistic ways—that is, their roles
are not limited to one sphere of influence but have an interdisciplinary quality that encourages connection in all aspects of Native life. Through her short film *Bloodland*, released in 2011, Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers (Blood Tribe, Blackfoot Confederacy and Sámi) uses metaphors of oil fracking, land use, and sexual violence to speak out on multiple Native issues. I argue that Tailfeathers’s work in *Bloodland* represents a larger reclamation of femininity within Native societies, not only as oral educators but as sexually autonomous women who continue to be essential contributors to tribal economy and politics. Through this holistic approach to reclamation, Tailfeathers calls for Native women to assume the powerful roles that were originally theirs.

For centuries, Western society has continued a pattern of colonialism in physical dominance of lands and through interpretation of Native societies; however, recent decades have produced scholars seeking to correct this misstep. These academics discuss the ways Native writers have adapted the English language to continue a tradition of Native feminist power. Literary experts Ruth Spack and Dorothea Susag have both analyzed the ways Dakota Sioux Zitkala-Ša’s publications describe feminine power. Spack’s discussion focuses on the way Zitkala-Ša re-paints readers’ perceptions of Dakotan women as she depicts childhood instruction at the feet of her mother, an economically empowered woman who passes on essential guidance to her daughter. Similarly, Susag argues that Zitkala-Ša’s ability to use the English written word to dispense information “[fulfills] Beatrice Medicine’s definition of a strong Lakota woman by maintaining her role as a ‘carrier of culture’ to future generations” (21). Both scholars identify the way Native women are reclaiming their traditional roles through literature. This recognition that Native women have long been cultural instructors and continue that practice today is of critical importance when discussing Native femininity. Professor Gary Sligh adds to this conversation by articulating how Native women have adapted their methods of cultural instruction. He writes, “These [Native] women did not adopt western forms of writing just to gain recognition, but refigured themselves as Native Americans in ways that allowed them to broaden their traditional storytelling and ceremonial knowledge to encompass western literary conventions” (107). Sligh believes that Native female writers continue feminine oral tradition through new means within Western culture, and that Western theory is currently at a place where such powerful storytelling can be recognized for its significance. While all of these scholars move beyond Western norms to
analyze Native female writers, their discussion stays within the realm of one discipline—literature—rather than moving into a holistic approach to Native femininity that includes economics, politics, and sexual autonomy. This change in conversation, while powerful, lacks the concept of connectedness so characteristic in Native culture because it only observes Native women through fragmented disciplines.

Despite a one-sided examination of Native femininity from Western scholars, Native women have long been recovering the complex roles they once possessed through activism like Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’s film *Bloodland*. Through the symbolic drilling of a woman’s body, Tailfeathers speaks out against hydraulic fracturing on the Blood Tribe’s lands and reclaims female voice in tribal economics. The dangerous practice of hydraulic fracturing, often referred to as fracking, includes forcing natural gas flow in wells through highly pressurized water, sand, and chemicals. This process involves risks including groundwater contamination, earthquakes, and various health issues. Despite these risks, many tribes in economic depravity see oil fracking as a chance to bring jobs to reservations. In the case of Tailfeathers’s Blood Tribe in Canada, the tribe’s chief and council did not confer with tribal members on the decision to contract reservation land for the use of oil fracking—a result of nepotism and corruption that the filmmaker roots in colonialism (Tailfeathers).

*Bloodland* stemmed from Tailfeathers’s deep dissatisfaction with modern tribal systems that traced their roots to early explorers’ bewilderment and subsequent application of their patriarchal lens in an attempt to understand Native women. Europeans like John Smith and Jamestown resident George Percy recorded their astonishment seeing women work in fields to produce the necessary agriculture. Coming from a patriarchal society, European men seeing Native men hunt (a leisure activity in the eyes of these Englishmen) while women provided the primary substance for consumption was interpreted as a failure of Native men to assert their masculinity and exercise control over their women. Writes Percy, “Their women doe all their drugerie [while] the men takes there pleasure in hunting and their warres, which they are in continually one Kingdome against another” (qtd. in Slater 40). Percy’s use of words like “drugerie” versus “pleasure” makes it clear he disapproves of such a gender structure. This lack of understanding influenced a gradual change in Native gender roles as many tribal leaders adapted to a patriarchal organization. This change in structure may have come from Natives reflecting the organization they saw in Europeans, hoping to have clearer
communication between the two groups. Additionally, Europeans singled out male leaders as the ultimate power in a tribe, assuming that a chief was the equivalent of a king and disregarding any differences the concept of a leader carried in Native society. In the face of such changes, Native women began to lose independence.

Prior to this patriarchal repercussion, tribal economies were intertwined with the land—a relationship Tailfeathers emphasizes in *Bloodland* by connecting tribal economies and land to Native women through the literal drilling of a woman. Whereas hydraulic fracturing involves dangerous drilling of sacred land, the film depicts dangerous drilling into the stomach of a Native woman, held down by her captors. Tailfeathers’s choice to use a woman as a representation of the land emphasizes Native women as integral to tribal economies and protests the lack of women heard in Native economic decisions. When asked about the choice to show a woman being drilled into, Tailfeathers explained, “Without our land, we’re nothing . . . So essentially that place is our mother. And if you think about it, drilling into the earth, fracturing soil beds, injecting horrible chemical cocktails into the earth, is very violent and gruesome” (Chiu 10). Tailfeathers’s protest is complemented by Native women throughout the world who increasingly speak out regarding tribal economics. Regarding issues such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, Native economist Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) and others protested the decision to use Native lands for economic advancement at the risk of community health. Eriel Deranger (Dëne Séléné) speaks of destruction of lands with imagery similar to Tailfeathers’s, explaining that such violent use of lands is like “someone ripping a part of who you are out of you. As Dëne Séléné women, people, we are the Delta, the river, the muskeg, the bears, the caribou, the bison, the peppermint, the rosebuds, all of it. When you destroy that, you are destroying who we are” (Kennedy). Deranger’s metaphor of Native women to sacred land reinforces Tailfeathers’s choice to show a woman being drilled in a graphic manner. Symbolically, this choice criticizes current male-dominated tribal economies and demands Native women have a greater voice in economic proceedings. Through such active engagements in tribal economies, Tailfeathers and others have begun reclamation of Native female economic roles.

*Bloodland* also serves as more than economic reclamation for Tailfeathers, as she demands women be heard in tribal politics and criticizes the way decisions are currently made in her local government. In February 2012,
independent news *Briarpatch Magazine* published an article written by Tailfeathers regarding the oil fracking issues *Bloodland* addresses. Regarding the decision to agree to hydraulic fracturing on Blood Tribe lands, Tailfeathers wrote:

> The band council system is itself deeply flawed and in no way represents traditional Indigenous self-governance. In fact, many would argue that band councils are inherently designed to fail. After all, how could the federal government continue to benefit from the exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources if they had to negotiate on an even playing field with First Nations? This might mean that they would have to actually honour and uphold the original nation-to-nation relationship established in our historic treaties . . . In the case of the Blood Tribe chief and council, Aboriginal Affairs and the federal government have ignored the chief and council’s blatant violation of our member population’s basic rights. Ultimately, this perpetuates the vicious cycle of nepotism and corruption within the band council. (“Fractured Land”)

Tailfeathers’s assessment of Native tribal councils is that they lead to flawed political systems, where tribal members are not heard and Western norms of patriarchy and nepotism flourish. Her articulate analysis of current tribal politics in this quote is one way she participates politically as a Native woman. Additionally, Tailfeathers and other tribal members were dissatisfied with the information provided by tribal leadership regarding the effects of oil fracking and participated in a peaceful protest to delay the start of drilling. Tailfeathers and two other women were arrested on charges of intimidation and held in a jail cell overnight for their refusal to leave the site (O’Rouke). After her release from jail, Tailfeathers decided to make *Bloodland*, which brings attention to the oil fracking while also functioning as an opportunity for Tailfeathers to claim a political voice in the proceedings. Through *Bloodland*, she demands that tribal leaders face the damaging consequences of their haste for economic gain.

Tailfeathers is not the only Native woman to recover traditional Native femininity in politics. Throughout the last century, women like Ada Deer (Menominee), LaDonna Harris (Comanche), and Wilma Mankiller (Cherokee) have been crucial in establishing Native organizations and providing a voice for women in tribal political conversations. Regarding Western societies influence on tribal politics, Deranger said, “A lot of [communities]
were matriarchal or had very even-keeled structures of governance that were basically torn apart, ripped out. They were force-fed these colonial structures that really disempowered women as contributing members of society” (qtd. in Kennedy). Deranger’s recognition of pre-colonial Native femininity shows that female involvement in politics is not a result of the feminist movement within Euro-American societies but a reclamation of traditional Native female power. Native female activity in politics is not revolutionary: it harkens back to generations of Native women who possessed political respect within their communities prior to European contact.

Through *Bloodland*, Tailfeathers also raises a powerful female voice in matters of Native sexuality, referencing issues of sexual violence and exploitation among Native women over the centuries. The film begins with a lone Native woman in a field, rhythmic heartbeats flashing images of pooling blood as the story continues. Attacked by two men, the woman is carried to a darkly lit room and brutally tied down, referencing sexual assault and rape. By using such harsh imagery, Tailfeathers invokes discomfort in her audience, who must face parallel issues of economic and sexual exploitations among Native women. Her choice of setting and darkly lit frames force Natives and non-Natives alike to confront sexuality in a way that is uncomfortable for Western society. Although many Native women possessed sexual knowledge and autonomy prior to contact with Europeans, Western views of sexuality have sought to diminish this knowledge among Native populations. Commenting on European contact with Native peoples, Historian Sandra Slater writes, “[Explorers’] writings reflect ambivalence. Native women simultaneously embodied wanton sexual deviance and women in need of male protection. They controlled their own sexuality within native society through multiple suitors, husbands, and lovers” (40). As in all other instances, Europeans in America pushed Western understanding on Native sexuality, which led to the treatment of Native men and women within patriarchal patterns, where men were considered leaders and women were considered homemakers. Sexual autonomy was understood as sexual violation, and economic contribution was seen as forced servitude to husbands.

Adoption of the Anglo-Saxon world’s avoidance tactics in matters of sexuality—a product of Christian beliefs and Victorian reign—created an environment of fear among Natives regarding sexual issues, objectification of Native women, and sexual abuse that continues to have influence today. In her magazine article highlighting powerful contemporary female voices,
journalist Jennifer Kennedy explains how many scholars view Native sexual violence, writing that before colonial involvement “violence against women was uncommon . . . the process of colonization eroded traditional values and brought gender inequality to Indigenous communities” (“Voices of Resistance”). Kennedy’s summary suggests that gender equality was common among Native communities prior to Western influence, and that a healthy approach to sexual issues has gradually diminished as a result of such influence.

Tailfeathers and other Native female activists recognize that diminished sexual autonomy among Native populations continues to influence all realms of Native femininity and, more broadly, Native life. Jessica Danforth, advocate for Native women’s sexual health, explains, “The crux of our work is to decolonize from that [colonial] model. We call a lot of our work reclamation because we don’t think that we’re actually doing anything revolutionary. We always joke that we didn’t wait for Christopher Columbus to come teach us about sex” (120). Danforth recognizes Euro-American patriarchal influence on Native sexuality and centers her activism on reclamation of sexual knowledge among Native communities. Through this focus, she advocates a return to traditional Native femininity. She continues:

To place sexual health over here and land rights over there is a very colonial, imperial way of thinking. Environmental justice over here, reproductive justice over there. We have really paid the price for that. And our work seeks to indigenize by making full cycles tangible so that people can directly see the violence against the land and the violence against our bodies and the different roles we have to play . . . when we lose one area or one person or one gender in the gendered universe, it creates problems for other things. (121)

Like Tailfeathers, Danforth recognizes that healthy sexuality is related to all Native issues and points out that current gender inequality is linked to all aspects of tribal life. In advocating a return to sexual knowledge and autonomy, these women seek to end a period of sexual exploitation and violence among Native women. Ultimately, their call for sexual autonomy is but one piece in a larger movement to regain powerful roles for Native women.

Women like Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers are not singularities among Native populations, and each Native female activist plays a vital role in recovering Native femininity in its traditional, holistic form. Recent works by scholars have sought to address this recovery, primarily through literary analysis of Native women. However, due to the complete and whole nature of Native
femininity before Western societies’ interference, there is need for a much broader conversation regarding Native women reclaiming essential roles. Tailfeathers’s *Bloodland* powerfully addresses three roles of Native women: economic involvement, political voice, and sexual autonomy and knowledge. Her comprehensive analysis of these issues represents a much larger array of Native women actively campaigning for their lost roles in tribal societies. By recognizing the voices of Native female activists, whether they use the written word or mediums outside of the written word, Natives and non-Natives “repair the circle” of Native femininity that has been broken for centuries (Highway 26).
Works Cited


Criterion
Stepping Out of Photographs
Stopping the Myth of the Vanishing Native through Reclaiming Personhood in The Edward Curtis Project

Mari Murdock

“We were making our own pictures out of our own beliefs and they were adding up. We were inside the lies and beauty of history, of gender, and of class, we were making a case for the future.”

—Marie Clements

The Edward Curtis Project is the collaborative brainchild of both Marie Clements (Métis-Dine) and Rita Leistner. Both a play and a photographic collection, it was originally released as part of the 2010 cultural Olympiad in Vancouver, introducing aspects of living Indigenous culture to the world. Due to its potential worldwide audience, the project hits on many contemporary issues—like Indigenous feminism, inaccurate media coverage, and racial markers such as skin color—and Clements dramatizes this assemblage of issues as a seemingly insurmountable legacy of complex historical, social, political, and even moral consequences of settler colonialism originating in Edward Curtis’ famous narrative of the “vanishing race.” In
light of the sheer number of these problems, Clements wonders, “How does an Indigenous man or woman overcome any of the grossly oppressive realities that makeup Indigenous lived experience?” Her intersectionality of complex issues, coupled with multimedia presentation, brings Clements’s audiences into intimate contact with both the experience of getting crushed beneath overwhelming suffering and the process of self-discovering solutions. Clements highlights the need to get at the core of these problems: what if, instead of having to fight the centuries of escalating momentum for stereotypes, racism, sexism, and domination, we reach the source—the basic right to exist? This question of the privilege to be a real person, rather than a photograph or a perceived stereotype, is where her protagonist goes to rebuild herself rather than taking these issue on one by one.

This theme of affirming personhood to conquer settler colonialism is taken up by Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) in his essay “Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination,” wherein he poses similar questions to Clements and proposes his own solution. Corntassel asks, “What recourse do we have against those destructive forces and entities that have disconnected us from our longstanding relationships to our homelands, cultures and communities?” (87). These questions demand answers to an often overpowering abundance of issues that threaten to snuff out Indigenous life in all its forms. To overcome the seeming impossibility of the task, he invites Indigenous people to adopt “a peoplehood model” that would renew “the complex spiritual, political and social relationships,” disrupting that process of erasure and destruction (89). The heart of this model stems from the basic need to be recognized as human, not as a settler stereotype, making the struggle more of a resurgence of life than a specifically political, social, economic, or spiritual resurgence. This is done by simply enacting and living one’s Indigenous traditions, reconnecting every day to “language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories” (89). While Corntassel applies his model specifically to nationhood, in this paper, I make a more individual application of his model, responding to the more personal need for life resurgence in combatting depression and suicide which are common psychological responses to seemingly insurmountable situations. I explore the food-based version of the peoplehood model solution adopted by Clements’s protagonist Angeline in *The Edward Curtis Project* to illustrate her journey toward asserting her humanity, which allows her to conquer the feeling of being psychologically defeated.
The play’s story follows Angeline, a Métis journalist tasked with reporting on Native issues. After winning an award for reporting the story of three Aboriginal children, who “were found frozen to death in the snow . . . and their father, age 24, was found drunk,” Angeline develops depression, which escalates into a mental breakdown as she realizes her involvement in perpetuating settler narratives and stereotypes about Indigenous people (12). As an Indigenous woman herself, she feels death might be her only escape from such a self-defeating, damning situation. In her examination of the play, Jennifer Henderson observes that this situation constructs “a socially distanciated but empathetic spectatorship of Indigenous tragedy read as pathology: an alcoholic father has neglected his children” (300). This means that Angeline’s tragedy comes from her culpability in adding to the stereotypical journalistic voyeurism dedicated to delivering the settler audience the tragedy of their preconceived pathological expectation and nostalgia for a “vanishing Indian” narrative. However, this burden does not fall on Angeline’s shoulders alone. Clements also invites the audience to share the blame, holding them responsible for their power to create and perpetuate these stereotypical narratives. As Beverly Yhap observes of the play’s performances, “To some extent, each show enacted a kind of exhumation: received ideas of culture and privilege—of who occupies and creates any given artistic ‘canon’—were brought to light and held up to account” (106). Thus, as Angeline longs to escape her guilt through death, Clements also connects audiences with the experience of being overwhelmed, generating a shared empathy for the threat of depression and suicide. The audience must then join Angeline in her journey through mental breakdown in the attempts to discover freedom.

Due to the complexity of the historical, social, political, and moral consequences of settler colonialism that Angeline faces, her depression conjures hallucinations: mental manifestations of her tangled thoughts which she can examine and address. Her hallucinations begin with an encounter with Edward Curtis, the controversial photographer who took pictures of Native peoples in the early twentieth century and one of the originators of the American “vanishing Indian” myth. In this relationship, she confronts Curtis’s legacy of trauma, prejudice and political neglect directly, looking for a solution at the problem’s source rather than attempting to solve these issues one at a time. During their interaction, Curtis fixes Angeline a pot of buffalo stew, a Native recipe, and tells her he was the grand preserver of
Indigenous cultural elements like this. He says he took “a picture so no one would ever forget they [Indigenous peoples] were here. . . . Because pictures are . . . realities” (28). Angeline immediately stiffens, contesting, “Or are they [pictures] just perceptions? And if so, of whom? Those who take the picture or those who pose for them” (28). In these questions, she wonders how he could think that what he took was really anything more than his version of history, not Indigenous realities. In her review of the play, Selena Couture observes that Clements recognizes “that photographic documentation is seductive in its apparent truth-telling, but that it is always a process of choosing what to include in the frame and what to exclude from it,” and in Curtis’s version, he excludes the possibility that the Indigenous people could endure (13). Angeline herself is living proof of this endurance. This complicates his narrative of the vanishing Indian immediately. One cannot imagine real Natives who, looking toward their seemingly inevitable demise, would ask Curtis to save their stew rather than their own lives or the lives of their children. Therefore, his narrative appears false.

The stew thus acts as an artifact of Curtis’s myth-making, his process of taking Indigenous dances, customs, and pictures to preserve them while the people they come from die. By producing this stew recipe, Curtis perpetuates the reality in which the people who invented this dish have disappeared, reenacting his myth before Angeline’s eyes, preserving only the vanishing Indian stereotype. This is the same myth which condemned the “drunk” father, turning him into a stereotype, freezing him into a picture “reality” that Curtis helped create and the audience and Angeline helped perpetuate. When faced with the reality where this myth is still prevalent, Angeline despairs, overcome by this complex, settler colonial dilemma. She searches again for an escape, her depression driving her into a psychological fracture, and she even begs for death, saying, “Why can’t a person die if they want to? . . . I just want to die” (32).

Angeline’s reaction converses directly with the suicide epidemic commonly plaguing Indigenous communities, and through Angeline’s despair, Clements helps her audiences experience the brutal psychological results of extended trauma and racism. For example, in her exploration of Indigenous psychology, Luana Ross (Salish and Kootenai) asserts that an oppressive settler legacy is not only “complex, it is also unyielding” and has “the power to eliminate the desire for survival” (61). As a specific instance, Ross observed incarcerated Native women, confirming, “Many Native women, indeed, do not survive the violence. Some go crazy . . .
while others exist in a depression they cannot—or dare not—name” (61). Ross’s observations cover only a fraction of the rampant instances where trauma and racism generates defeatism, insanity, and depression, potentially life-threatening psychological disorders that further scourge Native communities. Angeline’s breakdown illustrates these threats, drawing the audience’s attention to the ongoing, significant consequences of the settler legacy. She is trapped in an emotional prison perpetuated by her pain, and as she suffers psychologically, her social connections break down, and she thrusts away those she loves, ready to abandon them completely through death. This reaction, however, is also part of the settler stereotype for the “vanishing Indian” as her death would culminate in the “proper” demise dictated by the stereotype. This is similar to E. Pauline Johnson’s (Mohawk) long-standing observation of the literary stereotype of the Native woman, a figure destined to die because “she is too unhealthy and too unnatural to live” (122). Settlers tell stories to match their narratives of the vanishing Native and expect real Indigenous peoples to follow suit, crafting a society that adds pressure on the Indigenous populations to do so. Likewise, Angeline feels forced to follow suit, beaten down by the “complex” and “unyielding” oppression that seems to give her only one way out. Her suicide would fulfill Curtis’s prophecy of the vanishing Indian, and Angeline would be back where she started, living out the fate of that myth.

Despite Angeline’s bleak situation, Curtis’s stew also introduces the life-saving personhood model by becoming an ironic symbol of the most basic of human functions, the natural requirement that separates a photograph from a body of flesh: food. This is suggestive of Corntassel’s “peoplehood model” because where a two-dimensional photograph of the “vanishing Indian” would have no use of food, indicative of a people’s supposed plea for Curtis to take and preserve it for them, a living people looking for resurgence requires “daily acts of renewal,” literally like eating, in order to survive (89). Therefore, Angeline—in order to move from photograph to flesh, stereotype to human being, and choose life over death—must find real food that represents her “personhood” to preserve herself. Thus enters the Hunger Chief, the timeless bear-like entity who acts as a “leader of all nations and peoples” (8). Embodying the hardship of these forgotten people, the Hunger Chief stands by Angeline to guide her subversion of Curtis’s destructive myth. He first appears in the form of Angeline’s boyfriend Yiska.
Yiska plays the part of champion for Angeline’s initial challenge to Curtis’s narrative, supporting her ideas and even physically taking action to defend their personhood. As Yiska enters the hallucination, Curtis cooks eggs and bacon for them, again offering his food artifact symbolic of the myth. However, Yiska is suspicious, eventually tearing up Curtis’s photographs, demanding, “What, you think you can cook a pair of eggs and everything is fine?” Yiska directly confronts the vanishing Indian myth by tearing up the photos, claiming his right to exist outside of their restrictive borders. This forces Curtis to admit in a fit of rage, “I cooked for them, and I cooked for them, and I cooked for them . . . do you want to know why? Because I couldn’t stand watching them starve to death over and over and over . . . everywhere I went . . . starvation, death, incarceration, hunger” (54). Here, Curtis reveals his solution to Native suffering: feed the starving, vanishing Indians with his empty food until they disappear, fulfilling his narrative. However, this is not the solution Yiska and Angeline desire. Yiska then transforms into the Hunger Chief and, speaking with the voice of all Indians, simply says, “I am and remain thin. I want to eat. We want to eat. I don’t want to be sick. I want to get well” (62). Instead, the Natives demand the right to real nourishment to satisfy their hunger, not to vanish to erase it all together. The Hunger Chief then tells Curtis, “I am very poor. I am very rich, weak, strong, short, tall, fat, skinny, alive, blind, dead . . . We eat together,” a list that invokes all forms of existence. This timeless deity asks for the right of his people to just live, regardless of their condition, as real human beings, to share in the simplest act of mortality: to eat.

The Hunger Chief’s powerful claim upon life, this right to peoplehood, dispels Curtis’s myth of the vanishing Indian. In fact, after this, Curtis himself literally fades from the stage, as if vanishing from history, unable to take a photograph of Angeline, the picture that would be the first of his collection, cutting his toxic legacy off at its root. This disruption of the photographs’ limiting stereotypes allows Angeline a chance to reclaim her true identity as a real human being through resurgent peoplehood. Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) declares, “To assert our self-determination, to assert our presence in the face of erasure, is to free ourselves from the ghost-making rhetorics of colonization” (353). As Angeline has seen the Hunger Chief act, now she must make this effort for herself to outlive Curtis’s vanishing Indian narrative in the real world beyond her hallucination. She resurfaces from her hallucination, but the threat of Curtis’s legacy remains in this world where she is still a journalist winning an award for reporting the deaths of those children. However, after her
experiences with Curtis and the Hunger Chief, she finds herself armed with her newly discovered pathway to personhood, using her humanity to declare, “I am ready to see everything. Please” (66). The Hunger Chief, transformed back into Yiska, responds, “Touch me . . . Remember me . . . Smell me . . . Look at me Ange, . . . love me and we can move forward . . . you have to see love because it is the only thing we have that can’t be starved from us” (66). He once again invokes her right to be human, not a photograph, and asks her to use her body to experience and partake of the food that proves she can exist, the food that nourishes her best: love. Unlike the buffalo stew, a temporary artifact capable of being stolen by Curtis, Yiska reminds Angeline that love is a nourishment forever preserved. As an eternal food, she should turn to love to nourish and strengthen her body, her life. Angeline grasps this lesson, adopting it as her own resurgent peoplehood model, a preservation of a powerful cultural aspect that can reverse settler colonialism, thus reversing her decay under Curtis’s destructive legacy.

This ending explains why Angeline describes her mental breakdown as a breakthrough. In the beginning of the play, she cries, “All I wanted to do was get out. Get out of the picture that was made for me—get out of the picture I had made for myself. Get out of all the lies that framed me” (13). This signifies her original desire to succumb to her depression, to die crushed beneath the weight of the unyielding settler legacy. Angeline avoids being overcome by the rising tides of immensely complex historical, social, political, and even moral consequences of settler colonialism by confronting Curtis’s myth directly. She faces the root of these issues: the denial of simple humanity. Through asserting her humanity, she has no more need of escaping the stereotype and can choose life instead of death. She identifies her own resurgent pathway to personhood, reemerging as her true self: a human being instead of a half-vanished stereotypic specimen of an interrupted settler nostalgia. In the final line of the play, Angeline declares, “We have survived across time, across place, to love each other towards a new day,” banishing the myth from her future endeavors in a triumphant reclamation of her own life and the lives of her Native brothers and sisters. Through this powerful protagonist’s change, Clements encourages her audience to likewise stand firm against unyielding odds and lay claim to the basic right to exist and hold onto love as their sustaining, unifying proof of personhood. Rather than disappearing, forced into depression and suicide through victimized helplessness, they can realize the truth Clements declares in her artistic statement found on the first page of The Edward Curtis Project: “There is no Vanishing Indian, never was. . . . We are everywhere and it is beautiful” (5).


Despite the United States’ claims that the Indian Education Program was created to pay back Indigenous people who had been uprooted and displaced by the government, the underlying ideology was much more insidious. At the heart of this operation was General Richard Pratt’s admonition to “kill the Indian, and save the man” (Peterson). However, rather than resort to physical extermination—which was no longer a politically viable option—the United States government implemented a series of American Indian boarding schools. These were intended to teach Native children to forsake their culture and become so-called civilized members of society. The boarding schools sought out young Indian girls in particular, theorizing that if they were to indoctrinate the young Native women with Victorian ideals of femininity, the girls would then raise their own children accordingly and thereby extinguish Native culture (Devens 219).

In her series of autobiographical essays, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “School Days of an Indian Girl,” Zitkala-Ša combats the boarding school’s assimilation efforts through her connection to her mother, her ultimate symbol of Native womanhood. She highlights her mother as a figure of Native fertility and power and contrasts her with the cold, sterile images of the Indian boarding school. In doing so, Zitkala-Ša both establishes
the Indian Education Program as a cultural sterilization project and resists the assimilation efforts of the boarding school by remaining connected to her own identity as an Indigenous woman. In this paper, I will first examine the physical and cultural sterilization efforts of the US government against the Indian race and culture. I will then explore the ways in which Zitkala-Ša both rebukes and resists these assimilation efforts through her connection to Native womanhood.

The Indian Health Services and the Sterilization of Native Women

Although Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical essays focus exclusively on the cultural sterilization efforts of the Indian Education Program, they foreshadow a later, more physically violent discovery: the Indian Health Services’ sterilization of Native women without their consent or knowledge. Jane Lawrence, an Indigenous studies scholar, writes that the Indian Health Services targeted Native American women in particular because their birth rates were about twice as high as those of the average white woman (402). This is significant because the sterilization of Native American women presumably began in 1970, and within a decade the number of children per Native American woman dropped by 1.99 children. This was nearly half of what it was previously (402). Although sterilization is only one possible explanation for this decline in birth rate, the greatness of the decline is suspicious, especially considering that the decline in birth rate for white women, which was only .28 children per woman, was about eight times less than the decline for Native women.

Additionally, according to investigative records from Planned Parenthood during that same time period, over 3,000 Native American women were sterilized between 1973 and 1976 (3). Considering that Native American women made up only a fraction of a percent (.025%) of the American population, the sterilization of 3,000 Native women accounts for 6 percent of the entire Native female population at the time, and an even greater percent of Native females of childbearing age (“1940 Census” 9). Comparatively, if the US government had sterilized 6 percent of the entire white female population, it would have sterilized over 5.2 million white women. This is especially concerning considering the methods the Indian Health Services used to sterilize Native American women. According to records from Planned
Parenthood, the Indian Health Services used several deceptive methods. These included a lack of basic information regarding procedures, a lack of information regarding rights to withdraw consent, and insufficient time between consent and procedure (2). In one case, a young Native American woman had been told that her hysterectomy was reversible, only to be told years later that there was “no such thing as a womb transplant” (Lawrence 400).

On the one hand, these results provide evidence that Native women were being sterilized through deceptive methods, and that these methods very likely contributed to the Native childbearing rate being cut in half. On the other hand, they also point to a troubling history of aggression from the United States government against Native peoples. Using deceptive methods, the Indian Health Services effectively sterilized six percent of the entire Native female population within a period of three years. This indicates a clear intent by the US government to covertly continue previous attempts to eliminate the Indian race.

The Indian Education Program and the Sterilization of Native Culture

Prior to physically sterilizing women in efforts to eliminate the Native American race, the US government also implemented a series of boarding schools that sought to assimilate Native American peoples to white culture. According to Carol Devens, a scholar of Native Women’s Studies, the Indian Education Program sought out young Native girls specifically in order to convert them from their Native traditions to Victorian ideals of femininity (228). This is presumably because the US government was aware of the significant role of women and female kinship relations within Native communities. According to Paula Gunn Allen, Laguna Pueblo poet and scholar, “traditional lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not” (29). By teaching young Native girls to forsake their culture’s traditions in exchange for “higher” traditions of submissiveness, piety, and domesticity, the Indian Education Program was essentially teaching the young girls how to assimilate the next generation of Native children to white culture.

The immense influence of Native womanhood on Native culture is of significant interest in contemporary scholarship on the subject. According to Mary Jo Tippeconic Fox, Eileen Luna-Firebaugh, and Caroline Williams,
all of whom are Native American scholars, “leadership in education is seen as congruent with the role of woman as caregiver and nurturer” (Fox 87). Devens describes the significance of female kinship relations within Indigenous communities when she writes that the Native woman’s role in her community is to “ins[truct] the child in both the practical and ritual activities that . . . shape her life as an adult within the community,” and “[white] schooling removed a girl from the warmth of her kin’s care, left her with no one to teach, comfort, or guide her as they would at home” (232). Thus, not only did the Indian Education Program seek out young Native girls in order to remove them from their mothers and the root of their culture, it also altered the girls’ future roles as leaders to serve its own agenda. In other words, knowing that the young girls would grow up to be leaders and teachers of culture and tradition within their communities, the Indian Education Program created boarding schools to assimilate the young girls to white culture. This ensured that they would one day lead their own children in the same way. In doing this, the Indian Education Program sought to metaphorically sterilize Native people of their culture.

Zitkala-Ša’s Rejection of Cultural Sterilization and the Indian Education Program

Although the Indian Education Program was in part successful at separating many Native American children from their culture, many children in these programs were resilient to its efforts. For example, Zitkala-Ša was once considered the success story of white assimilation tactics, but she ended up leaving the boarding school and is now a renowned Native author and Indian rights activist. Additionally, in her series of autobiographical essays, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” Zitkala-Ša presents her mother as the epitome of Native womanhood and power. She does this by contrasting her mother against the cold, sterile imagery of the boarding school. By doing this, Zitkala-Ša rebukes the boarding school’s sterilization efforts and remains connected to her Native female identity by presenting her mother as a Native hero that provides refuge or rescues her from white culture. Thus, Zitkala-Ša renders the boarding school’s assimilation tactics ineffective.

One of the first instances in which Zitkala-Ša contrasts the fertility of her mother and culture with the sterility of the boarding school is in her story “The Cutting of My Long Hair.” This is one of the first traumatic experiences she
suffers at boarding school, in which a white woman cuts off her long, thick hair. She writes, “Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy” (“School Days” 90). It is important to note that immediately upon hearing that her hair might be cut off, Zitkala-Ša remembers her mother. Rather than write that her people had taught her to associate shingled hair with weakness, she writes that it was her mother who taught her this. Not only is her mother her ultimate example of biological fertility she is also a symbol of cultural fertility because Zitkala-Ša looks to her as the ultimate example of what it means to be a Native woman.

Zitkala-Ša’s depiction of this instance also sets up the white oppressor as a literal object of cultural sterility. When describing the cutting of her hair, Zitkala-Ša writes, “I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit . . . in my anguish, I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me” (91). This passage is significant for two reasons. First, rather than referring explicitly to the white woman, Zitkala-Ša accuses the “cold blades of the scissors” of cutting off her hair. She does this not to set up the scissors as the enemy, but to use them as a metonym for the woman using the scissors. Rather than regarding the white woman as a human female, she equates her to a pair of scissors: a cold, sharp object without form or gender. This passage is also significant because in contrast to the unwanted presence of the white woman, Zitkala-Ša expresses a mournful desire to be in the warm presence of her mother. In setting up her mother as the quintessential Native feminine ideal and contrasting her with the sterile description of the white woman, Zitkala-Ša reveals her feelings of being literally and metaphorically cut off from her culture, thus demonstrating the cultural sterilization underlying the boarding school program.

In this story, Zitkala-Ša doesn’t present her mother as a hero who comes and saves her from the humiliation of having her hair cut, but as a figure from whom she derives the strength to endure the situation. For example, in the midst of the experience, Zitkala-Ša remembers the safety of her mother’s presence and longs to be with her. Thus, this passage not only depicts the boarding school as a sterile, cold place through the description of the white woman, it also depicts Zitkala-Ša’s mother as a source of warmth and refuge from that sterility. By contrasting the boarding school and her mother this way, Zitkala-Ša remains connected to her source of Native womanhood and thereby resists the boarding school’s assimilation efforts.
In “The Cutting of My Long Hair” as well as in “The Land of the Red Apples,” Zitkala-Ša also symbolically rebukes the cultural sterilization of being separated from her mother through her descriptions of her moccasins. In “The Land of Red Apples,” when Zitkala-Ša begins her descent out East, she describes her experience on the train in which “[white] children . . . pointed at [her] moccasined feet” (87). Embarrassed to the point of tears, she writes, “Their mothers, instead of reproving such rude curiosity, looked closely at me, and attracted their children’s further notice to my blanket” (87). According to Ruth Spack, scholar of Native American studies, the beadwork designs involved in making moccasins is a domestic task within Indigenous communities that “represent[s] a type of power that [is] uniquely female” and “brought prestige and wealth to the woman and to her family” (31). It is no surprise, then, that Zitkala-Ša felt so deeply hurt by the white mother and children’s gawking on the train; to disrespect her moccasins was to invalidate her skills and role as a young Native woman.

Furthermore, in “The Cutting of My Long Hair,” Zitkala-Ša writes that “the annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave [her] no peace” and that “the constant clash of harsh noises . . . and bitter cold . . . made a bedlam within which [she] was securely tied” (89). In this passage Zitkala-Ša reveals the insensitivity of white culture towards her own by describing the boarding school with words like “bare,” “bitter cold,” and “annoying,” contrasted with her own noiseless moccasins and her memory of “unlassoed freedom” back West (96). By doing so, she introduces the boarding school as a sterile place that not only disrespects her culture but also disconnects her from it.

Although in this part of the story Zitkala-Ša does not explicitly declare her mother as the source of deliverance from cultural sterilization, she does so implicitly through the symbolism of her moccasins. After hearing from her friend Judewin that her hair will be “shingled by the enemy,” Zitkala-Ša declares that she “will not submit” and goes upstairs to hide (“School Days” 90). However, Zitkala-Ša recognizes that she is unable to sneak effectively because of her “squeaking shoes,” which had replaced her moccasins (91). It is symbolic here that Zitkala-Ša chooses to foreshadow her capture and subsequent defeat (the cutting of her hair) with the removal of her moccasins. Although Zitkala-Ša never states that her mother rescues her from the boarding school, she indicates that “the weakening of female power is tied to the encroaching white world” by foreshadowing her traumatic hair-cutting experience—a symbol of defeat and weakness within her community—with the removal
of her soft moccasins, which symbolize Native domesticity and womanhood. Thus, Zitkala-Ša expresses that Native womanhood and values—specifically those taught to her by her mother—are capable of protecting her against the cultural sterilization efforts of the boarding school system as long as she remains tethered to them.

Zitkala-Ša’s account of a biblically charged nightmare in “The Devil” presents the same idea. In this dream, she is pursued by “the white man’s devil,” and eventually rescued by her mother. Zitkala-Ša contrasts her culture’s approach to evil spirits with white culture’s approach to the devil, which is to instill fear and obedience. Comparing these approaches between the two cultures, she writes, “The old warriors used to tell me . . . of evil spirits. But I was taught to fear them no more than those who stalked around in material guise” (“School Days” 94). Conversely, she writes about being taught about the Devil from “a paleface woman,” who said that he “roamed loose in the world, and that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him” (94). The difference between the two cultural approaches is important in that Zitkala-Ša is taught at home not to fear evil, but is taught at the boarding school that she should be fearful of evil, especially if she doesn’t abide by school regulations. This communicates that she must not only forsake her culture and assimilate to white culture but that if she fails to do so, she will be tortured by the devil, a fundamental symbol of fear and control within white Christian culture.

Because the devil embodies white culture’s attempts to eliminate Native culture, he and Zitkala-Ša’s mother also act as opposing figures of physical sterility and fertility. In Zitkala-Ša’s dream, the devil, which she describes as “the king of evil spirits,” lacks a body and lacks form, thus missing the organs necessary for reproduction. As such, he is literally sterile. In direct contrast, Zitkala-Ša presents her mother, who rescues her from the devil, as an emblem of Native fertility in that she has not only created children but also in the sense that she is powerful enough to save Zitkala-Ša from the “white man’s devil” (94). The comparison that Zitkala-Ša draws between the threat of the sterile, white devil and the fertile avenger that is her mother is powerful because it presents her mother as a God-like figure who, like the God of Christianity, is more powerful than the devil and provides salvation for her child. Catherine Kunce, scholar of Native literature, writes, “before the invasion of missionaries, Zitkala-Ša enjoyed an Edenic existence . . . with her mother presiding as God” (74–5). Additionally, Kunce
describes the white missionaries as a representation of evil who, like Lucifer of the Old Testament, tempt God’s creation—in this case, Zitkala-Ša—away from a paradisiacal existence with God: her mother (78).

These images are significant not only in that they depict white missionaries and white culture as a source of cultural sterilization for Native peoples, but also because they present Zitkala-Ša’s mother—a Native woman—as a replacement for the God of Christianity. By describing her mother as a god-like figure that saves her from the white devil, Zitkala-Ša depicts her mother, the embodiment of Native femininity, as a superior, overpowering force against the boarding school system and white culture. Thus, Zitkala-Ša’s depiction of her mother communicates to the reader that the boarding school acts as a cultural sterilization project. Just as important, it demonstrates that despite these attempts, Zitkala-Ša views her connection to her mother—and her own identity as a Native woman—as the things that will fortify her against the sterilizing boarding school program.

In her writings, Zitkala-Ša both uncovers and combats the boarding school program’s attacks against her culture and race through her celebration of Native womanhood and her rejection of white assimilation tactics. She exposes the anti-Indigenous agenda underlying this system through her opposing symbols of sterility—embodied by white culture—and fertility, embodied by her Native mother. In remembering and honoring her mother as a symbol of Native power and femininity, Zitkala-Ša remains connected to her own Native identity, thereby rendering the boarding school apparatus ineffective. Through her reverence towards Native womanhood throughout her stories and her rejection of the Indian school system’s sterilization efforts, Zitkala-Ša lays the groundwork for current Indigenous female resistance to assimilation.
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Adam Brantley is a junior majoring in English and minoring in Korean and chemistry. He plans on attending medical school after graduating. In the meantime, he enjoys hummus and hot tubs.

Sarah Cannon is a senior in the English Teaching program at BYU. She was fortunate to have some stellar English teachers at her high school in South Jordan, Utah, who helped her realize her passion for voice and articulation. She believes there is power in reading and writing and wants to use those tools to empower students.

Christine Eck recently graduated from BYU with a major in English and a minor in editing. She lives in Arizona with her husband and son. Besides them, her great loves are poetry, good food, and the outdoors.

Lorin Groesbeck is a senior from Alpine, Utah, majoring in American Studies with minors in music and digital humanities. She especially enjoys playing the organ and studying religious and African American history. Lorin graduates in April.

Jacob Johnson is a senior interested in using his English skills in the public sector. He will begin a public administration master program at the University of Utah this fall. Ultimately, he hopes to follow in the footsteps of a hero, Mr. Rodgers, and make communities more compassionate, equitable, and neighborly.

Anna Kendall is an undergraduate student studying American Studies at BYU. She is especially interested in anthropology and folklore, and hopes to pursue a master’s degree in those subjects. She’s also the proud mother of a fiery redheaded baby girl, and loves implementing her schooling into parenthood.
Morgan Klatskin’s studies at BYU centered on language. Through lectures on the language, literature, and usage of English, Morgan discovered her interest in the infinite diversity of human communication through words. Morgan puts these studies to work in her job as an editor.

Charlotte Kupsh is a writer and graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She is currently finishing her master’s thesis, a creative nonfiction book about rural identity in America. She plans to start doctoral work at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in late 2018.

Maren E. Loveland is a junior American Studies major with a minor in women’s studies planning to apply to graduate school in the fall. She grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and loves reading, hiking, and occasionally baking.

Mari Murdock is a second-year graduate student from Hawai’i studying Transatlantic Modernism. After graduation, she hopes to eventually get a PhD and continue teaching and writing somewhere warmer than Utah.

Deirdre Murphy is a senior English literature and history double major at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. She enjoys studying how religion and literature intersect. Upon graduation, she intends to pursue a career in teaching.

Isaac Robertson is a senior at BYU majoring in English with minors in math and creative writing. He wrote the included piece based on research performed while fulfilling an internship with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon. He would like to give them special thanks and recognition, as well as all of the mentors and friends who have inspired and supported him. He plans to apply for graduate school during the coming year.

Lainey Wardlow is from Norman, Oklahoma, and works at BYU’s Research and Writing Center. She is majoring in English and loves spending time with friends, making art, and listening to Kate Bush.