“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

We, the executive staff of Criterion, are excited to present the Winter 2021 issue of Criterion to our readers and would like to take this opportunity to express gratitude to our editing staff, published authors, and contributors. Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism is a student-run journal associated with the English Department at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. As a journal, we give our volunteers hands-on editing, proofreading, and design experience throughout the publication process. Our editing staff is composed entirely of student volunteers; without them, publishing quality articles for our readers would be impossible. Although the social distancing guidelines in effect at Brigham Young University mandated that we work together remotely, their diligent efforts and dependability throughout the extensive editing process allowed us to produce this issue. We are proud to share this issue with our readers, made possible by their uncompromising commitment.

The papers in this journal were chosen from dozens of submissions because of their engaging themes and thought-provoking arguments. Three of those published (starting on pages 69, 91, and 123 respectively) respond to a forum prompt written by Nicole Waligora-Davis, a professor in the Department of English at Rice University, that invited authors to examine how Black literature addresses the most urgent questions of our time. We give thanks to all of the authors in this journal, who shared their unique insights in their articles and allowed us to publish their work. We are especially grateful for the time they spent revising their papers with our editors; without their commitment to creating the best possible papers for
our readers, success would not have been possible. Thanks to their tireless engagement and valuable ideas, we are able to present a collection of critical thought ranging from spiritual experiences evoked by World War I poetry to domestic violence as seen in the works of Shakespeare.

We would also like to thank our faculty advisor, Billy Hall, a professor in the English Department at Brigham Young University. Without his advice and guidance, we would not have been able to produce such a quality issue. Lastly, we express gratitude for Brigham Young University and the BYU English Department for their continued support of the journal. We sincerely hope you enjoy this issue of *Criterion*.

Rachel Teixeira  
Ethan McGinty
Criterion
The academic study of spirituality does not belong to just religious studies. The fields of psychology, biology, neuroscience, art, and literature recognize the salience of human spirituality both inside and outside the confines of religious tradition and theological belief. Each field utilizes varying definitions and attitudes in their academic pursuit to understand spirituality and spiritual experience. As a result, the word “spirituality” often evades a singular definition. Scholar and theologian Sandra M. Schneiders claims that the term is “unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience” (678). American psychologist William James, who attempted to approach the study of spirituality as a pseudoscience, claimed that part of the difficulty of understanding mystical and spiritual experience lies in the fact that
“it defies expression . . . its quality must be directly experienced” and “cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (515). The difficulty and ambiguity of spirituality for scholars is thus twofold: defining the phenomenon itself and explaining how the phenomenon manifests itself in the most unspoken, personal depths of the human psyche. These lived manifestations of spirituality we will refer to as spiritual experiences.

The studies of spirituality and spiritual experience conjure a number of different academic responses, ranging from zealous fanaticism to skeptic disapproval. While some scholars recognize the validity of spiritual experiences as deeply meaningful, psychological experiences beyond the scope of scientific understanding, others might argue that such experiences are simply the fruits of a disturbed mind. Scholars like Wesley J. Wildman recognize the compelling nature of spiritual experiences not only as a means of confirming religious feelings of ultimate truth and social identity but also as a fundamental aspect of the human condition (Wildman). And even though research on spirituality in the past has favored traditional Christian paradigms, the academic field has grown more expansive to include an understanding of other religious traditions, including an understanding of spirituality that is divorced from religious belief altogether. Wildman writes that “there has been an average increase in sophistication” in the academic study of spiritual experience “as researchers gradually became aware of and subsequently tried to overcome simplistic assumptions about [religious and spiritual experiences] deriving from theistic and usually Christian religious and theological frameworks” (53). This all-encompassing understanding of human spirituality and the universality of spiritual experience will more properly suit our purposes in this study.

There is likewise no sole definition of what constitutes a spiritual experience. However, in literary studies spiritual experience can be described as a spontaneous swelling of the emotions, a momentary euphoria, a perfect union of the body and mind, or an epiphanic sense of ultimate meaning. For my purposes, I will focus on how spiritual experience is expressed and interpreted through poetry. Poetry presents a thoughtful medium to explore the inner workings of the human spirit, as it seeks to articulate aspects of the human experience that are unseen and hold ultimate meaning. The poetry of World War I in particular presents a fascinating portrait of human spirituality. To imagine a spiritual experience occurring amid the trench warfare, mustard gas bombings, and ecological destruction fundamentally characteristic of World War I seems almost paradoxical. Yet, British soldier-poets Isaac Rosenberg
and Edward Thomas, who both wrote poetry as soldiers and were killed in battle, portrayed wartime spiritual experiences in their works. The depiction of spiritual experiences in their poetry, on one hand, captures the Romantic glorification of a sublime spiritual experience and its fruits of joy and deeper understanding. On the other hand, the spiritual experience simultaneously reflects the twisted depravity of World War I and the increasing secularization of the modern era. This literary tension led these soldier-poets to portray spiritual experience in nuanced and contradictory ways.

In order to understand the spirituality found in the poetry of Rosenberg and Thomas, I invoke Schneider’s assessment that the study of spirituality must have “an understanding of the discipline which is not necessarily theological” but includes “non-Christian and even nonreligious spiritual experiences” (687). Rosenberg and Thomas present provocative notions of spirituality that are strikingly similar, despite their theological differences. Rosenberg, an Orthodox Jew, and Thomas, a disenchanted Christian, both tether their depictions of spiritual experience not to a concept of religion, theology, or even divinity (“Isaac,” Longley). They portray wartime spiritual experience anthropologically, as a universal feature of the human condition accessible to all people in all places—even the darkest of trenches. This type of spirituality is detached from theological meaning and carries the potential to be shared universally. By avoiding religious framing in which to interpret their respective spiritual experiences, Rosenberg and Thomas suggest that the transcendence of their spiritual experiences tethers them to their humanity and to the natural world. Yet, the poets also suggest that the horrors of the War are so terrible that it prevents them from fully basking in the magnificence or higher meaning of their spiritual experiences.

To Rosenberg and Thomas, spiritual experience entails a sensory and emotional awakening from the dull and numbed life of a soldier. These experiences are depicted as an approach to a transcendent sense of ultimacy or broader reality that occurs through communion with nature. I argue that Rosenberg and Thomas—who belonged to the Georgian poetic movement—both hearken back to the Romantic poetic tradition that preceded them, particularly by linking the spiritual experiences in their poems to birdsong. In these poems, birdsong creates a spiritual experience that is reminiscent of the Romantic sublime, in that the key to spiritual awakening is a spontaneous interaction with the unseen beauties of the natural world, which leads to an enhanced acuteness of one’s place in time and space. The Romantic elements
in Rosenberg and Thomas’s poetry are also brought into dialogue with modernist angst—a typical feature of English poetry during and after World War I. I argue that the psychological trauma caused by the War and the existential stress of modernity leads these poets to interpret their spiritual experiences as life-threatening and dangerous rather than life-sustaining and fulfilling. Thus, spiritual experiences in these poems are portrayed as a transcendent moment of beauty or existential clarity, but they are interpreted by the poets as an unwanted distraction from the dangerous reality of imminent death at wartime. Finally, because the spiritual experiences themselves pose a threat to survival for these soldier-poets, I reason that Rosenberg and Thomas find spiritual solace in the formal elements of poetry itself instead of in their lived spiritual experiences. The act of writing poetry becomes a spiritual exercise whereby Rosenberg and Thomas can capture a fleeting, threatening moment through language, and—within the formal elements of the poem—grapple with existential stress, imminent death, and the spiritually numbing life of a soldier.

Both Rosenberg and Thomas were far from the typical British soldier. After returning from a stay in South Africa in December 1915, Isaac Rosenberg enlisted in the British army to fight in France. Only twenty-four years old, Rosenberg enlisted not out of duty or desire for glory, but to financially support his impoverished family. He determined as a young school boy to establish himself as a literary visionary of great imagination and depth, and he had already published several poems before enlisting. Although his Orthodox Jewish heritage discouraged engagement with art and English literature, Rosenberg exhibited a gift in writing from an early age and was encouraged by mentors to study English poetry vocationally. He became a student of many Romantic poets and felt a “strong affinity” for the Romantic painter-poet William Blake (Maccoby 14). He continued to write poetry on scraps of paper in the muddy trenches of France and had a few poems published while serving. On April 1, 1918, Rosenberg was killed in man-to-man combat. His family engraved words upon his headstone which, for Rosenberg, would have been “the highest title which a human being can bear: . . . ‘Artist and Poet’” (Maccoby 124).

Edward Thomas was many years older than Rosenberg by the time Britain declared war in August 1914. At this point in his life, Thomas already had a family and a well-established writing career. However, it is apparent that the conflict abroad quickly consumed all of Thomas’s thoughts, for it
soon became the primary subject of his letters and writings. That same year, Thomas’s closest friend, the American poet Robert Frost, had encouraged him to utilize his writing talents to compose poetry. Thomas lacked a substantial education in English literature, but, like Frost, he held a deeply emotional connection with landscape, and his poems paint idyllic portraits of pastoral England. Echoing the views of Romantic poets that preceded him by a century, Thomas’s poems revere the beauty and simplicity of the natural world and the psychological relationship between nature and man. While considering for months the possibility of enlisting, Thomas made World War I the focus of most of his poems. Thomas’s indecisiveness became the subject of Frost’s poem that would one day become one of his most famous: “The Road Not Taken.” Thomas’s internal battle of whether or not to join the War so consumed him that it became a spiritual matter, taking place “in his spiritual world,” as his wife later wrote (Hollis). “Frankly I do not want to go . . . but hardly a day passes without my thinking I should,” he wrote to Frost (Hollis). At age thirty-seven, he enlisted with the Artists Rifles, and like Rosenberg, continued to write poetry during his military service. Thomas was killed less than two years later in the Battle of Arras when his body was obliterated by an enemy shell. Though Rosenberg and Thomas came from different religious backgrounds, both soldier-poets were acutely aware of the impact World War I had on human spirituality. In Rosenberg’s poem “Returning, We Hear the Larks,” and Thomas’s poems “The Owl” and “Adlestrop,” we find spiritual experiences—stripped of any trace of theology and existing wholly within the realm of nature—whose beauty and simplicity are manipulated by the brutal horrors of the War and the collective angst of the secularized modern world.

The works of many great soldier-poets from the early twentieth century often avoid literary categorization, since they neither entirely adhere to the Georgian or Romantic influences that preceded them, nor do they fully embrace the modernist attitudes that were largely born out of the terror and uncertainty of World War I. The Georgian poetic movement, which was “in vogue when war broke out,” resembled the poetry of the Romantic period nearly a century earlier, as it focused on the tranquility and majesty of the natural world and the cultivation of the human spirit (“Voices” 2017). Georgian poetry “represented an attempt to wall in the garden of English poetry against the disruptive forces of modern civilization” (“Voices” 2017). Hoping to avoid the controversies surrounding the precise art of dating and
defining different literary movements, my mentions of Modernism refer to the literary movement that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century that was largely defined by feelings of alienation, angst, and an increased focus on the inner world of the human psyche. The modernist literary movement also included a shift towards secularization and a growing disdain for all things spiritual, religious, or mystical. In essence, “the unsettling forces of modernity profoundly challenged traditional ways of structuring and making sense of the human experience” (“Introduction” 1889). Though both Rosenberg and Thomas exhibit Romantic aptitudes and interests in their poetry, the trauma of their wartime experience allows modernist angst to seep in, creating a more unusual depiction of human spirituality.

Rosenberg ties his depiction of spiritual experience to humankind’s relationship with nature in his poem “Returning, We Hear the Larks.” Written in 1917—one of Rosenberg’s final poems before his death in April 1918—“Returning, We Hear the Larks” portrays a battered group of soldiers returning to camp, seeking a moment of safety and sleep.

Sombre the night is.
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lurks there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
This poison-blasted track opens on our camp—
On a little safe sleep.

But hark! joy—joy—strange joy.
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering on our upturned list’ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song—
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man’s dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl’s dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides. (Rosenburg 15)

He begins the poem with the phrase “Sombre the night is,” establishing a blatantly solemn tone. This group of soldiers seems to be on the brink of death. An additional day of survival is no cause for celebration, for “though we have our lives, we know / What sinister threat lurks there.” The threat is shrouded in mystery but is imminent. The soldiers’ pessimism is warranted; the ambiguous, sinister threat belongs to the night and thus the darkness. Rosenberg continues this tone in the second stanza by employing synecdoche, using dismembered “anguished limbs” to describe the surviving troops. For a soldier to drag his own anguished limbs suggests a total disconnect between body and mind. This constant anxiety of combat results in his dehumanization. The visualization of dismembered and “anguished” limbs also implies the physical toll of horrifying trench warfare. Echoing the first stanza, Rosenberg again writes, “we . . . know.” In the first stanza, the men know that a “sinister threat” lurks in the night; in the second stanza, they know that “this poison-blasted track opens on our camp.” Rosenberg plays with the surety of the word “know,” as if to touch on the inevitability of a brutal death. Though unspoken, he and his fellow soldiers “know” it, and not even a “little safe sleep” can remedy the existential stress they consequently suffer.

With the sombre tone and physical and emotional numbness firmly established thus far, Rosenberg begins his third stanza with a phrase that indicates both a change in tone and a shift towards the spiritual—“But hark!” The third stanza begins as something akin to the announcement of a heavenly visitor: “But hark! joy—joy—strange joy.” Joy repeated three times also carries subtle Biblical precedence, as a repetition of three often creates a superlative in Hebrew rhetoric. Fellow Jewish poet and World War I soldier Siegfried Sassoon wrote of Rosenberg’s poetry as having a “biblical and prophetic” scriptural quality that linked back to Rosenberg’s Jewish heritage (Sassoon IX). A devout and believing Jew, Rosenberg’s use of Biblical language points his readers to something of spiritual significance. However, the word “strange” hangs eerily, as if waiting to taint the pure spiritual experience soon to be enjoyed collectively by Rosenberg and his comrades.
The next line clarifies what Rosenberg and his peers hearken to—“Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.” The birdsong of larks in the night awakens spiritual sensitivities and brings an unexpected joy in a moment of pain and trauma. The larks provide the soldiers with a repose that contrasts directly with their sombre emotional state and “anguished” physical state. This spontaneous overflowing of emotion recalls the concept of the sublime in Romantic British poetry. The sublime indicates a spiritual state of “grandeur, power, and awe that may be inherent in or produced by undomesticated nature” (Glossary 1075). According to philosophers like Edmund Burke, a necessary element of the sublime is the presence of potential danger or terror; the escape from which produces intense emotions of joy and relief.

More importantly, the presence of larks in the poem carries a literary history in the tradition of British poetry that points to the spiritual significance of these birds. For many British poets, larks and their songs convey mystical and spiritual properties. In Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark” and William Wordsworth’s poem published five years later of the same name, the lark “represents divine inspiration” (Hendry 68). The lark’s song acts as a spiritual muse that speaks truths of ultimate value. Specifically, Rosenberg’s poem engages intertextually with Shelley’s “To a Skylark,” which was published in 1820. Rosenberg and Shelley both refer to the skylark as “unseen,” which points to an aspect of spirituality that has heretofore gone unmentioned: its immateriality. The fact that both Rosenberg and Shelley’s larks remain formless and immaterial throughout their poems expresses the concept that the larks exist in a spiritual, unseen realm, and therefore they inspire a spiritual reaction from humans that transcends the material universe. Further, both poets describe the lark’s melodious song as a showering rain. In both poems, the immaterial larks appear as a grace, providing spontaneous and unwarranted repose from the gloom and darkness of life. Rosenberg’s use of intertextuality thus further implies the spiritual significance of the lark’s song and the transcendent awakening it inspires among the soldiers. His spirituality appears in the third stanza as a moment of pristine ecstasy—the shadow of a Romantic sublime cast into the twentieth century. He and his soldiers experience momentary stillness and spiritual solace in unexpected communion with nature by means of unseen songbirds.

Rosenberg’s final stanza, consisting of seven lines, cuts the emerging spiritual experience to an abrupt end by directly asserting what has been
implied from the very beginning: “Death could drop from the dark.” This poem ends by returning to its beginning. Death, danger, and ruin are still imminent. The poem encapsulates a sublime spiritual experience of three lines between two three-lined stanzas at the beginning and a final seven-lined stanza of sombre reality. Not even a spiritual experience shared collectively can awaken us to a greater transcendent meaning behind the War and its bloody conflict. This implication is further established in the formal elements of Rosenberg’s poem. The first two tercets that serve to establish a sombre reality, as well as the final seven-line stanza, are written in free verse without apparent rhythm or rhyme. The third “sublime” stanza, however, adheres to a more traditional poetic structure. Its lines appear orderly, and the meter resembles iambic pentameter. The stanza is also united by meaningful rhymes: “hark” rhymes with that which the soldiers hearken to, “lark”; and “heights” rhymes with “night.” The third stanza thus presents itself as a more formal poetic whole, surrounded between two halves of chaotic, unstructured language, as if Rosenberg is suggesting that the peace and wholeness of his sublime spiritual experience is but a tiny, fleeting moment, tainted by the chaos and confusion caused by World War I.

Thomas touches on a parallel spirituality in his poem “The Owl,” in which a weary and insensate soldier is stirred by the call of a nocturnal bird. Published after Thomas’s death in 1917, this poem was originally composed in February 1915—a few short months before he would voluntarily enlist in World War I (Hollis). Though not based on his own experiences in combat, this poem exhibits Thomas’s keen mindfulness of World War I and those suffering at its hand.

Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved;
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof
Against the North wind; tired, yet so that rest
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,
Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.
All of the night was quite barred out except
An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry
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Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,
But one telling me plain what I escaped
And others could not, that night as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird’s voice
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice. (Thomas 10)

The poem begins much like Rosenberg’s. The narrator has narrowly escaped
the dangers of another day of battle and seeks shelter as night falls. In the
first quatrains, it is apparent that the narrator’s sole motive is to extend his
survival one more night. He desires only the necessities of life—warmth,
food, and rest—and he finds them at a nearby inn, “knowing how hungry,
cold, and tired was I.” He invites the reader into this moment of silence,
writing “all of the night was quite barred out,” but the silence is broken by
“an owl’s cry.” In this second quatrains, Thomas rhymes “I” in the second line
with “cry” in the fourth. This rhetorical strategy links the narrator’s sense
of self with the sound of the owl. It is important to note that, despite the
poem’s title, “The Owl,” the emphasis here is placed on the owl’s cry and
not the bird itself. In fact, the bird remains immaterial and is never seen nor
depicted in the poem—another noteworthy parallel to Rosenberg’s “unseen
larks,” which present themselves as formless spiritual emissaries.

The experience spawned by the owl’s cry awakens the narrator to a
transcendent understanding of his exact place in time and space. In the third
quatrain, we read that the owl’s cry was “shaken out long and clear upon
the hill.” The phrase “shaken out,” paired with “long and clear,” seems
somewhat oxymoronic. A sound that is “shaken out” suggests it is choppy
or halting—not a particularly apt description of a typical owl’s call. Though
there is the possibility of catachresis here, there are also other explanations
for this description that contribute to the poem’s meaning. To “shake
out” a “long and clear” call perhaps suggests that the noise was repeated
continuously as if each long and clear cry was shaken out one after the next.
Considering the narrator’s resonance with the cry, as shown by the rhymed
pair of “I” and “cry,” one could also argue that the “shaken out” cry implies a narrator that is psychologically or spiritually “shaken” by the violence he barely escaped. The owl’s cry does not stir up an ecstatic jubilance like the larks in Rosenberg’s poem but produces a subtler effect. The narrator experiences a moment of enhanced mental and emotional clarity as a result of the hooting song. The owl’s spiritual call is instructive; it is “no merry note, nor cause of merriment,” but is a call “telling me plain what I escaped / And others could not.” Something about the owl’s call communicates a comprehensive message to the narrator. Herein lies the spiritual experience; the penetrating call of the owl unlocks the narrator’s spiritual capacity for a transcendent understanding of human suffering. The narrator is awakened to an enhanced awareness of his place in time and space and to the boundless suffering around him. The narrator came “downhill” to the inn at the beginning of the poem, and he hears the owl’s call coming from “upon the hill.” The call anchors him to an understanding of what he escaped “upon the hill” and what “others could not, that night.”

The owl’s sobering call and the subtle depiction of spiritual experience points to the narrator’s sense of ultimate value and meaning. Initially, the narrator only aspires to secure that which is necessary for his own survival—much like an animal. However, the “bird’s voice” “salted and sobered” the narrator’s food and repose. The sound that is initially described in the second and third stanzas as a singular “cry” and “note,” suggesting a musical, one-dimensional quality, is described as a “voice” that is “speaking” in the final stanza. This rhetorical shift indicates the narrator’s act of interpretation as the bird’s cry begins to carry significant spiritual meaning. The voice carries a distinct message of ultimate value, explained to him in a “plain” manner, as if the owl uses human language to articulate it. The bird’s melancholy song, or voice, awakens the narrator to the melancholy reality of human suffering, but it also adds flavor and meaning to the narrator’s meal and rest, as if to indicate that ultimate value is found in something beyond just daily survival. The poem celebrates the owl as a champion of the human spirit—its song speaks “for all who lay under the stars, / Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.” The owl’s call points to the idea that the human spirit requires more than just the necessities of life to thrive; there is something innately spiritual that allows humans to transcend from an animalistic mindset that aspires only to live another day. This spiritual experience fits well with what Wildman describes as an experience of ultimacy, which involves “engagement with an
ultimate reality” that imbues one’s life with renewed purpose (85). The owl’s melancholy cry laments the spiritually stifled—soldiers facing impending doom, poverty-stricken individuals without hope. The spiritual experience allows the narrator to cognitively approach a sense of ultimate value and grasp the reality of the human spirit, but also allows him to comprehend the depth and horror of human suffering both within and without the War.

As we examine the similar portraits of spiritual experience in both “Returning” and “The Owl,” the influence of Romanticism is most evident in the form of spiritual communion with nature. In both poems, the narrators are awakened from a spiritually catatonic state by an unexpected communion with the natural world. The songs of unseen birds provide a fleeting moment of clarity, joy, and transcendence reminiscent of a Romantic sublime. In “Returning, We Hear the Larks,” the narrator and his comrades pose with “upturned list’ning faces” in what appears to be a state of momentary ecstasy upon hearing a chorus of immaterial larks. Rosenberg describes the music as “showering” down upon their faces like rain, suggesting that the music takes on a metaphorically physical form; the senses are all engaged as the music is both heard and felt. The spiritual experience spawned by birdsong in “The Owl” is characterized less by joy and more by clarity; an enhancement not of physical senses but of emotional perceptions. The owl’s call brings the narrator closer to discovering a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose amidst arbitrary violence and horror. However, both poems end with a return to a bleak reality. The Romantic elements of these poems clash with a modernist attitude as both narrators are unable to bask in the mystical joy or clarity of their respective spiritual experiences. The true focus of these poems becomes not the budding human spirituality but the horrors of the War and the existential stress of surviving modern battle.

The clash between Romantic elements and modernist nuances, particularly evident in the narrators’ inability to relish the Romantic sublime, suggests that, for these writers, spiritual experience during wartime is life-threatening rather than life-saving. The authors succeed in creating a shadow of the sublime as the narrators connect with nature through birdsong, but the fleeting spiritual experience, in the end, serves not to inspire or protect. Spiritual experience during wartime creates a distraction from focusing on the imminent threats all around. In “Returning, We Hear the Larks,” Rosenberg’s “strange joy” lasts only for a short three-lined stanza before the narrator’s focus returns to the threats of the night. Robert C. Evans writes that the “romantic impulses”
within this poem “are in dialogue with impulses that are non- or even anti-Romantic” (132). Death has been momentarily replaced by beautiful birdsong, but the spiritual awakening that consequently follows feels more “like a blind man’s dreams on the sand / By dangerous tides.” The spiritual experience of enjoying the lark’s chorus initially activates sensitivities and stirs the narrator from a dulled state; and yet, the narrator correlates the “joy” with blindness—a sensory deficit. Rosenberg’s poetry before the War seems obsessed with exploring man’s relationship with the divine. Participation in the War did not change this obsession, but rather warped it: “in the trenches the growing search for the God-idea disappears; instead God is only apparent by His absence” (Maccoby 153). The spiritual experience for Rosenberg is a pleasing mirage that provides ephemeral joy but ultimately distracts him and his comrades from their most pressing task: survival. Their communion with an otherworldly, spiritual realm does not satisfy the human soul but deprives it of its much-needed sensory awareness.

The birdsong in “The Owl” indicates that human life transcends basic animalistic survival and that ultimate meaning and growth can only be obtained on a spiritual level. In the poem, the narrator discovers that the human spirit is constricted and degraded when all of its faculties are focused only on survival. But during times of war, in the face of imminent death and existential fear, survival must become one’s sole mission. Thus, the poem puts the desire to awaken spiritually at odds with the absolute necessity of surviving the danger of war.

Both Rosenberg and Thomas create spiritual experiences that distract and endanger rather than fulfill or enrich. Wildman touches on a similar argument in his study “Religious and Spiritual Experiences” when he writes, “[Religious Spiritual Experience]s are not only beautiful and valuable, but also potentially dangerous” (26). Wildman claims that all spiritual experiences are subject to personal interpretation and that the danger arises when that interpretation leads one to harbor beliefs that advocate violence and oppression, as has been the case historically (26). However, the danger of Rosenberg and Thomas’s spiritual experience differs in two ways. First, the danger lies not just in the interpretation but in the experience itself. It is in the very moment of experiencing something beautiful and transcendent that the narrators find themselves at risk. Second, the experience ironically threatens only the experiencer.
To feel that one’s life is put at risk by a transcendent moment of joy and mental clarity suggests the true extent of depravity that World War I soldiers were subject to. For Rosenberg, Thomas, and many others, World War I functions as a symbolic embodiment of the great spiritual dullness of the modern era. Deborah Maccoby wrote that “to Rosenberg, the First World War was something uncanny, weird, sinister, breaking out from the hidden, subterranean levels of human consciousness” (154). Though in Britain the War was overly glamorized and soldier’s efforts were often glorified, the soldier-poets engaging in actual battle in mainland Europe “soon realized the full horror of war, and this realization affected both their imaginations and their poetic techniques” (“Voices” 2017). For these poets, the Great War and the technological advancement of the modern era represented an irreversible turn from the simplicity of the past. World War I and Modernism presented themselves as the bastard children of an advanced society that placed too much emphasis on progression and too little emphasis on the fragility of the human spirit.

Thomas’s poem “Adlestrop” encompasses the conceptual difficulty of reconciling the rapid shifts of modernity with the stillness of nature. This poem was written in January 1915, one month before he wrote “The Owl” and several months after the War began in mainland Europe. It also presents a spiritual impression, generated by the song of a bird, that pairs nicely with “Returning” and “The Owl.” The piece describes a personal experience from June 1914 when Thomas took the train to visit Robert Frost. Though the poem does not depict or even reference war, “Adlestrop” can be found in most anthologies of World War I poetry, since it thoughtfully captures the peace lost during wartime. Composed a few months after Britain’s entry into the War, Thomas writes about an unexpected stop at the platform in Adlestrop en route to visit a friend. “The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. / No one left and no one came / On the bare platform” (Thomas, Adlestrop). The train rests at the Adlestrop station for only one minute, but “for that minute a blackbird sang / Close by.” There is no further movement in the poem, nor action nor event. The climax of the poem is the bird’s song.

The poem speaks to some final moments of calm before the destruction of World War I, but one could also read “Adlestrop” as a comment on the increasingly uncomfortable trajectory of the modern era. Thomas indicates tension in the poem between movement and stillness. The noise and rattle of the moving train are contrasted with the song of the blackbird, only audible
once the train has stopped completely on the platform. The train, symbolic of industrialization that ushered in twentieth-century modernization, is contrasted with the sweet music of nature. Only when the train stops and passengers become silent does Thomas realize that “all the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire” are singing. A character in Ian McEwan’s novel Sweet Tooth marvels at the spiritual power of the poem “Adlestrop” and remarks on “the sense of pure existence, of being suspended in space and time, a time before a cataclysmic war” that the piece inspires (169). The poem reads like a spiritual reflection on man’s once intimate and sensory relationship with the natural world—a reflection of Romanticism cast into a modernist mold. This tension between Romanticism and Modernism and their respective attitudes toward spirituality plays a role in both Rosenberg and Thomas’s poems and reveals their perception of human spirituality during wartime. 

Since spirituality is unable to be savored as a beautiful, enriching experience in these poetic moments, I assert that the act of writing poetry becomes a spiritual exercise for these poets that allows them to explore complex concepts of human spirituality. The act of composing poetry creates a literary safe-haven; the poems themselves become a source of solace as the poets capture fleeting spiritual experiences. In “Returning” and “The Owl,” the narrators seek temporary safety and solace by returning to protected abodes—the camp or the inn. They seek both physical safety from the foe’s bullets and shells, as well as spiritual safety from the numbing and psychologically-damaging stress of facing impending death. Ironically, both narrators secure physical safety by the end of the poem, and they both also describe transcendent spiritual experiences. However, by the end of both poems, neither narrator feels secure, and instead the poems end with a lingering sense of doom and despair. The poetry, then, with its meticulous construction of lines and stanzas, creates a sense of order amongst the chaos of the outside world that the poets fail to obtain in either their physical abodes or their lived spiritual experiences. The poem becomes the one place where the narrator is able to navigate the complexities of the human condition and the vast depths of human existence, all within the bounds of a structured rhythm and meter, because to do so during the fighting would create a distraction that would in turn become life-threatening. The beauty these poets experience in poetry can be enjoyed without leaving them feeling endangered, unlike the spiritual experience that occurs spontaneously during wartime. Thus, poetry creates a proxy spiritual
experience for these authors. Rosenberg and Thomas help demonstrate the spiritual potential of poetry by assessing its formal capacity to immortalize moments of transcendence, clarity, and sublimity during confusing and chaotic war. This function of poetry closely reflects the purpose of studying spirituality academically, according to Philip Sheldrake: to navigate “the broad understandings of the numinous (sometimes embodied in nature or in the arts), the undefined depths of human existence or . . . the boundless mysteries of the cosmos” (3). This is perhaps why many soldier-poets, particularly Rosenberg and Thomas, chose not to use poetry as a means to describe the horrors and death they witnessed fighting abroad, but instead as a medium to explore how these horrors impacted their psyche and spiritual development. They chose to depict not the violence of battle but the aftermath of battle; they chose to depict not the trench warfare but the trenches themselves. The form of poetry itself provides a structural security—a spiritual solace from the dangers of war and the stress of modernity.

Even during times of mass death and destruction, Rosenberg and Thomas still entertain spiritual experience in their war poetry. For these writers, human spirituality is a living force that awakens sensory capacities and provides peace, clarity, and transcendence. The Romantic feelings of spiritual union with nature cause tension in the poem as it grapples with the modernist uncertainty so commonly found in World War I poetry. And though Rosenberg and Thomas recognize the potential beauty of spiritual experience, in these poems we find a rare form of modernist animosity towards spirituality as the authors admit the reality of spiritual experience but deny its function of enriching human life. Finally, these poems provide a fascinating study of spirituality that is not theologically grounded but is born out of an anthropological paradigm. Rosenberg and Thomas’s writings suggest that spiritual experience is not dependent on proximity to the divine or consciousness of religious beliefs. Spiritual experience is an anthropological element of the human condition, accessible to all people at all times regardless of religious belief or practice. Yet, the horrors of war and the uncertainty of modernity restricts the development of human spirituality and distorts one’s perception of the beauty of spiritual experience.
Works Cited


Shakespeare’s recasting of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* into *King Lear* omits a fundamental ordering principle of the original: “providential order and interventionist deity that reinforce a final sense of justice and divine order” (Loewenstein 169). In fact, there is “no sense that providence, even in the guise of pre-Christian gods, has played *any role* whatsoever in the devastating tragedy” (Loewenstein 170). In the absence of the gods, and even the mildest form of natural evil, the agents in the world of *King Lear* and their moral evils are left as the sole objects of scrutiny. However, the model for moral judgment that affirms the direct relationship between moral responsibility and personal autonomy is also nowhere to be found.

The play is fraught with instances of compromised human autonomy which constitutes the main culprit of interpersonal volatility. Lear, for example, is described in both first and third person as a victim of alien forces interfering with his psyche and abusing his nature, while Cornwall relinquishes responsibility to that “wrath which men may blame but not control” (3.7.26–7). The dialectic in the play surrounding autonomy, which
will merit further attention in this study, is remarkably presentient of the quandaries of modern neurobiology that have begun to posit that “our beliefs, moods, desires, motivations . . . are all features of our brains; that these features were caused by prior events over which we have no control” (Sternberg 11). Thus, in this paper, the early modern dialectic of free will and determinism will be posited as coextensive with the modern debates surrounding neurobiological determinism.

If moral evil is the only spectacle in King Lear, then it risks being collapsed entirely under the weight of this dialectic, reverting back into a world of purely natural evil. While my concern will not be whether Shakespeare takes a side in the interminable debate of free will and determinism, which I believe is left intentionally opaque, I see two principal normative symmetries clearly broken in the world of Lear to make space for an alternative worldview. In the first—symmetry between intent and action—the possibility of complete and continuous autonomy is refuted by the apparent dyadic discontinuity. The second—symmetry between action and consequence—is dismantled in the closing scenes when the abused Lear loses everything directly following Edmund’s paradoxically graceful exit.

Contrary to the natural human aversion to the idea of compromised personal autonomy exemplified in Edmund’s famous speech: “We make guilty of our disasters the sun / The moon and the stars as if we were villains on / Necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves / . . . and all that we are evil in by a / divine thrusting on (1.2.120–6), I will argue that King Lear refutes the possibility of complete autonomy and instead offers a sublime solution to the problem of navigating a world of fellow fragmented agents that is rooted, not in stoic avoidance of passion and its side effects, but rather in the embrace of a positive form of autonomical surrender—surrender to the power of pity.

Though it suits practical concerns and affirms some of humanity’s deepest desires, complete human autonomy is a myth. Reductionist tendencies champion both ends of the spectrum, from radical freedom to sheer material determinism, but phenomenological data suggests an alternative view. King Lear is one such fictive repository of this data. Oxford philosopher A.E. Denham notes that “ordinary human agency is neither seamlessly integrated nor perfectly coherent” (Denham 145) and observes that “human experience is not merely punctuated by episodic interferences from external causal determinants; it is largely shaped by them” (Denham 147). This boundary
between what can be called the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ aspects of causal forces is collapsed in *King Lear* in the absence of the divine, yet the ‘external’ is precisely what Edmund is concerned with in his decrying of “fools by heavenly compulsion.” To investigate this matter, it will be necessary to extrapolate the phenomenological data found in the characters’ own confessions, because as Sean A. Spence points out, “no account of human action (and therefore human moral responsibility) is ever complete in the absence of a subjective report, a ‘view from within,’ provided by the agent” (Spence 236). This proves to be a fruitful undertaking in a play bustling with characters quick to chide one another for their opaque actions.

Edmund’s decrinal finds its sounding board in the dialogue surrounding Lear when Goneril’s response to Lear in Act I Scene iv puts a finger on the pulse: “These dispositions, which of late transport you / From what you rightly are” (1.4.213–4). The infringing force is named as “disposition,” a word frequently employed in astrological contexts, linking Goneril’s polemic to Edmund’s “fool by heavenly compulsion.” This compulsion, having thwarted his rightful disposition, assumes an autonomy of its own, allowing for a blame transfer from the transported to the force of transportation. Even Lear himself is convinced, wondering “Why, this is not Lear” (1.4.217). In conversation with Gloucester his growing awareness shows: “We are not ourselves / When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind / To suffer with the body. I’ll forbear / And am fallen out with my more headier will” (2.2.296–8). The idea that nature can ‘command the mind’ and form the duplicity of wills with which he struggles implies a compromised autonomy, in this case, a madness that derails him until it is rectified by his beloved daughter’s pity.

However commonplace Edmund’s identification of the heavens as the primary mover is, *King Lear* complicates this assumption with a relocation of the causal forces, shrinking the cosmic distance inherent in blaming the heavens to the interior of the human skull. What results from this relocation is a more intrapersonal and psychosomatic rupture than would be possible inside the constraints of the man versus nature trope. A remarkable example with parallels in modern neurological literature is found when Lear gives his ‘view from within’ in Act II Scene ii: “O how this mother swells up toward my heart / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow.” A modern Schizophrenic patient in an experiment to produce feedback about the mechanisms of control, commented that “I felt like an automaton, guided by
a female spirit who had entered me” (Spence 232). We are here met with the strange notion that internal forces are somehow experienced as being external: “thy tender-hafted nature shall not give / Thee o’er to harshness” (2.2. 360–61). This phenomenon is loosely termed ‘interference.’ Spence, in relating modern accounts, describes it as “a sense of separation, alienation, from their most intimate agentic experiences . . . the person is no longer the author of their own thoughts and deeds . . . there is ‘interference’” (Spence 228).

The portrayal of interference in Lear takes on multiple forms, one being a dual of passions assuming distinct identities and vying for control, as in Gloucester’s comment about Lear: “When misery could beguile the tyrant’s rage / And frustrate his proud will” (4.6.63–4). Misery must beguile the current steward of Lear, rage, to take over, and Lear is not named amongst those vying for control. These anthropomorphic descriptions are advanced in Act IV when speaking of Cordelia: “It seem’d she was a queen / Over her passion, who, most rebel-like / Sought to be king o’er her” (4.3.13–14). The forces are so distinct that gender is inverted. What the language in these examples makes clear is that the forces at work are distinct from the agent itself, meriting various names taken from the menagerie of passions and even gender assumptions. This phenomenon is framed by Denham thusly: “Even though the efficacious powers lie within our own natures, they are experienced as something visited on us from without, making our own actions rationally opaque—or even not actions at all” (Denham 145). This notion finds vigorous support in the small sample of phenomenological data explored above.

If profession of intent can be seen as a proof of autonomy, then the glass through which we see darkens further. In *King Lear’s* view of autonomy, deontological evaluation fails simply because “intention itself is a product of forces that undermine . . . autonomy” (Denham 148). Furthermore, as if Spence had *King Lear* in mind while writing, “just because behaviours may ‘appear’ purposeful does not mean that they are. Some quite complex behaviours can emerge without their conduit’s ‘consent’” (Spence 236). The case of Edmund, the apparently radically free agent, provides a rich case study for testing the limits of these ideas. His solicitation to Gloucester in Act I scene ii to “suspend your indignation against my brother till / you can derive from him better testimony of his intent,” given the nature of his deceit, takes on a secondary appeal—to the audience, in reference to himself. Sean Benson, citing Hegel and Stanley Cavell, offers that “these characters
are radically and continuously free, operating under their own power, at every moment choosing their destruction” (Benson 321). This stance is lent credibility by Edmund’s professions such as, “Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit / All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit” (1.2.181–2). Edmund, out of apparent necessity, can acquire what he wills and exercise his demiurgic powers to shape his presently contracted existential possibilities. By virtue of wit, he attempts to escape being a “fool by heavenly compulsion.” What Benson overlooks, in cases other than Edmund’s, is the ‘view from within.’

If Spence is taken seriously in insisting that “our provisional understanding is always contingent upon what the subject actually ‘says’ (even if we do not believe them)” (Spence 331), then Benson’s claim of intentional self-destruction does not hold water. Though Edmund insists on self-determination, the forged letter scene reveals a self-reflexive sympathy for its dissolution. Gloucester recoils from the forged letter attributed to Edgar: “had he a hand to write this? / A heart and brain to breed it in?” (1.2.56–57). Edmund, responding to the rhetoric of breeding (a separate organism) says, “It is his hand, my lord; but I hope his heart is / not in the contents,” (1.2.67–8) in language referring to a disconnect between heart and hand, or in other words, the volitional center and the appendage of activity. This figuratively resembles the very first patient described in neurological literature as having suffered from an ‘alien hand’ whose words were “those are two very different people, the arm and I” (Spence 209). In his feigned solicitation of Gloucester clemency Edmund appeals to a distinction between heart and hand.

Edgar’s later confrontation with his illegitimate brother displays similar rhetoric that compartmentalizes moving parts instead of portraying a simple movement as seamlessly integrated—“This sword, this arm, and my best spirits are bent / To prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak/ Thou liest” (5.3.137–9). It is as if the moving parts themselves must first reach a collective democratic agreement before proceeding. King Lear is not content with only deconstructing the psychological aspect of agency and intentional continuity; it goes further to scrutinize the mechanisms of physiological follow through and finds them wanting.

Edmund’s pledge to ‘nature’ complicates the picture, presenting a scenario of simultaneous subduction and manifestation of willpower. Denham’s assessment of Agamemnon, by way of comparison, identifies this more subtle movement: “He was in a bad spot, to be sure, but in the event he chooses to set his reasoned deliberations aside and resign his agential authority to a less
ambivalent, more resolute motivational system” (Denham 146). Cornwall offers an analysis of Edmund’s fictionally contrived Edgar, which can be redirected to Edmund himself: “I now perceive, it was not altogether your/ brother’s evil disposition made him seek his death; but / a provoking merit, set a-work by a reprovable badness / in himself” (3.5.5–8). At this point, it is anything except the agent’s name that functions as the receptacle of blame. ‘Evil disposition’ and ‘reprovable badness’ as well as ‘provoking merit’ are pitted against each other in a contest of ‘language of intimations.’

Catherine Martin, in a study entitled “The ‘Reason’ of Radical Evil: Shakespeare, Milton, and the Ethical Philosophers,” identifies the mechanisms at work as “the avoidance of rational negotiation and choice . . . [which] in its monological simplicity seems highly attractive . . . yielding to every suggestion that comes along and to every current of imitation” (Martin 196). This uninterrupted yielding to ‘nature’ is to yield to the primal suggestion that the one with “more composition and fierce quality” (1.2.12) ought to “top the legitimate” (1.2.21), a play on the fratricidal trope of Cain in Genesis. As moral philosopher Sarah Buss puts it, “a person can have authoritative status with respect to her motives without having any real power over them” (Denham 148). However, this subtle reading of Edmund escapes the general audience, which has implications I will discuss later. Suffice it to say here, Edmund represents the radically free agent whilst the contrarian notion is suspended until its appearance in his dying words.

The contrast between the respective demises of Lear and Edmund, understood in this context, reveals the frustration of expectation that confounds the audience’s simplistic model of moral judgment based on the two symmetries mentioned above. Marco de Marinis elaborates on this theatrical strategy, explaining that “in order to attract and direct the spectator’s attention, the performance must first manage to surprise or amaze” or in other words “disruptive or manipulative strategies which will unsettle the spectator’s expectations . . . in particular, his/her perceptive habits” (Marinis 109). The expectation elicited in the audience is that Lear will be met with more moral leniency, being at least partially excused by his obviously compromised autonomy, whereas Edmund will rightly receive his comeuppance. As Spence argues, “responsibility requires some form of symmetry . . . if behavior emerges unintended . . . then we as a community seem to suspend moral judgment” (223). Cordelia pleas likewise, “O you kind gods! / Cure this great breach in
his abused nature” (4.7.14–15). But the gods, as has been the case throughout, remain silent.

Notably, Lear comes to himself in a rhetorical display of pure, authentic intent upon reunion with Cordelia: “Come let's away to prison” (5.3.8). In this tender moment, the vexing forces are conspicuously absent. Stripped down to bare man, Lear enacts what he really wants—to spend the remainder of his days in bliss born of authentic intent. However, the surprise comes in the form of one of the more tragic stage directions to ever see print, [Enter LEAR with CORDELIA in his arms] (5.3). The void gaping between Lear and personal autonomy eventuates in his intimate proximity to its consequences—literally carried in his arms.

Lear’s natural frame is put to death by grief, directly following Edmund’s renunciation of his pledge to nature as he dies: “I pant for life. Some good I mean to do / despite of mine own nature” (5.3.40–1). His fate is not so gruesome. Derek Cohen describes Edmund’s last moments, or ‘conversion,’ as “grotesque, and its source of violence is a hideous and nihilistic mockery,” but in the same breath, “Edmund’s conversion can be made to fit the template of a moral structure . . . there is no ignoring his evident last-minute desire to do good in a world he has helped to damage and suddenly wishes to save” (Cohen 385). Furthermore, Edmund dies with the one assurance he lacked in life, observing “yet Edmund was beloved” (5.3.240) while gazing fondly upon the corpses of Regan and Goneril. In the play’s microcosm, Edmund receives a graceful exit, frustrating expectations of just retribution, as Cohen points out, “not even punished with knowing that he has saved no one and nothing” (Cohen 377). Antithetical to Lear, his intimate proximity to personal autonomy eventuates in a void gaping between him and the consequences—[Edmund is carried off] (5.3).

It may appear, thus far, that I consider King Lear to be a deterministic nightmare. However, mitigation of moral evil by means of neurobiological determinism is inadequate because this “information does not necessarily, or entirely, explain ‘what has happened,’ nor does it assist that much in specifying what should happen next” (Spence 334). Instead, I claim that Shakespeare offers a solution to those willing to accept his refutation of seamless autonomy. The absence of providence and the gods, I argue, is intended to create a vacuum in which another force is proposed in place of justice, the “much more transformative force” of pity (St. Hilaire 492). With an irony easily lost
amidst much more ‘negative passions’ that are blamed for every evil, this new answer also demonstrates an ability to compromise autonomy.

The aversion to this classically feminine emotion was preached by the early modern Stoic revival, speaking of “a kind of feminine passionate pitie, which proceedeth from too great a tenderness and weakness of the minde,” in line with basic stoic principle that “one should be free of compassion and avoid any surrender to deep sympathy” (Aggeler 323). The stoics are adamant that one should not ‘surrender’ to this pity, again implying a compromise of autonomy in the pitier. Seneca’s assertion that “we ought to avoid both pity and cruelty” loses its traction in a play wherein the villains that commit cruelty “maintain a veneer of rationalism that enables them to serve their appetites without any emotional impediments, such as guilt or pity” (Aggeler 325). So, while the anonymous gentleman cries on behalf of the stoics, “Let pity be not believed!” (4.3.30), it appears as the only force for any good.

It is Lear’s sudden pity for the pitiful Edgar that prompts Lear’s anagnorisis “that prepares him to receive Cordelia’s regenerating love and forgiveness” (Aggeler 322). On the macrocosmic scale, Regan’s haunting complaint to Oswald about letting Gloucester live, “Where he arrives he moves / All hearts against us” (4.5.11–2) reveals that pity undermines those who direct “their power of empathy toward the ‘ruthless displacement and absorption of the other’” (James 372). Here, the pity Gloucester would induce has the power to move ‘all hearts,’ rhetoric mirroring Cornwall’s description of wrath as a force that can carry out its effect unhindered. Edgar, the virtuous survivor, does so “pregnant with good pity” (4.6.218) that enabled him to exorcise his father’s demons and allows his heart to “burst smilingly” (5.3.198). Edmund professes pity: “This speech of yours hath mov’d me / And shall perchance do good” (5.3.198–9), and Cordelia’s deep pity for Lear allows him a quasi-redemption before his abused frame gives up the ghost. It is only in the relinquishment of complete autonomy that pity induces, that the cycle of violence can be broken. Retribution falters and fails under the aegis of pity.

Even if the fates of Lear and Edmund deny any sense of justice or symmetry, what they do accomplish is a potent solicitation for pity from the audience, as befitting the tragic genre. Ironically, as Heather James points out, “the theater . . . with its passionate speeches and dire spectacles, inspires sympathy to the point of interference with the playgoers’ deliberate exercise
of will” (James 363). If it is true that the play presents problems of “power, hierarchy, and social injustice” then it follows that “pity disrupts attempts to critique these forces by troubling the pitier’s ability to make moral and ethical judgments” (St. Hilaire 482). This, I argue, is the effect King Lear angles for. Of note, is the peculiar language with which this force of pity is portrayed. The description of its effect as “the contagious solicitation of consent that moves from actors to the audience and out to the social world” (St. Hilaire 505), implies an element—contagion—that lies outside of the agent’s control, but in this case, is beneficial when embraced by characters within and audience without. The dynamic hinted at within, is extended by way of invitation to those without.

To paraphrase Sean Spence, even if consciousness does not cause action in the short term, its quality certainly affects the course of long-term cycles of acts (Spence 391). If this is the case, then by virtue of our inherently interactive world, conscious awareness of one another is potentially redemptive (Spence 395). Human responsibility for a consciousness augmented by pity is forcibly foregrounded in King Lear and points to a more human response to a world of fragmented agents who clearly do not have all of their marbles by recognizing that neither does one’s self. When it comes down to it, the inevitable question seems to be not if one has been moved, but rather “what hath moved you” (1.4.266). The spectrum of moving forces proposed by King Lear is one ranging from pity, to its opposite, cruelty. And its only resolution, I argue, is that to see one another ‘feelingly,’ even if it means embracing ‘being moved,’ is better than calling for retributive justice that is inevitably bound up in ‘hierarchies of violence,’ and denies grace to the other that is much more like one’s self than one would like to think.


Christ the Father
Mr. Ramsay as an Ironic Christ-figure in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*

*Devon Thomas*

“To her son these words—‘Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow’—conveyed an extraordinary joy.

—*Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse*

*V*irginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* narrates the life of the Ramsay family—primarily Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their relationship with each other and with their children—as they live in their vacation house near the sea. From the beginning of the novel, we follow their attempts to make it to the nearby lighthouse, which holds particular importance to the young James Ramsay, but not to his father. Most readers of the novel come to disdain Mr. Ramsay’s insecure, self-minded character, even considering the consensus that he is a portrait of Leslie Stephen, Woolf’s father. Indeed, much of Mr. Ramsay’s characterization paints a man who self-imposes and seeks intellectual, emotional recognition; in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf herself records, “How often I was enraged by [my] father” (105).
Thus, I believe these are correct interpretations of Mr. Ramsay—they are just not the whole. Instead, I suggest reading Mr. Ramsay as a metaphorical Christ-figure who reconstructs our understanding of his and Leslie Stephen’s paternal roles.

Much of our existing scholarship views the novel as a means for Woolf to flesh out her religious beliefs; as Mark Gaipa wrote, *To the Lighthouse* functions as “an agnostic’s apology,” a verbatim reference to Leslie Stephen’s book, *An Agnostic’s Apology* (3). It is well-documented that Woolf, exacerbated by her father’s heavy agnosticism, deeply struggled with her religious beliefs. Martin Corner argues that within the text, though, Mr. Ramsay works as an “explicit declaration of atheism,” an “unwavering witness to the nonhumanity of the world” (415, 417). For Corner, the novel does not explore agnosticism, but atheism—a certainty that there is no divinity. And, while there are characters within the text who subscribe to atheism (particularly Mr. Tansley), Tina Barr contends that there is religiosity in the novel, specifically contained in reference to Greek mythology. Barr asserts that the text conflates Mr. Ramsay with “the Lord of the Underworld . . . a ‘king in exile’” (139). Simply, for most existing scholars, Mr. Ramsay either affirms agnosticism, atheism, or hell itself. And while I certainly agree that Mr. Ramsay appears as a negative religious symbol, I believe that if reconsidered, Mr. Ramsay acts as an ironic, metaphorical Christ-figure—a different “king in exile”—the King of Israel, exiled from Nazareth (*The Authorized King James Bible*, John 1.49, 12.13; Luke 4.28–9; Woolf, *Lighthouse* 148). So, in this paper, I will explore reading Mr. Ramsay in this attitude to revisit our perception of his—and Leslie Stephen’s—fatherhood.

Understanding Mr. Ramsay’s ties with Christ comes by first understanding Woolf’s own ties with Christianity. While most agree that Woolf held a nuanced relationship with religion—often leaning more bitter than positive—it is important to note that her beliefs were often dichotomous and influenced by close friends. Perhaps the most influential individual was Violet Dickinson, a family friend of the Stephens. Woolf and Dickinson primarily communicated through letters in the beginning of their relationship. In the letters, Woolf emulated Dickinson’s religious verbosity, writing sentences like, “I think of you and your holy life on the mount,” thus echoing Peter’s recount of Christ’s transfiguration on the Mount of Olives (Woolf, *Flight* 58; 2 Pet. 1.18).

Woolf’s biblical language gives us a glimpse of her significant exploration of Christian ideals. In her biographical exploration of Woolf’s religiosity, *Virginia
Woolf and Christian Culture, Jane De Gay argues Woolf’s letters to Dickinson provided “a particularly important forum for Woolf to speculate about the nature of God” (60). Woolf’s correspondence and relationship with Dickinson allowed her to frankly explore beyond Leslie Stephen’s firm agnosticism; hence, it is not surprising that in the early twentieth century, Woolf’s relationship with Christianity, though often “tongue-in-cheek,” also demonstrated a willingness to consider God as both real and involved (De Gay 60).

Despite her early religious curiosity, after World War I, Woolf’s bitterness toward Christianity returned as her take on God stemmed from local churches’ beliefs and practices. Though her diaries occasionally used biblical terms, several entries described feelings of intolerance and anger—feelings quite different from the playful banter with Dickinson in 1902. Yet, on 4 November 1917, Woolf wrote, “Writing has the advantage of making a weekday out of the Sabbath, in spite of the clamour & blare of military music & church bells which always takes place at about 11—a noise which the other people have no right to inflict” (Woolf, “Diary” 71 qtd. in De Gay 65). The em dash preceding Woolf’s rebuke emphasizes her conviction: anything tied to God “inflict[s].” Her specific disdain for Sundays and church bells recurs in her diaries; they make God inescapable, ever-demanding. Indeed, just weeks later on 26 November 1917, Woolf stated, “I don’t like Sunday; the best thing is to make it a work day, & to unravel [Rupert] Brooke’s mind to the sound of church bells was suitable enough” (Woolf, “Diary” 82). In both accounts, Woolf distracts herself from recognizing Sunday—the Sabbath—and its implications; despite her efforts, however, Woolf could not ignore God.

Further, it is important to understand that Woolf’s detestation of male clergy and deity also affected her view of religion and God. As De Gay notes, Woolf ironically explicated the abhorrent sexism present in religion in the early twentieth century: “The clergymen in Woolf’s novels are mostly ineffectual, opinionated and ignorant” (222). Thus, in reading Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure—Christ representing the ultimate clergyman—we see the “opinionated and ignorant” clergyman repeatedly. The very first dialogue we hear from Mr. Ramsay establishes him as insensitive and self-serving, in direct juxtaposition to his tender wife:

“Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” said Mrs. Ramsay.

“But,” said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, “it won’t be fine.” (Woolf, Lighthouse 3–4)
Even without his interiority, we easily imagine six-year-old James’ disappointment, his anger toward his father; but, when we review his interiority, we understand Mr. Ramsay’s dismissal as irrevocable.

To [James] these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch . . . his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. (Woolf, Lighthouse 3)

Mr. Ramsay, entirely ignorant to his child’s needs and desires, dashes them to oblivion in a passing sentence; in other words, Mr. Ramsay’s austerity functions only to preserve his frail arrogance. Thus, Woolf portrays male deity ironically, unaware of their own hypocrisy and cruelty.

As my brief exploration of Woolf’s religious experience concludes, I want to note that notwithstanding her aversion to the idea of God, Woolf carried “surprising moments of sympathy or empathy with people of faith,” as well as “much thought” to religion (De Gay 83; Yünlü and Memmedova 191). Ultimately, while Woolf “engages with [Violet’s] understanding that there is a God,” she “challenges [Violet] that if such a being is omnipotent it must also be cruel. Woolf makes . . . Mrs[.] Ramsay the focus of this debate too, and [Mrs. Ramsay] come[s] to a view that there cannot be a god for this very reason” (De Gay 83). Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay adopts Woolf’s aversion to God and thinks, “How could any Lord have made this world? . . . With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that” (Woolf, Lighthouse 64). Essentially, Mrs. Ramsay not only believes that such a being must be cruel, but recognizes that same cruelty in her husband. Her denial of a benevolent “Lord,” then, can be understood; her view of Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure comes because of his omnipotence, callousness—he is, therefore, an embodiment of God (64).

Mr. Ramsay’s ironic characterization as God begins as he parallels God’s chastisement toward Adam and Eve in a scene that echoes their fall in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3; Poresky 137–8). As Lily Briscoe paints in the Ramsays’ backyard, she “kept a feeler on her surroundings lest some one should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at”—much like the realized nakedness Adam and Eve experience after partaking of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3.1–7; Woolf, Lighthouse 17). The specific diction—“lest someone should creep up,” “find her picture looked at”—denotes Lily’s fear of violation, her need for
privacy; yet, with Mr. Bankes, she feels comfortable amid her exposure. Lily and Mr. Bankes’ vulnerability, though, becomes problematic when, like Adam and Eve, “they hear God’s voice,” Mr. Ramsay’s voice, “as he walks through the garden”: “Some one had blundered” (Gen. 3.9, 13–4; Poresky 137–8; Woolf, Lighthouse 18). These scenes, while quite similar, differ on a critical point: in Genesis, Adam and Eve disobey God and are thus punished; in To the Lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay—the stand-in for God—“blunders in his awkward appeals for sympathy and in his thoughtless pronouncements that the family will not visit the lighthouse” (Poresky 138). God justly judges and punishes Adam and Eve; His perfection and omniscience allow Him to be the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament. Yet, Mr. Ramsay unjustly judges and punishes Lily and Mr. Bankes; his glaring imperfection transforms his retribution into irony, as ultimately “he judges himself” (Poresky 138). Truly, as Louise A. Poresky argues, Mr. Ramsay believes the “delusion that he is God, the angry God of the Old Testament,” and thus excuses himself of all consequences (Poresky 138). Simply, through this self-deification, Mr. Ramsay both justifies his moral condescension and avoids the repercussions for it.

Mr. Ramsay’s characterization as an ironic Christ-figure continues primarily through Mrs. Ramsay. When Mrs. Ramsay protests that the weather “often changed” and could permit a trip to the lighthouse the next day, Mr. Ramsay spits “Damn you” in response (Woolf, Lighthouse 31–2). In turn, Mrs. Ramsay scrutinizes his “astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings,” and “dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked” (32). Interestingly, though, her anger transitions as she bows her head, submits her will to her husband’s, and thinks, “There was nobody whom she reverenced as she reverenced him” (John 6.38; Woolf, Lighthouse 32). Truly, Mrs. Ramsay’s submission deifies Mr. Ramsay through the repeated affirmation of her “reverence” for him. Specifically, the Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes “reverence” as an approach of “veneration as having a divine or sacred character; (more generally) to worship” (“reverence, v.”). Ostensibly, Mrs. Ramsay views Mr. Ramsay as a God. And, while the novel does not connote insincerity in Mrs. Ramsay’s actions, Woolf’s approach to God does paint Mr. Ramsay as an ironic, unworthy Christ-figure. We can almost hear Woolf scathe: “What a terrible grip Xtianity still has—[Mrs. Ramsay] became rigid . . . at once, as if God himself had her in his grasp. That I believe is still the chief enemy—the fear of God” (Woolf, Diary 165). Indeed, for Woolf, Mr. Ramsay fits his role as a God-figure; God holds Mrs. Ramsay
“in his grasp,” and perpetuates the cruelty that, for Woolf, hallmarks deity. So, while Zehra Yünül and Beture Memmedova argue that “the Ramsay household survives handily without benefit of a God,” I believe Woolf asserts that the Ramsays suffer because of the presence of a God (190).

Shortly after Mr. Ramsay’s outburst and Mrs. Ramsay’s submission, our perception of Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure starts to become ambivalent, just as Woolf’s own view of God was often inconsistent and clashing. While Mr. Ramsay ruled as the oppressive God in the garden and in the exchange with his wife, his characterization starts to ameliorate; Mrs. Ramsay’s continued devotion shifts their relationship from coercion to discipleship. Moments after the first time she considers her reverence toward him, she thinks, “There was nobody she reverenced more. She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings, she felt” (Woolf, Lighthouse 32). On a superficial level, we understand her piety; yet, her deification of Mr. Ramsay becomes clear when we align it with John the Baptist’s (almost verbatim) prophecy about Christ: “He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose” (John 1.27). Biblical narratives, particularly John 1, denote John’s complete submission to Christ, the recognition of His divinity, and their kinship. When John is beheaded, Matthew 14 records Jesus’ grief over the loss of His friend, His disciple: “When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart” (Matt. 14.13). Simply, Christ and John the Baptist were friends; however, most renowned was John’s discipleship and faithfulness. The same can be said of Mrs. Ramsay’s self-imposed role as disciple of Mr. Ramsay—hence her almost verbatim echo of John’s words: she proclaims her loyalty.

Though Mrs. Ramsay acts as chief disciple, Mr. Tansley and Mr. Bankes also consider Mr. Ramsay in worshipful terms. Again, however, the characters’ perceptions of him continue in ambivalence; while at one moment Mrs. Ramsay “brace[s] herself” against Mr. Ramsay’s presence, she shortly joins Mr. Tansley and Mr. Bankes in their awe toward her husband (Woolf, Lighthouse 37). As Mr. Ramsay walks out to the shore alone, we learn:

It was his power, his gift, to shed all superfluities, to shrink and diminish so that he looked barer and felt sparer, even physically, yet lost none of the intensity of his mind . . . it was in this guise that he inspired William Bankes (intermittently) and in Charles Tansley (obsequiously) and in his wife now . . . reverence, and pity, and gratitude too, as a stake driven into the bed of a channel upon which gulls perch and the waves beat inspires in merry
boat-loads a feeling of gratitude for the duty it is taking upon itself marking
the channel out there in the floods alone. (44)

This scene clearly echoes the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, as recorded
in John 19 and Luke 23. The crucifix imagery of Mr. Ramsay appearing as a
“stake driven into the bed of a channel” parallels Christ’s own declaration:
“They pierced my hands and my feet” (Ps. 22.16). So, though Mr. Ramsay’s
suffering remains emotional instead of physical, the narration conflates
him with the cross, a symbol of Christ and His redemption. Thus, just as
Christ’s followers “bewailed and lamented” the crucifixion of Christ, so too
do Mr. Ramsay’s disciples feel “reverence, and pity, and gratitude too” for
his sacrifice (Luke 23.27).

While this passage strengthens Mr. Ramsay as a Christ-figure, the
introduction of him as one willing to “shed all superfluities” and atone for
others seems unfounded; certainly, we can follow the biblical narrative that
Christ willingly, as part of His sacrifice, endured scourges and blows (John
19.1–3). But a sacrificial Mr. Ramsay—particularly one conflated with a
God—seems intensely ironic.

Even years later, just before the trip to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay continues
to paint himself a God. While waiting for Cam and James to get ready, Mr.
Ramsay approaches Lily as she paints, for “this was one of those moments when
an enormous need urged him . . . to [get] what he wanted: sympathy” (Woolf,
Lighthouse 150–1). Mr. Ramsay’s insatiable need for sympathy and outside
reassurance occurs throughout the novel, just as Leslie Stephen often required
it. However, this unfolding scene marks itself significant for several reasons.
Consider that Mr. Ramsay again approaches someone in the name of a self-
proclaimed “grand” sacrifice. “Such expeditions,” Mr. Ramsay tells Lily, “are very
painful. . . . They are very exhausting” (151–2). So, while Mr. Ramsay proclaims
the trip to the lighthouse—“such [an expedition]”—a sacrifice, Lily only thinks,
“This great man was dramatising himself,” affirming Poresky’s assertion of Mr.
Ramsay’s “delusion that he is God” (Poresky 138; Woolf, Lighthouse 152). Woolf
illustrates this “delusion” when she shortly portrays him as “a lion seeking
whom we could devour”; and, while Mr. Ramsay almost certainly construes
himself as Christ—often symbolized as a lion—it becomes clear Woolf uses the
Bible ironically (Gen. 49.9; Woolf, Lighthouse 156). Though Christ is known as
the Lion of Judah, Woolf’s phrasing mirrors nearly verbatim a New Testament
description of the devil: “as a roaring lion, [he] walketh about, seeking whom
he may devour” (1 Pet. 5.8). Woolf thus extrapolates biblical language to affirm that the deification of Mr. Ramsay is fueled by himself. Further, in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf writes that her father “was the pacing, dangerous, morose lion; a lion who was sulky and angry and injured; and suddenly ferocious, and then very humble, and then majestic; and then lying dusty and fly pestered in a corner of the cage” (116). Simply, Woolf’s biblical language again affirms the ironic divinity of Mr. Ramsay.

Yet, despite Lily’s criticism of Mr. Ramsay’s self-deification, she later thinks, “there was that sudden revivification, that sudden flare . . . when it seemed as if he had shed worries and ambitions, and the hope of sympathy and the desire for praise, had entered some other region” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 156). Truly, it seems, to brand both Mr. Ramsay and Leslie in pure negativity is inaccurate, for when Lily does, it “made her ashamed of her own irritability” (156). And, while Woolf paints a fairly critical picture of her father, she also notes “He had a godlike, yet childlike, standing in the family” (111). Thus, Mr. Ramsay’s characterization does not remain entirely critical, as seen at the novel’s close.

Mr. Ramsay’s trip to the lighthouse with Cam and James has generated much scholarly debate, as it should; the novel itself takes its title from this journey, and the dialogue, interiority, and actions of the characters offer many possible understandings. Specifically, Corner argued the eventual landing at the lighthouse as “an explicit declaration of atheism” within Mr. Ramsay, an opportunity for Woolf to declare it as “something toward which his whole life has been a preparation” (417). However, I do not believe this really explicates Mr. Ramsay’s purpose, particularly in his affiliation with theology. And, while De Gay believes Mr. Ramsay “redeems himself” through the trip to the lighthouse, I believe he really redeems the Ramsay family (210).

So, while Mr. Ramsay’s earlier declaration of self-sacrifice appears pompous and assumptive, interpreting the journey as an atonement changes that. Consistent with all of her writing,

[Woolf’s] characters’ most heightened and ineffable experiences are moments of profound, if fleeting, spiritual connection—between self and other, self and the circumambient world. These interstices form the site of the mysterious in much of Woolf’s work. (Groover 218)

Indeed, even before the redemption fully begins, Woolf indicates its certainty through a single, bracketed section—an everyday moment: “[Macalister’s
boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 180). Though short, these sentences communicate profound information. Even its format—bracketed text, separated from other paragraphs by intentional spacing—denotes its importance. As in *Jacob’s Room*, Vara Neverow summates, Woolf “emphasizes” an everyday moment through the brackets and “the work shifts in significance” (203). Woolf not only “emphasizes” this everyday moment, but uses it to signal the start of Mr. Ramsay’s atonement for his family; simply, the bracketed blip signals the “[shift] in significance,” because it is through the excerpt that we receive an initial indication of Mr. Ramsay’s atonement, his self-sacrifice of pride, on behalf of his children.

I believe we understand the excerpt’s role as we consider its biblical origins and implications. Within the account in Matthew 13, Jesus shares several parables with His apostles; speaking parabolically on “the kingdom of heaven,” He compares it to “a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, [the fishermen] drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away” (Matt. 13.47–8). Essentially, Macalister’s boy acts out the parable: he casts, catches, and uses the fish—the good, beneficial part—and “cast[s] the bad away.” The parabolic link becomes fully pointed as we finish the parable: “So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just” (Matt. 13.49). And, so shall it be to the lighthouse: Mr. Ramsay will “cast the bad away” and “[gather] the good into vessels”—“vessels,” then, referring to Mr. Ramsay, Cam and James, and the boat itself (“recipient, n. and adj.”). In other words, Woolf isn’t merely alluding to the parable; she is recreating it, through Mr. Ramsay.

Truly, Mr. Ramsay’s metaphorical atonement redeems his family through everyday actions. The trip begins as James watches his father, and thinks he “looked very old . . . as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 202–3). James’s harsh observations peak and thus revive his boyish tendency to patricidal rage; however, when he sees the lighthouse from the boat, he finds it “satisfied him” (203). James’s observation that the lighthouse contented him—although it is a decade late, with his father instead of his mother—demonstrates the start of his ten-year
“grudge [being] exorcised with the completion of the much-anticipated journey” (Tneh Cheng Eng 100). Simply, the redemptive healing begins.

While the Ramsays continue toward the lighthouse, Lily stays behind to resume her ten-year-old painting. As she does, she ponders the nature of redemption, of clarity. Ultimately, she decides, “The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (Woolf, Lighthouse 161). Lily’s revelation, woven into the Ramsays’ journey, becomes significant as we see that the Ramsays’ redemption comes through “little daily miracles” in a wholly unexpected way.

The lulled silence back on the boat becomes pierced with Mr. Ramsay’s invitation:

“Come now,” said Mr. Ramsay, suddenly shutting his book.

“Come where?” Cam wonders. “To what extraordinary adventure? . . . To land somewhere, to climb somewhere? Where was he leading them?” For after his immense silence the words startled them.

“There’s the lighthouse. We’re almost there.” (204)

Of course, Mr. Ramsay’s sudden invitation startles his children; he’s read in silence the entirety of the boat ride. However, I believe the surprise Cam and James feel comes from the abrupt break from Mr. Ramsay’s lifelong “immense silence” as their father.

Yet, James’s hope lives only a moment before the father he knows returns. When Macalister remarks to Mr. Ramsay that James navigates the boat “very steady,” James thinks, “But his father never praised him,” and his bitterness toward his father resurfaces (Woolf, Lighthouse 204). But, Cam perpetuates her hope: “‘This is right, this is it,’ Cam kept feeling as she peeled her hard-boiled egg” (205). Though Cam never expounds what “it” is, we glimpse the implication as she thinks, “It was very exciting—it seemed as if they were doing two things at once; they were eating their lunch here in the sun and they were also making for safety in a great storm after a shipwreck” (205). Of course, they are not literally “making for safety” after a disaster—the family is merely spending time together, connecting. Cam, then, reaffirms Kristina Groover’s assertion that Woolf’s characters find healing in everyday events (218): in this moment, eating a hard-boiled egg and a sandwich.
Cam’s perception of her father continues to ameliorate through Mr. Ramsay’s engaged parenting. When Cam goes to dump the remainder of her sandwich into the sea, Mr. Ramsay “told her, as if he were thinking of the fisherman and how they lived, that if she did not want it she should put it back in the parcel. . . . He said so wisely, as if he knew so well all the things that happened in the world” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 205). Again, though an everyday event, Mr. Ramsay’s gentle instruction affects Cam profoundly, so “that she put it back at once,” thus giving way for them to connect; “he gave her, from his own parcel, a gingerbread nut . . . . He was shabby, and simple, eating bread and cheese; and yet he was leading them on a great expedition” (205). Interestingly, while Woolf, through Mr. Ramsay, has conflated Christ—and thus, her father—with cruelty and selfishness, this depiction differs: Mr. Ramsay is now patient, selfless, generous, humble, exemplary. Further, this interaction mirrors that of Jesus’ with His disciples, post-resurrection, at the Sea of Tiberias. In the narrative from John 21, Christ stands on the shore and invites His disciples to “Come and dine,” and as He eats bread and fish, He “taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise” (John 21.12). Mr. Ramsay’s nonverbal invitation for Cam to “Come and dine,” alongside his humble food and generosity, makes him appear like the God of the New Testament—not the Old.

Mr. Ramsay’s shift from the God of the Old Testament to that of the New solidifies as he heals his relationship with James. “Estranged from his father since he was six years old,” James’s bitterness only makes sense (Tneh Cheng Eng 100). Though the lack of his father’s praise at his steering causes a surging rage, Mr. Ramsay again surprises his children when “at last he said triumphantly: ‘Well done!’ James had steered them like a born sailor” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 206). “At last,” like the master in the Parable of the Talents, he praises, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25.21). And, like the servant, James then “enter[s] . . . into the joy of [his] lord” (Matt. 25.21). On this, Cam notes,

“You’ve got it at last.” For she knew that this was what James had been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so pleased that he would not look at her or his father or any one. . . . He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody share a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 206)
"His father had praised him;" Mr. Ramsay redeemed their family, "shed worries and ambitions, and the hope of sympathy and the desire for praise," and thus completed his atonement (156). David Tneh Cheng Eng summates, "[Lily] could visualize how Mr. Ramsay has finally reached the island and James received the so much needed affirmation from his father"; thus, she concludes, "It is finished," a verbatim repetition of Christ’s last words as He hung on the cross (John 19.30; Tneh Cheng Eng 102; Woolf, Lighthouse 208). Thus, it is with this declaration that Mr. Ramsay finalizes his role as the God of the New Testament; in other words, his character becomes changed. He is now the God that hangs on the tree in Calvary, who sacrifices for His people, rather than Himself; this phrase—"It is finished"—thus comments both on Mr. Ramsay’s redemption of his family and, consequently, of his fatherhood.

I do, however, want to establish that to argue Mr. Ramsay merely shifts from an ironic Christ-figure to a positive Christ-figure misconstrues Woolf’s views; to say so would be an oversimplification and an error. De Gay articulates,

It is inaccurate to describe Woolf as atheist: she speculates far too often about the existence and nature of God for us to say that she had a thoroughgoing and consistent conviction that God did not exist. It is inaccurate to describe her as irreligious: she shows far too much empathy with believers and far too much curiosity about religion for this. It is also inaccurate to describe her as consistently anti-religious, although she certainly voiced anti-religious sentiments at times. Equally, it would be disingenuous to suggest that Woolf had leanings towards Christianity: for all the fascination she shows towards its cultural expressions, her responses are always tempered with resistance and a sense of dissatisfaction with its answers on matters of key importance. (220)

In essence, I have tried to demonstrate what De Gay asserts: Woolf’s beliefs on Christianity were multifaceted and were primarily influenced by her personal experiences. Still, it is clear from Woolf’s letters, diaries, and novels that, while uncertain, she often held God in disdain. So, the portrayal of Mr. Ramsay as an ironic, metaphorical Christ-figure makes sense, as we know that Woolf often struggled with her father. Ultimately, I suggest Mr. Ramsay’s characterization as a Christ-figure—first negative, then positive—demonstrates Woolf’s view on the complexity of the human character, particularly within her father. And, though some scholars feel the novel’s ending “sound[s] a hollow, anticlimactic note,” I contend the closing
provides sincere, new insight into Mr. Ramsay and Leslie Stephen as fathers (Ludwigs 1). Marina Ludwigs, in particular, argues the novel ends “almost too perfect in the way . . . narrative strands come together and reinforce each other in their mutual culmination” (1). I believe Ludwigs is right if we only consider that the strands achieve resolution; when we heed the details, however, there are still imperfections within the resolutions. I believe these imperfections actually establish the conclusion of the novel, like the rest, as authentic.

Consider, for example, despite Mr. Ramsay’s miraculous and metaphorical transformation from the Old Testament God to the New Testament God, he still falls short as a father. Particularly, though he stops Cam from throwing the remnants of her sandwich into the sea, moments later, “he sprinkled the crumbs from his sandwich paper over [the water]” (Woolf, Lighthouse 206). He is hypocritical: he breaks a rule he had just set with Cam. These imperfections within the characters and plot demonstrate the humanity and authenticity of To the Lighthouse: Mr. Ramsay did redeem his family, but even afterward, he still made mistakes.

This representation of humanity, in spite of Mr. Ramsay’s and Leslie Stephen’s link with deity, helps us appreciate their efforts. Though the beginning of the novel paints him as cruel and self-serving, Mr. Ramsay earns paternal redemption through his atonement for his family. Mr. Ramsay gains a final opportunity to heal his family, to praise James, to gently course-correct Cam; Leslie gained that opportunity in time.

Revealingly, Woolf frequently thought of Leslie in religious, deific terms. It seems this ironic portrayal of Mr. Ramsay—and thus, of Leslie Stephen—arose from a lens Woolf viewed him through: in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf records that Leslie was “Christian; but shed his Christianity—with such anguish, [a friend of Leslie’s] once hinted . . . that he thought of suicide” (108). Through her characterization of Mr. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse, then, Woolf ironically manipulates Leslie’s ambivalence toward Christianity—and thus shows her own uncertainty toward Christianity and her father. Woolf demonstrates this as she later recalls in “A Sketch of the Past”:

There was a Leslie Stephen who played his part normally, without any oddity or outburst . . . Still, I cannot conceive my father . . . hearing everything that was said, and making jokes . . . I remember my amazement, my envy, when the Booths said their father took them to dances. How astonished I
felt when Charles Booth said something humorous about ‘shepherding my flock.’ (114)

Simply, for Woolf, her father embodied everything she felt about God: he was sometimes engaged, but prone to rage, and often absent in her life. Woolf’s “amazement, [her] envy” comes because neither her father nor the Good Shepherd seem to want to herd their sheep (John 10.11, 14). Mr. Ramsay’s characterization demonstrates this nuance: he is curious about his children, but simultaneously belittles their dreams. Again, though, his characterization is not simple, nor is it persistently negative. We truly cannot discount the great transformation that takes place in Mr. Ramsay; to ignore the change in Mr. Ramsay’s role as a Christ-figure and father is to ignore his and Leslie’s paternal redemption (220).
Works Cited


For years, critics have discussed domestic violence in Othello—violence so obvious and explicit that sometimes, critics do not feel the need to dissect it (Schawb; Smith 388–404; Deats 79–94). Much of the scholarship surrounding Othello deals instead with the troubling racial implications present in the play, or with other aspects of the play’s plot and language. There is especially very little scholarship specifically about Emilia, despite the significant, albeit sometimes passive, role she plays in several pivotal points of the play (Schawb). Emilia is the one, after all, who takes Desdemona’s handkerchief and gives it to Iago, allowing him to convince Othello once and for all of Desdemona’s infidelity. She is the one, too, who ultimately foils her husband’s plot, explaining Iago’s subterfuge to Othello and giving Othello reason to doubt. She is the one in whose name Iago’s plot is carried out: Iago’s proffered justification for hating Othello is his conviction that Emilia had an affair with him. Despite Emilia’s arguably central role in
Othello’s plot developments, she does not appear on stage or speak often, and so she is, perhaps, doomed to a lack of scholarly interest.

Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew certainly does not suffer from a lack of scholarship; her struggle is different. Unlike Othello, where the existence of domestic violence (by definition, violence between two members of the same household) can never be in question, lively debates surround The Taming of the Shrew and the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio—specifically, whether or not this relationship can be considered an example of domestic violence (Detmer 273–93; Daniell 71–83; Deer 63–78). Upon careful examination of the play’s language, audiences today generally feel some discomfort with Katherine and Petruchio’s relationship; some may assert that the relationship is indeed an abusive one because Petruchio frequently commits (albeit indirectly) violence against Katherine. However, the argument usually revolves around the play’s historical context, and whether one can truly consider the relationship abusive if, in early modern England, perceptions of spousal abuse, or spousal violence, outside the physical did not yet exist.

Although there are conversations about domestic violence in both Othello and The Taming of the Shrew, scholars have largely neglected to consider them in tandem and further consider them in conversation with each other. However, doing so can provide valuable insight as one considers the difference in the portrayals of domestic violence. In Othello, domestic violence is an obvious vehicle of tragedy: Iago’s toxic relationship with Emilia arguably sets the stage for the plot as a whole, and the tragedy is ultimately carried out through domestic violence. This representation of domestic violence is preceded by the more farcical representation present in The Taming of the Shrew. These two plays, written nearly a decade apart, illustrate an evolution in Shakespeare’s treatment of themes of domestic violence. The evolution in the treatment and portrayal of domestic violence in Shakespeare—from a simple plot device to the terror that it truly is—exposes our flawed attempts to historicize domestic violence in Shakespeare’s work.

Although some critics argue that Petruchio and Katherine’s relationship cannot be considered violent because Shakespearean conceptions of domestic violence were different than modern conceptions, this argument illustrates a misconception about early modern ideas of domestic violence. Literary critic Emily Detmer points out that during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when The Taming of the Shrew was written, English attitudes about
spousal relationships shifted. Husbands were still expected to control their wives, but physical violence was a less acceptable method of control, and there was an emphasis on other methods of controlling “unruly” wives (279). In accordance with this, Petruchio never physically abuses Katherine in his attempts to gain control over her. This lack of physical violence provides evidence, for some scholars, that their relationship cannot be considered violent through a historical lens.

Nevertheless, this argument ultimately rests upon the idea that early modern people did not recognize violence outside of physical violence, which is simply untrue. Historian Susan Amussen argues that in early modern England, “violence” described behavior society considered inappropriate or illegitimate (“Punishment” 3). It is true that not everything a modern audience defines as domestic violence would also have been defined as violence in early modern England; people accepted some level of physical “correction” directed from husbands to wives (“Punishment” 13). There were, however, important caveats to this acceptance: correction should parallel the offense, that is, the punishment should fit the crime; and any violence should be in response to some transgression. Punishment without a transgression and excessive punishment, for early modern English people, crossed the line from acceptable husband-wife relations to violence (“Punishment” 14). Community policing played a vital role in preventing and limiting domestic violence; neighbors frequently eavesdropped on each other and would often attempt to mediate in cases of domestic violence (“Unquietness” 78). Removing one’s wife from the community, therefore, bordered on violence, particularly where the husband already demonstrated a predisposition towards such, since it kept the community from playing its role in limiting violence (“Unquietness” 81). Additionally, the community played an important role in defining when some particular action crossed into violence; usually, if an action disturbed public peace or disrupted the community’s social life, it was classified as violence (“Unquietness” 77). Since providing for his wife was an important husbandly duty, the failure to provide could also be considered violence. Failure to provide was defined as denying a wife access to the reasonable physical comfort she had a right to expect based upon her husband’s situation. In certain cases, courts considered failure to provide reason enough to grant a petitioning wife legal separation (“Punishment” 13). Denying a wife food, thus, also could be considered domestic violence, because it fell under the category of failing to provide.
It is, therefore, obvious that early modern audiences understood domestic violence existed outside of physical abuse, but in order to attempt to parse domestic violence’s existence in *The Taming of the Shrew*, we must consider whether Petruchio’s actions cross the line from “correcting” Kate to acting violently against her. The play’s events themselves may support reading Petruchio as violent: Petruchio’s actions at the wedding disrupt social order as he proceeds to take Katherine away from the community and isolate her, and then deprive her of the physical wellness he is able to provide by denying her food and sleep and ruining her clothing. Disrupting social order as Petruchio did at the wedding and isolating Kate thereafter may have made an early modern audience uncomfortable, but in order to decide whether these and his other actions could have been perceived as violent, we still must consider whether these actions were either unwarranted, or an exaggerated response to Kate’s perceived offense. At the beginning of their relationship, his actions may seem quite reasonable to an early modern audience: Katherine is shrewish, and her husband must correct her. However, on the road to Padua, Katherine seems quite sufficiently tamed, agreeing with Petruchio over the evidence of her own eyes that it is night, then day, as Petruchio wills. Still, Petruchio continues to make Katherine prove her taming, telling her to greet the old man as a young virgin; else, the implicit threat hangs over her head, they will return to Petruchio’s house, and not to her father’s house after all. Perhaps for some in an early modern English audience, this crossed a line; it disrupted the social order by involving someone outside their household. This public humiliation punished Kate for a crime she had not committed as well as the idea of Petruchio isolating Kate—through threats—may not have sat well with some members of that audience. Indeed, Susan Amussen says explicitly that “Petruchio’s behavior is similar to behavior that women cite when complaining of a violent spouse . . . so [an early modern audience] would not have found the behavior appropriate” (“Re: Domestic Violence”).

However, the play downplays Petruchio’s potentially violent actions because those actions are central to the plot and genre requirements of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play is a comedy, and comedies as a genre usually involve presenting a challenge to the community that is then resolved, typically through marriage. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the challenge to the community is Katherine’s refusal to get married. When Petruchio says he plans to marry Kate, Tranio responds that he will be grateful if Petruchio breaks “the ice, and do this feat,/ Achieve the elder, set the younger free/
For our access” (1.4.257–259). The issue for the community is that Katherine will not marry, thus Bianca cannot marry. As a result, the whole social system grinds to a halt. Not only will Katherine not marry, but her behavior makes it so that no one really wants to marry her. Her behavior, which is also a social problem—as demonstrated through her treatment of her father—must therefore also be solved (Detmer 278). Petruchio’s violence towards Katherine is what allows the story to achieve resolution: Katherine is no longer a shrew at the end of the play, and Bianca is free to marry. This has two consequences: first, domestic violence is clearly used as a plot device to resolve the challenge Katherine presents; and it is therefore necessary for the audience to accept Petruchio’s behavior in order for the play to be a comedy, and for the audience to feel content with its resolution. Without such resolution, the play cannot be a true comedy.

Though, as Dr. Amussen points out, an early modern audience could very possibly have read Petruchio’s behavior as violent, that is not the only potential reading for audiences then, or for audiences now. For today’s audiences, who often try to view The Taming of the Shrew in what they perceive as its historical context, the way the actors and directors choose to stage the play is paramount to whether the audience interprets the play as comedy or tragedy (in the way these terms are popularly used today). The 1981 New York Shakespeare in the Park’s production of The Taming of the Shrew starring Meryl Streep and Raul Julia is perhaps the most effective at translating the play into a comedy for a twentieth- or twenty-first-century audience. The production transforms Katherine’s speech at the end of the play, which is often very disquieting to modern readers, into a tender, almost romantic scene. Streep’s Katherine bows herself down to the ground, holding out her hand and inviting her husband to step on it, if he so chooses. Julia’s Petruchio kneels down beside her, takes her hand, and kisses it before he raises her to her feet alongside him. He proceeds to brag to his friends about his shrew-taming abilities—but as he does so, his Katherine tugs on his hand, eager to spend time alone with her husband, and clearly still unafraid to exhibit her indomitable spirit. These acting choices give the audience a sense that this couple truly cares about each other, and that Petruchio did not break Kate’s spirit, but rather, only softened it. However, not every production portrays their relationship this way. The 2012 Globe production, starring Samantha Spiro and Simon Paisley Day depicts a far more threatening Petruchio, and a far more worn and wearied Katherine. When Day’s Petruchio tells Spiro’s
Kate, “Will you, nill you, I will marry you” (2.1.262–63), he moves atop Kate, who is lying on her back, pinning her in place. The threat and his disregard for Katherine’s feelings are clear. By the time Katherine gives her infamous speech, she is tired and beaten. She says the words listlessly, without much real emotion. For audiences today, who so frequently attempt to historicize the play and excuse Petruchio’s textual behavior based on that attempt, the play’s interpretation depends on the actors. Given the very real possibility an early modern audience could have seen Petruchio as violent, it is only logical that this could have held true for them as well. Whether *The Taming of the Shrew* is an effective comedy therefore relies heavily upon acting and directing choices.

Domestic violence in *Othello*, on the other hand, exhibits itself with almost startling explicitness, and therefore functions as a plot device quite differently than it does in *The Taming of the Shrew*. There is no need for anyone to wonder whether an early modern audience would have found Othello’s behavior leading up to Desdemona’s murder violent. Desdemona commits no error to prompt his “correction,” if I may term it as such; and his behavior exceeds punishment that would fit the crime—quite uncomfortably so. Even though Othello remains unaware of Desdemona’s innocence for the majority of the play, his actions are still violent because murder was never an acceptable action for a husband to take (“Unquietness” 79). For early modern and current audiences, Othello fits the role of an abuser. Nonetheless, scholars do not frequently examine Iago through this same lens, though his behavior toward Emilia clearly qualifies as abuse as well. As critic Roxane Schwab points out, Iago certainly abuses Emilia mentally and emotionally before he murders her. Furthermore, Schwab analyzes Iago’s behavior, and concludes that he possesses many characteristics common to abusers. It should not surprise the audience that Iago’s first words to his wife in the play are cruel, aimed at “publicly humiliating, and thus controlling, her.” Emilia’s monologue when she discovers Desdemona’s handkerchief further supports Iago as abusive. She calls him “wayward” (3.3.300), perhaps indicating that Iago’s moods are unpredictable—as are the moods of most abusive partners, so their significant others can never quite predict when they will next turn violent. Iago’s reaction to Emilia’s possession of the handkerchief may further illustrate this, particularly in certain stagings of the play. In one scene, for example, Iago’s hand clenches Emilia’s jaw. The fear in her eyes
and the malice in his are both quite obvious, underlining the violence of their relationship.

Desdemona’s conversation with Emilia, however, after Othello hits her publicly, provides perhaps the best illustration of Emilia as a victim of abuse. She tells Desdemona that it takes a year, maybe two, to really know one’s husband, echoing the fact that abuse almost always begins within the first year of marriage, and perhaps indicating that this was the case for her (Schwab). Emilia continues by deriding male jealousy, indicating that the jealousy Iago expresses a few times throughout the play—first of Othello, then of Cassio—is well known to her, and she has attempted to deny it by telling her husband of her fidelity, but he will not listen because he is “not ever jealous for the cause,/ But jealous for [he’s] jealous” (3.4.160–61). This jealousy that Emilia so disparages began the tragedy’s events in the first place. Iago tells the audience he “hate[s] the Moor” (1.3.357) because of his certainty that “’twixt my sheets/ he has done my office” (1.3.358–59). Despite Emilia’s assertions otherwise, Iago chooses to act as though Othello has “done [his] office,” even though he admits to the audience he does not know if the rumor is true (1.3.359). Consequently, the tragedy in Othello results from Iago’s abusive relationship with Emilia and his refusal to trust or listen to his wife.

That domestic violence executes the play’s tragedy, yet provides perhaps the most compelling evidence that it is the central tragedy in Othello. Domestic violence accomplishes or motivates every death in the play: Emilia and Desdemona are ultimately victims of domestic violence; Iago kills Roderigo to further his plan—a plan ultimately motivated by the idea of Emilia’s infidelity, which itself further encourages domestic violence; and Othello’s realization of what he has done to Desdemona as well as her innocence—an important factor in determining correction versus violence for early modern English people—causes him to commit suicide. Othello not only portrays domestic violence as tragic, rather it portrays domestic violence as the tragedy. Far from the resolving role such violence plays in The Taming of the Shrew, domestic violence in Othello is unambiguously tragic, with terrible ends for not only the victim, but also for the abuser. Importantly, Othello and Iago do not go unpunished for their abuses of their wives. Othello, obviously, commits suicide, but Iago, too, is unmasked at the end of the play, left to live with the crimes he has committed—and the audience may reasonably presume, the punishments given to him by Venetian society. Then, as a plot
device, domestic violence differs dramatically from *The Taming of the Shrew*: in that play, it was the means of resolving a community; in this play, it is the means of destroying one.

*Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew* clearly deal with domestic violence in ways that could hardly be more different. The question, then, is why. What changed? Or, did anything change at all? To me, it seems the most significant change was time. *The Taming of the Shrew* was written in 1593 or 1594, at the beginning of Shakespeare’s playwriting career. *Othello* was written in 1603 or 1604. Almost exactly a decade passed between the two plays’ creations. The most likely explanation is that Shakespeare simply gained more life experience during this time, and somehow gained a more realistic view of domestic violence. As Sharon Hamilton points out in her discussion of abuse in *Othello*, “Long before the phrase ‘spousal abuse’ came into popular usage, Shakespeare understood its nature” (60). Moreover, Shakespeare does seem to understand something of domestic violence’s nature, portraying realistically escalating violence as well as abusers and victims with psychologically accurate actions, reactions, and characteristics. Perhaps Shakespeare, ever the master of human portrayal, simply saw more domestic violence and felt the need to return to the subject in *Othello*, in order to truly show its darkness and its terror.

At around the same time that Shakespeare revisited the topic of domestic violence and wrote *Othello*, John Fletcher wrote *The Woman’s Prize*, or *The Tamer Tamed*. This play responded to *The Taming of the Shrew*, as the title may suggest, and forced Petruchio to undergo his own taming at the hands of Maria, whom he courts after Katherine’s death. This play’s very existence demonstrates that early modern audiences were not entirely comfortable with Petruchio’s behavior, and at least some of them thought he crossed a line and were unsatisfied with the play’s original ending. Indeed, during later generations, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Woman’s Prize* were sometimes performed in tandem, and Fletcher’s play was extremely popular—more popular, actually, than *The Taming of the Shrew* (Amussen “Re: Domestic Violence”). Concurrently, Shakespeare wrote his own revision of domestic violence in *Othello*. It is also possible that attitudes about domestic violence underwent a slight shift at the turn of the century to more strongly emphasize peaceful and loving relationships between husbands and wives. Perhaps if *The Taming of the Shrew* were written later in Shakespeare’s career, Petruchio’s behavior would be different—less violent. It is impossible to be certain why,
exactly, domestic violence plays such different roles in *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Although this would require further study and historical archival work, more scholars should examine *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew* in conjunction with each other, as well as investigating other contemporary primary sources, in order to obtain a clearer picture of views on domestic violence in early modern England and how they may have changed.
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Criterion
Morphing Identities
The Muse, the Art, and the Artist in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait”

Emery Nielson

Edgar Allan Poe claims in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (165), a concept which, as explained by Elizabeth Bronfen, elicits some contradictions. Bronfen addresses the apparent incompatibility in “the combination of ‘beautiful,’ ‘poetical’ and ‘death’, since death is a decomposition of forms, the breaking of aesthetic unity” (60). Many of Poe’s works exemplify the concept of the feminine aesthetic, with numerous instances of the destruction of the beautiful feminine form (see Berenice’s stolen teeth, the axe in the skull of the wife in “The Black Cat,” and even subtler examples of decay like the entombed Annabel Lee). These depictions of temporary beauty fulfill Poe’s “poetical” aesthetic, but when we look at “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait,” we find demonstrations of permanent beauty (or endeavors to achieve it). These stories of portrayed beauty and metempsychosis exemplify a “cultural convention, namely the confusion of woman and art” (Bronfen 112). In their efforts to immortalize beauty, the artists in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait” fuse their muses with
their art and, subsequently, ruin them both. The destruction of the muses adds a layer of complexity to these stories when we consider parallels of loss in Poe’s own life, just as the attempts of the artists to immortalize their muses mirror Poe’s own processes of grieving and artistry.

For the purposes of this discussion, the role of the muse is based on the following definition: “a person (often a female lover) or thing regarded as the source of an artist’s inspiration; the presiding spirit or force behind any person or creative act” (OED, “muse,” n., 2c). Several scholars have already made the claim that Ligeia acts as the narrator’s muse. Grace McEntee states that “if the narrator is an artist, then Ligeia was surely his muse, a muse who initially led the narrator along transcendental ways” (75). Catherine Carter simply states, “She is the embodiment of the narrator’s muse” (46). The narrator admires Ligeia’s beauty and intelligence, looking to her for guidance and inspiration in the realm of intellectual exploration. This admiration extends to Ligeia’s strength of will as she lies on her deathbed and says, “Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe, “Ligeia” 319). Carter claims that “most authors imply that the muses’ place is to inspire . . . authors in order that they might do or sing something, rather than to act for themselves” (51). Ligeia’s statement regarding the power of the human will inspires the narrator: rather than acting for herself and being the cause of her own reincarnation, Ligeia is inspiring the narrator through her own example to strengthen his will so he can resurrect his wife. As a result, while the narrator works to provide an environment for his wife to return, he seeks inspiration and looks for guidance from a source beyond the grave. This looking toward a dead muse for inspiration brings darkness to the narrator’s art and ultimately results in horror.

With his will aligned with Ligeia’s, the narrator wants nothing more than to create an opportunity for her to return: “His response to the physical loss of his beloved is to endow his surroundings imaginatively with her ubiquitous presence and resurrect her in his poetic utterance” (Bronfen 367). There is evidence of this in his treatment of his new wife, Lady Rowena, whom he “loathe[s] with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). This intense hatred, in combination with his strong lingering feelings for his first wife, makes it clear that the narrator did not remarry for love or companionship. We must thus assume an ulterior motive; the presence of Rowena could be explained by the narrator’s desire for access to her finances,
but I argue that the narrator’s purpose in marrying her was to achieve an ideal physical vessel for the reincarnation of his first wife. The narrator’s loathing of Rowena allows him to overcome any potential guilt or hesitancy in sacrificing her. The location of the abbey “in one of the wildest and least frequented portions” of England, as well as the location of the bridal chamber in a turret “altogether apart from the portion of the abbey tenanted by the servants” (Poe, “Ligeia” 320) demonstrate the narrator’s efforts to isolate Rowena from anyone who might help her, befriend her, provide any sort of enjoyment for her, or miss her when she is gone (327). The bridal chamber itself is “pentagonal in shape,” supporting the narrator’s involvement with dark magic, and the decorations and draperies around the room create a “phantasmagoric effect” (321) that elicits “a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole” (322). Rowena has confided in the narrator that she despises the decor, yet he does not remove or alter the room to her taste. If the narrator is not acting for the purpose of reanimating Ligeia, we would have to assume his harshness towards Rowena stems from her not being his first wife. However, considering the tactics the narrator is willing to employ to make Rowena miserable, it is of little question that his actions imply once again a motive singular to his own interest: reanimating Ligeia.

When Rowena falls ill, the narrator describes her condition as follows: “Lady Rowena was attacked with sudden illness” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). He uses passive voice here, giving power to the illness and making Rowena simply a force acted upon. He also uses a significantly powerful word—“attacked”—to describe the illness’s action. The language here suggests more intention behind Rowena’s sickness than an implied coincidence between her falling ill and Ligeia requiring a vessel. The “sudden” quality of the illness as well as the narrator’s admittance that Rowena was, in some form, “attacked,” suggests the narrator’s implicit and purposeful involvement in her weakened condition.

Throughout the story, while Rowena is sick and flickering between life and death, the narrator’s mind is constantly fixed upon his muse. She is “the presiding spirit” behind his actions as he calls upon the dark knowledge she taught him. The function of the muse becomes complicated when we recognize that the identity of the narrator’s muse, the deceased Ligeia, coincides with his end goal and his final product of art: Ligeia reborn. With Ligeia acting as both the muse and the art, the end result of the narrator’s sorcery is something which he neglects to recognize as his first wife, let
alone human. The narrator tells us this story through his memories, and so when he says, “The thing that was enshrouded advanced bodily and palpably into the middle of the apartment,” we know he does not associate the reincarnated Ligeia with his beloved wife, going so far as to call the spectral being a “thing” (Poe, “Ligeia” 329). When the image of Ligeia is once again before him, the narrator does not identify the being as Ligeia, merely drawing attention to physical features like “the black, and the wild eyes . . . of the LADY LIGEIA” (334). While the “thing” may possess Ligeia’s eyes and hair, the narrator’s horror confirms that the being before him is not Ligeia herself. He also acknowledges that “it is by that sweet word alone—by Ligeia—that I bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more,” further testifying that his attempts to reanimate his wife failed and that he can only see a representative image of her in his memory: the true Ligeia “is no more” (310–11). The art the narrator attempts to create, when it is fused with the identity of his dead muse, is far from his goal of resurrecting his wife. Because of the deceased nature of the muse, the art could not be completed in its proper and beautiful form; the death of the beautiful woman altered the narrator’s muse and art into something of “horrors” (328). The narrator’s attempt to find life in death proves fruitless as his efforts are only rewarded with the dark and the unnatural.

While the roles of artist and muse in “Ligeia” appear more symbolic, “The Oval Portrait” provides a more obvious depiction of the muse, with the artist’s wife serving as his visual inspiration. The artist’s efforts to create a likeness of his wife place her in the position of his muse as she is the aesthetic inspiration for the image he is painting. Though his wife is his original muse, the artist becomes increasingly less focused on his wife as he becomes more fixated on the painting itself. The story tells us that prior to his marriage, the artist already possessed “a bride in his Art,” and this relationship between the artist and his art causes his wife to dread the “instruments which deprived her of the countenance of her lover” (Poe, “Life in Death” 665). Here we are already presented with a conflict regarding the identity of the muse. The artist has given his art not only human characteristics, but romantic ones as well. Because he considers art his first wife, and he continues to turn toward his art for inspiration for the duration of this story, we see the art begin to function as a muse. Catherine Carter suggests that “muses in general are, as their gender suggests, objects rather than subjects” (51). The artist works “day and night to depict her who so loved him,” neglecting his wife’s humanity and
treating her as if she has no mortal needs, thus ignoring the ever-weakening condition of her health (Poe, “Life in Death” 665). The objectification of the artist’s wife, as well as the attribution of human characteristics to the art, blur the lines between art and muse and facilitate a fusion between them.

When the artist finishes his painting and finally looks away, we recognize that the wife has died, and the “life-likeness” of the painting suggests a transfer of life from the wife to the art (Poe, “Life in Death” 664). Bronfen suggests that “the conflict between his two brides provokes in the painter a desire to merge the two, to transfer his living wife into the wife he already had” (111). It is through successfully merging his two wives that the artist combines the identities of his living muse with his art. Not only has the muse’s identity been fused with the art, but her living essence has been trapped inside it as well. The artist has captured the image of his wife “just ripening into womanhood” (Poe, “Life in Death” 663), an image which naturally evokes symbols of life and fertility. He paints her at a state in which she is symbolically blooming, and in doing so, he “creates a fictional idol/idealization that, while living on, replaces the wife’s corporeal existence” (Webb 216). The artist has to kill the muse in order to fuse her essence with the art, thus making her immortal.

Robert M. Mollinger addresses a romantic cliché regarding this story that “life is destroyed by art which, at the same time, preserves life forever” (150). While this move may appear cliché, when we consider the role of the muse as a source of inspiration, her death and simultaneous fusion with the art adds layers of complexity to what Mollinger sees as formulaic. Life is not simply destroyed by art, but the muse, the source of inspiration, becomes fused with the art when the wife’s living essence is transferred to the painting. Fusing art with inspiration creates a paradox that suggests an end to the muse but, simultaneously, an infinite loop of inspiration and art.

By killing the muse, the artist has created the most lifelike portrait imaginable: “as a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself” (Poe, “Life in Death” 664). Yet the truth behind the painting’s creation alters the association of life and liveliness and instead attributes a heavy context of death. While the portrait possesses “life-likeness,” and immortalizes its subject in its portrayal of her, it depicts a representation of ultimate mortality. The art was meant to be an image of life, and it is initially, but because of its fusion with the muse, the art’s essence has been altered forever. In killing his muse, the artist has forfeited all access he had
to his living source of inspiration. His living wife gone, her essence having transferred into his art, the artist will now have to seek inspiration from this unnatural fusion of life, death, and art. Without access to a living muse, the artist will be forced to rely on a living dead muse for inspiration, forever altering the nature of his art and bringing darkness to his future creations.

In addition to claiming that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” Poe says that “equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 165). While this rule is not explicitly followed in “The Oval Portrait,” “Ligeia” is told from the lover’s perspective, as are many of Poe’s tales regarding dead or dying women. In “The Oval Portrait” and “Ligeia,” the male lover is synonymous with the identity of the artist. While viewing Poe himself as an artist, we can find instances of his acting as a bereaved lover for the death of beautiful women in his own life.

Because of Poe’s role as an artist, we must question the sources of his inspiration. Who were Poe’s muses and what do they inform us about these pieces? Carter connects Poe to the narrator in “Ligeia” as she says, “inspiration is traditionally feminine, beautiful, mysterious, stronger than death (as the art remains to confer immortality on the artist), and dedicated to giving aid to men—in this case aid in writing” (Carter 49). The question of the identity of Poe’s muse or muses then remains. I propose that Poe’s muses for “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait,” are his dead mother, Eliza, and his dying wife, Virginia, respectively.

Eliza passed away on December 10, 1811, when Poe was just shy of three years old (Bradford 20). At such a young age, Poe was unlikely to retain any solid memories of his mother, and it is this lack of memory that we see mirrored in “Ligeia.” The narrator is unable to recall where, when, or how he met his wife, nor can he remember anything about her family or her life outside of their marriage. All of his memories of her seem to be broad ideas: her singing, her shadow-like presence, her beauty, her intellect. Not only does he struggle to remember her, but he remembers her as an almost inhuman ideal with “an airy and spirit-lifting vision more widely divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311). This idealization of Ligeia suggests an inability to remember her for who she truly was as the narrator fills in the gaps with characteristics stemming from feelings of love and loss.
In his biography of Poe, Kenneth Silverman addresses the death of Ligeia, saying that “one reason the narrator finds the loss irremediable is that, although an adult, he depends on Ligeia as if he were a child” (139). This parent-child relationship is supported by the text, as the narrator compares himself to a child several times throughout the story: “I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage” (Poe, “Ligeia” 316). The narrator admits that he looks up to Ligeia as a mentor, but here we see that he is so enraptured by her vast knowledge that he views himself as childlike. While considering the failing health of his wife, the narrator remarks, “Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted” (316). Without his muse, the narrator feels as helpless as an unenlightened child, creating implications of their relationship that feel less romantic and more maternal. This desire for Ligeia to teach and lead him mirrors Poe’s own desires for a relationship with his mother.

We see further connections between Ligeia and Eliza when we consider the circumstances of their deaths. Similar to Ligeia’s illness, Poe’s mother died “most likely of tuberculosis” (Bradford 20). While Ligeia is far from being the only woman Poe has killed with a sudden illness, considering the similarities between Poe and the narrator, there is a clear relationship between “Ligeia” and Poe’s feelings of loss regarding his mother. “Ligeia” was first published in 1838 when Poe was twenty-five years old, and it illustrates his sorrow for growing into adulthood without a relationship with his mother. Unfortunately for Poe, his loss did not end with his mother’s death. It was many years later when he found another muse of a more conventional model: his wife Virginia. It is in the tragedy of Virginia’s dying that we can find clear inspiration for “The Oval Portrait.”

Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe loved to sing, and, not knowing that Virginia’s singing would eventually result in her death, Poe supported his wife in her passion (Silverman). In 1842, Virginia was practicing when she “began to bleed from her mouth . . . she was hemorrhaging from her lungs” (179). The result of the hemorrhage brought Virginia into an early stage of tuberculosis, which at the time was commonly referred to as “death-in-life” due to the seemingly hopeless fatality of the illness (179). Much like Virginia’s illness was often called “death-in-life,” the original title of “The Oval Portrait” was “Life in Death,” due to the lifelike nature of the portrait of the deceased.
wife. Virginia underwent “death-in-life” for several years, living but
growing increasingly weaker as her expectant death drew nearer. Not only
did Virginia die young, but the nature of her death becomes particularly
intriguing when we recognize what killed her: singing. Just as the wife in
“The Oval Portrait” is consumed and destroyed by art, the art of singing
eventually killed Virginia.

On June 12, 1846, Poe wrote what remains today the only known letter
addressed to his wife. In it he addresses Virginia as “My Dear Heart” and
tells her, “You are my greatest and only stimulus now, to battle with this
uncongenial, unsatisfactory, and ungrateful life” (Harrison 232). He later
claimed he loved her “as no man ever loved before” (287). Poe’s love for
Virginia is evident in his letters, as is his suffering in watching her illness
progress: “This ‘evil’ was the greatest which can befall a man” (287). Rather
than focusing on Virginia’s loss of liveliness, Poe wrote a piece
that immortalizes a woman at her most lively state. Because the story was
published the same year Virginia fell ill, other scholars have made the clear
connection between the dying Virginia and the wife in “The Oval Portrait.”
Silverman describes the text as a tale concerning an artist “and his . . . Virginia-
like bride . . . The painter will not or cannot accept his bride is dying” (180).
This inability of the artist to acknowledge his wife’s failing health mirrors
Poe’s own experience as he watched Virginia grow weaker and weaker. Poe
wrote that “at each accession of the disorder [he] loved her more dearly and
clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity” (Harrison 287). The artist
“cannot accept his bride is dying,” just as Poe struggles to accept the mortality
of his own wife.

Though Virginia was not yet dead when Poe published this piece, he was
brutally aware of her worsening condition. His drinking habits increased
as Virginia’s condition worsened, and he writes that he “became insane,
with long intervals of horrible sanity” (Harrison 287). The pain of watching
his wife die was so unbearable that Poe indulged in alcohol to occupy his
conscious mind. As an artist in his own craft, he was faced with the reality of
a potential world without his muse, a world without the “only stimulus” in
his “ungrateful life.” By placing the artist in “The Oval Portrait” in a position
that forces him to use a dead muse for inspiration, Poe recognizes the very
real possibility of his own condition in the future. In her dying, “Virginia
Clemm unwittingly served as the muse who gave birth to Edgar Allan Poe’s
creative powers,” most specifically those regarding themes of death, loss,
and other forms of the macabre (Bronfen 366). Seeking inspiration from a
dead or dying muse is not unlike finding inspiration in death itself, and it is
this fixation on death that permeates so many of Poe’s works.

Just as the artists in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait” acquire inspiration
from dead and dying muses, Poe wrote these stories with the invocation
of his own dead and dying muses. The doubling of the dead/dying muse
further justifies the dark plots of these texts: the artists create art that is dark
and close to death just as Poe has created these stories, his art, with themes of
darkness and death. His “need to keep writing versions of the revenant plot
indicates clearly enough his own difficulty in putting the past to rest” and
his inability in finding living forms of inspiration rather than relying on his
dead muses (Silverman 140).

By identifying Poe’s sources of inspiration for these two stories, we
can further identify his processes of mourning with each respective loss.
Bronfen says, “The doubling of one wife by another [in “Ligeia”], by virtue
of metempsychosis, is meant to prove a continued existence of the ‘soul’
after bodily decay and serves to soothe the mourner about his own fear of
mortality” (334). We can connect this idea to “The Oval Portrait” as well,
considering the function of the painting as an immortalizing of the wife’s
image and essence. Considering these stories to be representations of the
women in Poe’s life, Poe is mirroring the artists in these stories by creating
doubles of his mother and wife in order to soothe his own fears. Bronfen
continues, regarding the final death of Ligeia, “this second death also marks
a closure of the protagonist’s uncanny exchange with the dead, usher[ing] in
a new phase in his mourning. Realising that the lost object can be retrieved
in the form of a mental image confirms his belief in the omnipotence of his
thoughts” (335). Again, we see Poe’s characters acting as representations of
his own life, as he uses his stories to remember his muses and gain some
control over the reality of their deaths through his mental powers.

At the close of “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait,” both artists make similar
exclamations regarding the completion of their art. However, it is through
the artists’ individual reactions that we can draw conclusions regarding
Poe’s state of mourning for his dead and dying muses. “Ligeia” concludes as
the narrator “shriek[s],” “these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—
of my lost love—of the lady—of the LADY LIGEIA!” (Poe, “Ligeia” 330).
The narrator recognizes a resemblance to his wife, but we know through his
narration that his attempts to resurrect Ligeia ultimately fail. He questions,
“But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night,” suggesting that Ligeia does not return to life in the form he desires (328). The narrator’s recognition of the “horrors” of his art illustrates an ultimate acceptance that Ligeia is gone, despite his best efforts. He still longs for the woman he remembers, but having experienced such dark terrors, the narrator is able to acknowledge the permanence of Ligeia’s passing. He doubtless still remembers her through a perfect lens, but after his failed attempt to reunite with his wife, he is able to accept that Ligeia is gone. When he published this story, Poe had been without his mother for many years. Though he never truly knew his mother, Poe’s longing to be close to her is apparent in this story, just as “Ligeia’s ultimate rebirth only dramatizes more horrifyingly how those most deeply beloved live on within oneself, never dead and ever ready to return” (Silverman 140). Unable to remember her for who she truly was, his memories likely idealized her to be a perfect representation of what a mother can be, just as the narrator idealizes his memories of Ligeia. Since Eliza had been absent from Poe’s life for so long, he was able to accept the fact of her passing, and, like the narrator comes to acknowledge Ligeia’s death, Poe recognized that he would never see his mother again.

Before discovering his wife is dead at the conclusion of “The Oval Portrait,” the artist finishes his painting and declares, “This is indeed Life itself!” (Poe, “Life in Death” 666). We do not have the perspective of the artist to conclude how he feels about the nature of his finished art like we do the narrator of “Ligeia,” but we can judge his acknowledgement of his wife’s death through his actions. The artist “would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him” (Silverman 180). Poe’s choice of the conditional text suggests a willing ignorance (or even purposeful neglect) in the artist to disregard the condition of his wife. We also know from this quote that the wife’s failing health was clearly visible and should have been recognizable to the man who was painting her. As the artist finishes the painting, he “comes face to face with his bride’s death but still cannot or will not recognize it” (Silverman 180). The artist’s negligence toward his wife suggests a feeling of guilt within Poe for Virginia’s condition as well as his use of her for inspiration.

The wife in “The Oval Portrait” “is gentle and forbearing, and quietly sacrifices her life on the altar of her husband’s passionately blind pursuit of an ideal,” whether that ideal be the immortal youth and beauty of woman or the
most perfect, lifelike art (Gross 18). By attributing these characteristics to the wife and aligning himself with the artist, Poe identifies himself as at fault for Virginia’s illness. The wife’s death due to the artist’s actions illustrates Poe’s fear of a worsening in Virginia’s condition due to unintentional neglect on his part. While Poe was diligent in caring for his wife, doing all he could to improve her health, the emotional strain of seeing her improve and decline, of finding hope and losing it over and over, weighed on him. Poe admitted after Virginia’s death that he had “nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure, when [he] found one in the death of [his] wife” (Harrison 287). Poe felt extreme loss at Virginia’s death, but he also experienced an end to unbearable torment. The artist’s inability to recognize his wife’s weakened state in “The Oval Portrait” communicates the complexity that Poe experienced when living with his ill wife: distracting his mind with alcohol would allow him to forget her pain and retain a perfect and healthy image of her, but failing to accept and address her situation would result in her death. Poe fought to keep Virginia alive, but in doing so he suffered great emotional stress. This is the struggle that Poe illustrates in “The Oval Portrait”: that the obligation of caring for his wife forced him to become familiar with her increasing weakness.

While the relationships of the artists and muses in these stories differ from Poe’s life, we can see clear connections between his personal muses and the muses in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait.” Rather than using his art to distance himself from his pain and loss, Poe infuses his grief into his writing. “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait” illustrate Poe’s inability to find inspiration among the living. Trapped in memories of the past, Poe is left in a position to call upon dead and dying muses for inspiration, resulting in art that is laced with death and darkness.
Works Cited


Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*, based on a true story, takes as its inspiration a particularly horrific example of failed reform. The Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, in Marianna, Florida, closed in 2011 but left a shadow of rape and torture—and the deaths of more than 50 boys—in its wake (Chadwick and Vermeulen 96). When news of the bodies made its way to Whitehead’s Twitter feed in 2014, “in the very summer Michael Brown and Eric Garner, two African Americans, were murdered by white policemen,” he felt like he had to share their stories (Chadwick and Vermeulen 96). He told a reporter that the story stayed with him, that “if there’s one place like there, there are many places,” and that “if the story hadn’t been told, someone needed to tell it” (Davies). Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermulen suggest, however, that “if *The Nickel Boys* manages to amplify the story . . . the novel itself is not so much filling an archival gap as tapping into a prevailing mood” (96). While Whitehead felt
a great conviction to tell the story of the Dozier boys, Chadwick and Vermulen argue that the resulting novel “cannot claim a heroic political posture” because it is “merely one relay station in a saturated media sphere in which stories of African American suffering are never absent and instead possess an almost ambient availability” (96). While I can agree with Chadwick and Vermulen’s analysis of the archive as overflowing with stories of suffering, I take issue with their statement that Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* has no political purpose alongside it. It is the task of journalists and archivists to tell true stories as they are; it is the task of the author to fictionalize those stories, to help them come to life in order to bring them into conversation with the greater social and political landscape, and to trace their roots through history—simultaneously engaging the past, present, and future.

Drawing from the work of journalists and the archives of stories from past Dozier victims, Whitehead’s novel begins in the present with the discovery of the bodies at a fictionalized Dozier, which he calls “Nickel Academy.” The novel then dives into the story of how they got there by following the journey of a conscientious high school senior named Elwood. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will examine how Whitehead uses a fictional Dozier to critique the reform system and bring the story into debate with the greater historical contexts of slavery and the civil rights movement. I will look first at how Whitehead plays with time in regard to his “haunting” of Nickel and the boys who go there. Then, I will turn to how he sets about fictionalizing the school and its students—namely, to Elwood’s character—and what that allows him to do that journalism and the archive cannot. I will conclude with a discussion about how, despite all odds, Whitehead structures the novel in a way that leaves his readers not without hope that Elwood’s seemingly naive reveries will one day be realized. The novel’s interconnection of the past, present, and future in critique of reform schools, alongside its mission to instill hope, lend it the “political purpose” that Chadwick and Vermulen claim is missing.

Though the novel begins in the literary present, Whitehead immediately introduces his readers to the past with the exhumation of bodies from Nickel’s graveyards—marked and unmarked. The novel’s first line, “even in death the boys were trouble,” sets the tone for the rest of the narrative (Whitehead 1). Over the course of the prologue, readers see pieces of that past coming back to haunt the school’s grounds and its survivors, starting with the mere existence of the bodies as they pose trouble for the construction company and the anthropologists exhuming them. This haunting is a thread that Whitehead
carries throughout the novel, haunting the grounds of Nickel, situating the story within the shadow of the civil rights movement, and showing readers, at various instances, a haunted “Elwood,” who we later learn is actually a boy named Turner. Through the carrying out of this thread, Whitehead is tapping into what Kashif Powell refers to as “the story of blackness,” made up “of subjectivities birthed in the liminal depths between life and death . . . a ghost story narrated by muted voices” (254). Luckhurst writes, in a similar regard, that “ghosts are the signals of atrocities” (247); in the novel’s first line, Whitehead introduces his readers to the ghosts of Nickel boys from the past and brings the atrocities that led to their condition into the present.

The atrocity that the reform school as an institution represents, in particular, is one target of Whitehead’s fictionalized Dozier, highlighted in his interplaying of the past and present. To fully understand Whitehead’s critique, I will look first to the archive. Reform schools emerged in the United States in the early nineteenth century, influenced in part by what has been deemed “the child-saving movement” (Platt 21). The movement, driven largely by feminist reformers, created new institutions for dealing with young criminals, namely juvenile courts and reformatories geared “to accommodate the needs” of so-called “delinquent” youth (22). The “child-savers” believed that a focus on nurture could retrain youth for “law-abiding careers” and obliterate “nature’s defects,” or, more specifically, “the intractability of human nature and the innate moral defects of the working class” (32, 22). The schools were not, in the beginning, disproportionately populated by Black youth as they have been in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; Black youth were being directed into prisons instead, and it was not until after the civil war that their numbers in reform schools began to rise (Span 109). What sets the reformation of Black youth apart is that it was not only targeted at those convicted of crimes but also at those “presumed to be prime candidates for committing crime” (116). Those presumptions were based on whether a child was deemed to have worthy parents, if they were frequently seen loitering or engaging in unproductive activities, and other vague criteria evidently susceptible to the influence of law enforcement’s or legal officials’ own biases (Platt 32). Given that Black people in the United States are also more than twice as likely than white people to live below the poverty line, the criteria outlined above as “defects” to be reformed affect them disproportionately (“Poverty Facts”). The racial history of reform schools is heavy, and something that many
might not be aware of, but Whitehead is able to use fiction as a means to reach and educate a wider audience.

Whitehead’s fictionalization of Dozier and his characterization of Elwood allow readers to consider these injustices in a way that archives can rarely offer, both by making space for empathy and forcing readers to consider the greater historical context—including Saidiya Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery”—as it relates to the boy’s experience. Whitehead’s focus on the haunting of the school’s survivors is the strongest example of how he achieves this; for most of the boys we meet, the crimes are minimal—being “recalcitrant,” skipping school, breaking a pharmacy window—or, in Elwood’s case, non-existent (Whitehead 46–47). Elwood is undeniably a good kid; he dreams of being on the front lines of the civil rights movement, gets good grades, is different “from the neighbourhood boys,” and somewhat of a goody-two-shoes—quite the opposite of someone who we might imagine needs reform (19). And yet, despite his stellar character, Elwood is stuck in a system designed for “delinquents,” that claims it will make them better members of society. The fact that readers get to know Elwood as well-mannered and law-abiding before he finds himself at Nickel allows them to empathize more with his situation than they might if they came across a similar story in real life. This is something that fiction does well because there is “no expectancy of reciprocation involved in the aesthetic response . . . the very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void” (Keen 212). The more we learn about the character through specific aspects of characterization—“naming, description . . . depicted actions”—Keen suggests, the higher the potential for empathy (213). Learning as much as we do about Elwood’s character, alongside the triviality of the “crimes” committed by the other boys, highlights the fact that crime, in reality and in fiction, is not the problem; blackness is.

There were white students at the school as well—both at Dozier and at Nickel—but the way Whitehead frames the novel draws our attention to the plight of its Black students; haunted, again, by the afterlife of slavery. Laying out the horrors of reform school alongside the struggles of the civil rights movement allows Whitehead to further solidify the connections between past and present. The era in which the novel takes place is saturated with social protest, encompassing the rise of the civil rights movement and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. These two storylines—of Nickel and greater social climate—are tied together as readers watch Elwood’s own hope for justice begin to subside as his stay at Nickel draws on, and as they witness
his realization that if he wishes to survive, he must suppress his own morality—his conception of right and wrong. The civil rights movement fights for Black people and white people to be seen as equals under the law; and yet, while Black people and allies are fighting for justice, the so-called justice system is treating young Black boys as disposable. The living quarters and schoolhouse for Black students are in worse shape than those for their white counterparts, and the work more challenging; Boot Hill cemetery, where the first bodies are exhumed, is located on the “‘colored’ side” of the school grounds, “immediately adjacent to the school’s garbage dump” (Jackson 159). The “secret graveyard,” we can only imagine, harbours similar racist underpinnings (Whitehead 5). Whitehead’s framing of the novel with the exhumation of the bodies, coupled with his focus on the civil rights movement and Elwood’s engagement with it, once again works to intertwine the past and present, emphasizing the horrors of Nickel and the reform school system.

Reform schools in general also placed emphasis on two primary means of rehabilitation: education and work, though at many schools work seemed to take precedence. Historian Robert Pickett said, in regard to a New York reformatory called “The House of Refuge” that opened in 1825, that at no time “did any of the youngsters work less than six hours” per day, leaving little time, it seems, for the education portion of their reform (Span 111). In the aftermath of the real-life Dozier School for Boys, hundreds of Black boys told the press that “they were ‘modern day slaves’” (Harrell). We also see this reflected at Nickel, where Whitehead draws attention to the fact that work did not have the intended effect of teaching students valuable life skills or making them employable. Rather, it “toughened and prepared them—especially its African American and Hispanic American offenders—for a life of continued delinquency and eventual prison” (Span 109). Whitehead tells us that many of the remaining Nickel boys are “dead in prison,” “decomposing in rooms they [rent] by the week,” or have “frozen to death in the woods after drinking turpentine” (7). This observation is very much in line with what Ruth Gilmore argues about prisons, using statistics to prove that the “crime went up; we cracked down; crime came down” narrative is entirely false (17). The juvenile court, instead of achieving the reform goals it set out, “reached into the private lives of youth and disguised basically punitive policies in the rhetoric of ‘rehabilitation’” (Platt 33–34).

What Nickel practices, essentially, is convict-leasing by another name—yet another remnant of the past that Whitehead brings forward into his narrative present. Some academics and activists have deemed prisons’ practices of
convict-leasing as evidence of “new slavery” (Gilmore 21). The problem with this conception, Gilmore writes, “is that very few prisoners work for anybody while they’re locked up” (21). This logic, however, may not apply to reform schools and their focus on work as rehabilitation since work is built into the institution itself. Perhaps, if education had been promoted with equal importance, the element of work would be less problematic; however, contrasted with Elwood’s struggle to find material he has not already learned, and the fact that he takes to teaching himself the British classics he finds while cleaning out the basement, Whitehead urges readers to question whether Nickel truly deserves to be called an educational institution. He also highlights, once again, the traces of the past that cling to the boys’ present day. The view Whitehead gives us of their future (in relation to the boy’s experience at the school), that “no one believed them until someone else said it,” only serves to solidify the broader afterlife in which the boys and the school exist(ed) and its lasting effects (Whitehead 5). The disregard for Black lives, on all fronts, is part of “memory’s cruelty,” which finds “that the affective ecologies of death erected during the Transatlantic Slave Trade continue to have authority over ontological imaginings of blackness” (Powell 254). Black lives in the time of slavery were viewed as disposable, as are the lives of the boys at Nickel. In pushing readers to make these connections—in pulling through the historical underpinnings that lead the novel’s characters to Nickel and that inform the greater context of the time—Whitehead infuses The Nickel Boys with a political purpose beyond what non-fiction materials, whether the products of journalism or the archive, are apt to produce.

Where The Nickel Boys holds the most political purpose, however, may be in allowing its readers room for hope. Fiction has long been seen as a means of imparting emotions, including hope; the genre of utopia is perhaps the most potent example of the power fiction holds in that regard. Darren Webb writes that when “confronted with contemporary suffering and injustice, utopianism is widely heralded as a means of recapturing the category of hope” (Webb 197). Though Whitehead certainly does not go so far as to promise utopia, the glimpse of a better future, even if only marginally so, is a similar response to injustice, and holds a great deal of political purpose in that it affords readers the hope necessary to keep fighting. That hope itself holds a great deal of political purpose is undeniable, in large part for this very reason; Barack Obama ran an entire election campaign based on that fact. In The Nickel Boys, Whitehead engages with hope in two key ways: first, in a very subtle manner, building on the relationships he draws between past, present, and future that have been
discussed so far in this essay. Then, in the motif of escape that leads us to the novel’s ending.

*The Nickel Boys*’ subject matter is arguably quite discouraging; as explored earlier, Whitehead is successful in illustrating a piece of Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery” through his portrayal of the horrors of reform schools, and the struggles of the civil rights movement. The depiction of this afterlife—the lingering injustice affecting Black lives in America—in the archive, may not leave much room for hope. The way Whitehead structures the novel, however, allows his readers the hope that Elwood’s seemingly naive reveries will one day be realized—allowing them to glimpse a future that is further from slavery and injustice in more than just time. Whitehead’s efforts in this regard begin in the prologue, when readers are introduced to “a Nickel Boy who went by the name of Elwood Curtis” (7). Instead of revealing Elwood’s death outright, he presents an opportunity for readers to maintain hope. A perceptive reader could assume, based on the line above, that Elwood might be dead—we know in the back of our minds that something is not right—but how the information is presented allows us to believe that we may still find a happy ending. Whitehead hides further clues throughout the rest of the novel as well. When the man introduced as Elwood in the prologue runs into an old Nickel acquaintance, Chickie Pete, he decides he had better not pass along his business card (167); later, he refuses to give an interview (188). Another scene finds his partner, Denise, massaging his back, with no mention of the scars readers know to expect from Elwood’s time in the White House (139). The truth, here, is hidden in plain sight—just as Turner Jack hides behind Elwood’s name—but the fact that it is not clearly stated allows readers the opportunity to hold onto hope and avoid believing that Elwood dies until it is stated explicitly at the end; it allows readers to believe that he will overcome the hardships of reform that Whitehead illustrates so vividly. The archive is far less likely to offer readers the chance for hope in the face of discouraging subject matter.

This structure of purposeful deception favours a reader’s hopeful tendencies and encourages them to finish the novel rather than give in to discouragement early on. Admitting a death in the first few pages has the potential to deter someone from reading on, which, in the case of this novel, would deprive them of another opportunity for hope. The novel’s last few chapters, while they reveal the tragic death of the real Elwood Curtis, also provide a motif of escape. Turner, in his life post-Nickel, is haunted by his escape—so much so that it affects
how he lives his life. In his day-to-day, before we realize his true identity, we witness Turner’s hobby of attending the New York Marathon, where he cheers for the last-place finishers, “for the runners bringing up the rear of the pack . . . who summoned him from his uptown apartment by a force he could only call kinship” (Whitehead 160); we see him watching The Defiant Ones with Denise; in his interaction with Chickie Pete, he is disappointed that tales of his “Great Escape” from Nickel haven’t caused the stir he imagined they would (168). Escape is a hopeful idea in and of itself; yet, at the same time, we see a Nickel boy who, despite having physically escaped the grasp of Nickel, is haunted by his experience and by the death of his friend. It is through this haunting, however, that Whitehead leaves readers with one final glimpse of the future when we see Turner seated in the restaurant in which Elwood’s grandmother, and later Elwood himself, worked. As a kid, Elwood played a game: “whenever the dining room door swung open, he bet on whether there were Negro patrons out there” (18). Elwood never did see a Black face in the restaurant; but, as readers, we watch Turner realize Elwood’s dream. Elwood’s haunting of Turner leads Turner to this moment, driving his return to Nickel and to Elwood’s hometown. In bookending the novel in this way, Whitehead gives us the past, illustrates the horrors of reform, the struggles of the civil rights movement, and shows us where it all started. And yet, through the story he has crafted on top of those very real histories, he allows us to remain hopeful. Despite the horrors, despite—and perhaps because of—the struggle, there has been change.

This is not an overly romanticized kind of hope, but rather what Webb and others have deemed “critical hope.” Critical hope recognizes tragedy and long histories of injustice but positions those things as moments “that can catalyze change,” finding a middle ground between cynicism and idealism (Grain and Lund 51). It is often driven by the objective of combating oppression, but recognizes that “critique is not enough,” though “the collective response to human suffering cannot afford to get lost” in romantic ideas about solutions (Webb 199–200). Whitehead’s weaving together of the past, present, and future allows for critical hope to happen because it lets his readers see what change—even the most miniscule—has happened along the way from there to here, while also highlighting what still needs to change. Throughout the novel, readers are led to hope, through the clues Whitehead provides and through the motif of escape, that Elwood may survive his experience at reform school—but at the same time, we see that the boy who goes by the name of Elwood is haunted by his experiences there. We get another glimpse of hope
for the future when Turner, still haunted by the death of his friend, realizes a piece of Elwood’s childhood dream—a somewhat marginal act in and of itself, but perhaps, we might hope, representative of something more to come. Haunting, in the words of Powell, “is not the initiation of the story of blackness, but thrusts us toward an end that has yet to be written” (259). That future which has yet to be written holds a great deal of political power in that it fuels the fight of right now; if there was no hope for a better future, what would there be for which to fight?

While the archive, the true stories of the Dozier survivors, is important in its own right—in presenting facts and recording history—The Nickel Boys, as a fictional representation, allows readers to make connections, to empathize, and to have hope. The archive presents examples of slavery’s afterlife; fiction allows us to trace the afterlife from past, to present, to future. Whitehead’s The Nickel Boys simultaneously engages the past, present, and future to bring the true story of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys into conversation with the greater social and political landscape of the civil rights movement and with the fight for Black lives that has spanned centuries. Whitehead’s fictionalization of the archive he draws from allows his readers to empathize with the characters in a way that they might not be afforded by reading the news or other non-fiction work; it allows him to haunt his readers with the history of racial injustice and the horrors experienced by reform school survivors. And finally, it allows Whitehead to show his readers glimpses of a more just future. To say that The Nickel Boys holds no political purpose is to overlook the political power of history, empathy, and hope.


Criterion
“Ghosts Hanging over the House”
Anja Spiegelman and Holocaust Memory in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

Angela Ricks

Art Spiegelman’s groundbreaking graphic novel, *Maus*, is saturated by memory, both literally and thematically. Memory and its impact are explored through two different storylines, both of which are conveyed almost exclusively as memories. Using a nonlinear narrative, *Maus* follows the experiences of a Holocaust survivor, Vladek Spiegelman, and those of his son, Art, as both men navigate their relationship to each other and their relationship to the Holocaust. To differentiate between Art Spiegelman’s role as a character and as an author, the character in *Maus* will be referred to as Art and the author of the work will be referred to as Spiegelman. This narrative weaves together memories of the distant past,
recent past, and present, raising compelling questions about the role of memory in framing the travesties of the past. One such question, prominent in both Vladek and Art’s memories, is this: how should the living remember the past and the lives of the dead? The character who brings this issue most to the forefront is Anja Spiegelman, Vladek’s wife and Art’s mother. Anja, who died before the start of the narrative, exemplifies the intangible yet pressing weight of memory. Her life and legacy have an indelible impact on the lives of her family members and how they view the past. I suggest that Anja’s role as a character in the text is to symbolize the persistent memory of the Holocaust and how the Holocaust’s legacy affects the lives of her family members. Due to her passing, she is unable to directly represent her perspective of the events that make up her family’s Holocaust past. Instead, Anja is seen only through the lenses of her grieving family. How Vladek and Art relate to Anja’s life and death parallels how they grapple with the weight of Holocaust memory and its effects on their lives. By creating a link between Anja’s memory and the Holocaust, Spiegelman suggests that the memories of past atrocities, whether acknowledged or ignored, still permeate the lives of those affected by them.

Anja is a silent presence in the text, yet one that “dominates” every part of Spiegelman’s carefully constructed narrative (Hirsch 418). Despite her influence on the narrative, there are two reasons for her direct absence. First, Anja died prior to Spiegelman beginning to interview his father to gather the content that would become the subject of Maus. (Her suicide is graphically depicted in the novel and will be discussed in detail later in this essay.) Second, Anja’s written record of her Holocaust experience was destroyed (Spiegelman 160). While her inability to share her voice in the present was a byproduct of her own tragic decision, the destruction of her journals was not. Vladek, in a moment of intense emotion after his wife’s death, destroyed the handwritten records containing the entirety of her Holocaust experiences (Spiegelman 160). This loss of Anja’s voice is due, in large part, to Vladek’s decision to burn her Holocaust journals. The simultaneous loss of Anja herself and of the destruction of her journals creates a vacuum in Vladek and Art’s lives. As a result of this pressing vacancy, Anja and her memory hangs over her family, permeating the past and the present.

Despite her importance to Vladek and Art’s lives, Anja would be rendered invisible without her family integrating her into the narrative via their memories. Most of these memories are Vladek’s and are told to Art
during their interview sessions. Art discusses only one memory of Anja, and much more briefly than Vladek. These dual recollections of Anja, as related through the lenses of a grieving widower and a disillusioned son, are crucial to understanding both Anja and her family. Anja’s absence in the present serves to emphasize the importance of memory throughout Maus. Like Anja’s absence in Maus’ narrative, millions of Jewish people had their voices silenced in the Holocaust and were unable to testify of their own experiences, requiring their story to be told by the survivors of the tragedy. This parallel between the loss of Anja’s voice and the loss of the voices of those killed in the Holocaust creates a strong link between the two events (Mandaville 218-219). This link, in turn, elevates the importance of Anja’s memory to Art and Vladek. Her past now takes on a new weight, representing both the personal tragedies of the Spiegelman family and how Art and Vladek relate to the memory of the Holocaust. Anja’s death, a tragic byproduct of the Holocaust, hangs over the text, a specter, indirectly driving the events of the storylines of the past and present.

One such storyline of the present is about Vladek’s life in the aftermath of the Holocaust. As seen through Art’s eyes, Vladek’s personal life is riddled with longing for his deceased wife, making his decision to burn her journals that much more surprising. I suggest that Vladek’s choice to burn Anja’s Holocaust memories symbolizes how he suppresses his own Holocaust experiences. In a 1991 interview about Maus, Spiegelman, described these Holocaust memories as “...ghosts hanging over the house” and as being an influence on Anja’s decision to kill herself (UW Video). These ghosts, intangible remembrances of past horrors, were something that Vladek also could not escape. Anja’s suicide forces him to face his recollections of Auschwitz that he had previously brushed aside. In the wake of Anja’s death, no longer could Vladek face his past experiences with casualness. When explaining to Art why he destroyed the journals, Vladek says, “These papers had too many memories” (Spiegelman 160). In his struggle to carry the weight of his past, Vladek chooses to destroy the journals. He tries to destroy the memories—symbolically and literally—and incinerates Anja’s journals. This coping mechanism only further suppresses Vladek’s traumas, which manifest themselves in his strained relationships with his son and his second wife.

Vladek’s decision to burn Anja’s journals creates tension in Art’s relationship with his father. Prior to the beginning of the narrative, Art’s
relationship to the Holocaust and Anja begins as an inquiry to process how both events have defined him as a person. He struggles to define his relationship to either event. As a result, he is badly shaken by the loss of his mother, and, later, by her Holocaust narrative. Art sees the inclusion of his mother’s Holocaust account as a key element to understanding his past. Art demonstrates this desire to have a clear picture of his family’s past when he asks Vladek about Anja’s journals multiple times. When Vladek reveals the destruction of the journals, Art is outraged, denouncing his father as a “murderer” (Spiegelman 160). In extinguishing Anja’s first-person account of the Holocaust, Vladek, in Art’s eyes, has severed a crucial way Art could have understood the past. By branding his father a murderer, Art reveals his anguish over what is the death of his mother a second time. With her memories destroyed, Art is unable to have a more complete picture of the Holocaust. Without his mother’s account, Art struggles to comprehend his mother’s life and her experiences in Auschwitz. By linking Anja’s loss and Art’s inability to process his relationship to the Holocaust, Anja becomes a symbol for Art’s Holocaust memories. Anja’s absence in the narrative, much like his lack of answers about the Holocaust, haunts Art, weighing him down with guilt throughout the narrative. What began as a vehement discussion between Art and Vladek has a hidden depth, as Anja’s memory and its ties to the Holocaust endow the act and implications of burning the journals with deep psychological consequences, directly affecting Vladek and Art.

Nowhere is Anja’s absence more apparent than in the singular memory Art shares of his mother—her suicide. This tragic event is brought to the forefront when Vladek stumbles upon Art’s comic about his mother’s death, entitled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History” (Spiegelman 101). Inserted into Maus, the comic displays Art’s staggering grief through a harsh black and white color scheme and tortured, expressive characters. It is clear that Art’s relationship to Anja is one of crippling guilt, confusion, and isolation, and that this relationship with his mother’s memory is paralleled by his reaction to the Holocaust. Art’s comic, with its lamentations about Anja’s death, also indirectly addresses their shared familial trauma that stems from the Holocaust. By addressing both events simultaneously in his comic, Art equates his complicated relationship with his mother to that of his complicated relationship with the Holocaust. The catalyst of Anja’s death, combined with the linkage of these two traumatic events, forces Art to
grapple with the guilt from life-altering events at the same time, causing him to struggle with the familial trauma that has defined his life.

Art conveys his sense of loss and confusion about Anja’s death by linking it to the Holocaust through three crucial themes, which are reflected in the formal elements of “Prisoner on Hell Planet.” First, Art’s visual depiction of his grief, surrounded by imagery of Anja’s suicide and of the Holocaust, suggests that the guilt he feels towards his mother’s suicide is similar to the guilt he feels about the Holocaust. One significant panel contains several different images: Anja’s corpse in a bathtub; a pile of Jewish corpses; arms, bearing an Auschwitz identification tattoo, that cut their own wrists; and Art’s stricken, grieving form huddled in the corner (Spiegelman 105). Mixed in with these images are the phrases “menopausal depression,” “bitch,” “Hitler did it!” and “Mommy!” (Spiegelman 105). Since this comic is set in Art’s memories, which occur from his psychological perspective and are of his own creation, the lack of separation between the imagery of Anja’s suicide and that of the Holocaust points suggest the inseparable nature of these events in Art’s mind. To Art, these events are striking in their similarities: they are both unexpected and unfathomable personal tragedies that define his family and his own life. How Art draws himself in relation to the images in this panel further suggests this relationship. The other images in the panel are visually oppressive as they hover above Art, who sits in the bottom of the panel, weighed down with the heaviness of the elements overhead. These elements are overwhelming: the figure of his mother’s naked corpse in blood-filled water is haunting; the phrases inserted in the panel are intrusive and violent; the distinct visibility of his mother’s Holocaust tattoos as she cuts her wrists suggests an unspeakable weight of the past; the unidentifiable heap of Jewish corpses rots beneath a Swastika (Spiegelman 105). In response to these graphic elements, Art’s comic self is bent in grief, pressed down under circumstances that are out of his control. He is a passive viewer of this panel, displaced in time and space, unable to interact with the panel and its events that have already occurred. All he can feel, instead, is guilt, which literally weighs him down. Art’s overwhelming guilt showcases how the memory of his mother and the memory of the Holocaust are symbolically linked together, compounding his grief about both events together.

Second, Art’s unbalanced memories of his mother reflect his view of the past. Art grew up with his mother and had a relationship with her well into his adult years. However, the only memory Art includes in this comic,
outside of the events directly before and after Anja’s suicide, is a black and white photograph of his childhood self with Anja. Surely, after years of life with his parents, Art has some other memory to include? As the picture in the opening spread suggests, Art must have had other memories of his mother (Spiegelman 101). Instead of including these memories, however, Spiegelman silences Art’s other thoughts of Anja, deliberately excluding “. . . childhood memories, vignettes, or even small details that would suggest anything about his own relationship with Anja” (Elmwood 709). To emphasize this point, Spiegelman’s inclusion of the comic is the only time Art’s direct memories of his mother are shown in the narrative. What “Prisoner on Hell Planet” implies is that the trauma of his mother’s death has superseded his childhood and adolescent memories of her, redefining and recontextualizing Art’s relationship to Anja. This overwhelming event has transformed all of the memories they had together. This echoes Art’s relationship to his family’s Holocaust memories. Although his mother survived her time in Auschwitz and gained some semblance of a happy ending, her death throws Art’s interpretation of the Holocaust into flux. Throughout several points in the text, Art notes that the events of the Holocaust were somewhat normalized when he was a child. As he confesses to his wife, Art used to “think about which of my parents [he’d] let the Nazis take to the ovens if [he] could only save one of them” and imagine “Zyklon B coming out of [his] shower instead of water” (Spiegelman 174, 176). In the wake of Anja’s death, however, he must confront Anja’s death and its implications on his relationship to the Holocaust together, since both events have become inextricably linked through cause and effect. Anja’s suicide was influenced by her relationship to the Holocaust, and now Art’s understanding of the Holocaust is shaken by her death, needing to be processed anew. The death of his mother drives Art to confronting his family’s Holocaust experiences. The similarities between Art’s recontextualization of his mother’s death and his need to truly process his family’s relationship to the Holocaust establishes a link between Anja’s memory and how Art processes the past.

The third important element of “Prisoner on Hell Planet” is how Art feels that he is being held prisoner by Anja and her Holocaust experiences. In the last three panels, Art’s character stands behind bars, quarantined, and is the only person visible in the jail. He yells out into the building, declaring to Anja, “You murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!” (Spiegelman 105). Art feels he is a prisoner of Anja and her Holocaust
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experiences, as represented by how he is literally being held captive. He feels trapped by Anja’s memory, including that of her life and legacy. He has become imprisoned by both memories and grief over past events, extending to the point where Art feels “his parents have psychologically destroyed him” (Gordon 57-58). Art’s isolation is common among surviving relatives whose family members have taken their own lives (Saarinen 221). This perception of destruction has created in Art a profound sense of isolation, as he is the only person visible in the jail. His experience is unique, isolating him from his American peers, whose parents did not experience the horrors of the Holocaust (Spiegelman 5-6). This is compounded by the stigma surrounding suicide during the 1960s (Ginsburg 202), as shown in the reactions of Anja’s friends and family to Art’s “wrong” reaction to his mother’s death (Spiegelman 104-105). Art feels wrongfully imprisoned by circumstances out of his control, which contrasts to the overwhelming guilt he feels he has earned because of perceived complicity in Anja’s death. By not doing more to confirm his love for her, especially during the last time he saw her, Art feels deserving of his guilt (Spiegelman 105). Complicated and complex, Art simultaneously feels he is deserving of punishment while simultaneously pushing back against this guilt. To link this psychological “jailing” to the Holocaust, “Prisoner on Hell Planet” provides a striking visual connection: Art’s clothing. In jail, Art’s cartoon version of himself wears a uniform similar to those worn in concentration camps (Spiegelman 294). Art’s clothing—which he has to wear because his mother “left [him] there to take the rap!!”—gives interesting insight into Art’s relationship with the Holocaust (Spiegelman 105). The reader does not see Art being taken to jail. Instead, his cartoon depiction of himself appears there suddenly, with no transition between panels, now atoning for atrocities he did not commit. His guilt about Anja and the Holocaust, further muddled by his rupture with his past relationship with the Holocaust, condemn him to suffer through a similar experience to Anja, being “murdered” and unjustly imprisoned. By reenacting the general shape of Anja’s Holocaust experiences through his comic, Art is equating his mother and her death with the Holocaust, resulting in Art needing to grapple with his grief about both events at the same time.

Taking a different shape than Art’s grief, Vladek’s reaction to Anja’s death is one of explosive mourning that cools into a more internal, but no less potent, feeling of loss. This transition from intense outward expression to aching introspection parallels Vladek’s post-war relationship to his Holocaust
experiences. While Art grieves in his quiet, internal world, passively taking in his mother’s funeral and the words of friends and families, Vladek turns outward to express his grief. He clings to Art, literally and emotionally, as he insists they sleep on the floor the night after Anja’s suicide, as Jewish custom dictates (Spiegelman 104). At Anja’s funeral, Vladek cannot contain his grief, sobbing openly on her closed casket (Spiegelman 104). His sorrow, starkly visible in Art’s comic, eventually fades to something less external, moving away from outward grief and into the realm of memory. Vladek’s remembrances of Anja slowly become his way of mourning his late wife. This transformation of grief from the external to internal world mirrors Vladek’s relationship to his Holocaust experience. Initially, Vladek’s experiences with the Holocaust are overshadowed by his boundless expression of joy after making it out of Auschwitz (Spiegelman 296). In response to the Holocaust, Vladek sensibly begins to reestablish his material wealth to find financial security, which has been taken from him when his property was seized during the war (Spiegelman 284-285). This external, physical reaction, with actions that are motivated by a direct response to the impact of the Holocaust, fails to address the internal, emotional aspects of Vladek’s reaction to his experiences. Gradually, his external indicators of processing his relationship to the Holocaust fade, become less consuming as the years go by, allowing Vladek’s reaction to the Holocaust to become more internal. Somewhere between reuniting with his wife and Anja’s suicide, Vladek’s memory of the Holocaust becomes subdued, no longer a clear motivator driving all his actions. The parallel between the transformation of Vladek’s grief over Anja’s suicide and Vladek’s reaction to his post-war experience links the two processes together, firmly establishing Anja’s memory as a symbol of how Vladek processes his traumatic past prior to the beginning of *Maus*.

Vladek’s pre-war memories of Anja are precious commodities in the wake of Anja’s suicide and the loss of her journals, pushing Art, along with the reader, to rely on Vladek for a fundamental understanding of Anja’s character. These flashbacks, while providing more information about Anja, mostly serve to inform the reader about Vladek’s character, as he is the one interpreting and presenting Anja in each memory (Elmwood 712). These segments of memory, as seen from the perspective of the present, reflect how Vladek processes his memories of the traumas of the Holocaust. Understanding this filter of memory allows Vladek’s stories of Anja to be a reflective medium for how he understands his relationship to both his wife
and the Holocaust. Vladek’s memories of Anja before, during, and after World War II have a deep impact on how he relates to his Holocaust trauma in the present.

One insight Vladek’s flashbacks give is that he views Anja, and the pre-war period, as an idealized, unreachable past. Before the war, Vladek’s remembrance of Anja is wistful and sweetly nostalgic. He recalls the beginning of their romance, as he later recounts to Art, which Vladek remembers as sweet and innocent (Spiegelman 20). In some of his earliest memories of Anja, Vladek remembers meeting her wealthy, upper-class Jewish family and being impressed by their material circumstances (Spiegelman 17). When Vladek first entered Anja’s family home, he remarked, “But when I came in to their house it was so like a king came . . .” (21). This sense of gentle awe surrounding both Anja and her financial situation is infused throughout Vladek’s early stories about her. Even after Anja suffers a mental breakdown, Vladek recalls that period of their life as being a happy time: “And [Anja] was so laughing and so happy, so happy, that she approached each time and kissed me, so happy was she” (Spiegelman 37). This statement, fondly recalling the past, contrasts with the reality of the situation. Anja’s breakdown was so severe that she declared she no longer wanted to live (Spiegelman 33). Yet, the grimness of Anja’s mental health is completely offset by Vladek’s amiable feelings towards the event years later. The divide between the reality of the memory and Vladek’s interpretation of it highlights his idealization of that phase of his life. The dreamy quality of Vladek’s pre-war memories of Anja, lightly touched by a sense of yearning, serves as a brutal contrast between the couple’s later time in Auschwitz. The brightness of Vladek’s pre-war memories, when compared with his harrowing time during the war, helps establish Anja as a representation of both the Holocaust and an unreachable past.

Vladek’s repeated tendency to romanticize Anja and the pre-war period directly plays into his marital strife with Mala, his second wife, after the war. His relationship with Mala is characterized by constant bickering and confrontation. Through Vladek’s constant comparisons, Vladek sets up Mala as a foil for Anja and her memories. Mala has become a symbol of Vladek’s discontent with the present, as opposed to his conception of Anja and the idealized past. Vladek’s act of comparing the two women occurs in a smorgasbord of domestic situations, ranging from comments about purchasing new clothing to managing household finances. This contrast,
which is the source of multiple arguments between Mala and Vladek, highlights the difference between Vladek’s idealized life with Anja before the war and the reality of his present life in America. Mala, in Vladek’s eyes, constantly falls short of Anja. Anja, who has become memorialized in her husband’s mind, has had her flaws glossed over in the wake of her death; Vladek does not include any negative memories of her in *Maus*, other than a few mentions of her mental health struggles. This avoidance of Anja’s negative qualities or darker aspects mirrors Vladek’s avoidance and suppression of his Holocaust memories since Vladek choosing to avoid thinking about the Holocaust in lieu of focusing on the good in his pre-war past. Using a purifying lens of nostalgia and grief allows him to see only her good qualities, further solidifying Anja’s role as a symbol of an idealized past.

In contrast, Mala exists imperfectly in the present, unable to compete with the rose-tinted memories of a former wife. Vladek’s perpetual juxtaposition of Mala and Anja represents his desire to return to the past, to suppress traumatic memories, and to remain dissatisfied with the present.

Vladek’s attempted suppression of his Holocaust memories also plays into his constant thoughts of Anja and his normalization of his Holocaust experience after the war. This reaction stems from Vladek’s relationship with Anja, which is bound up in unfathomably deep emotional intensity, some of which is due to their shared Holocaust experiences. Vladek’s primary thoughts, while working various jobs in the concentration camp, were about the welfare of his wife. This acute concern for Anja’s wellbeing propelled Vladek to sneakily visit his wife when he was unable to send her letters or packages containing much-needed food supplies (Spiegelman 217, 225). His impetus to cling to life was heavily influenced by his desire to ensure Anja’s survival, no matter the pain or suffering he might personally endure. This pressing desire to take care of his wife, despite the dire circumstances, would help form the Spiegelmans’ marital relationship into something that would bind them together, creating immeasurably strong ties. The desperate urge for survival, coupled with the instinct to cling to his wife, plays a crucial role in defining Vladek’s relationship to Anja’s memory after the war. These emotional ties consume Vladek’s day-to-day life, even after his wife’s death. As Vladek tells Art, “Anja? What is to tell? Everywhere I look I’m seeing Anja” (Spiegelman 263). Vladek’s consuming thoughts of Anja echo his unconscious, consuming thoughts of his war experiences. While he is not consciously thinking about the Holocaust, his behavior suggests his constant
awareness of his memories. The present-day interactions between Vladek and Art help readers understand that some of Vladek’s behaviors in the United States are leftover Holocaust survival mechanisms. This behavior ranges from meticulously counting pills to picking up scraps of telephone wire (Spiegelman 28, 118). Vladek’s habitualization of previously “strange” behavior shows his normalization of what happened to him during the war. These behaviors, present in every facet of his life in America, rhyme with Vladek’s constant pining for Anja. Both are on his mind, always. For Vladek, Anja’s memory represents how he simultaneously internalizes and dismisses the trauma of his Holocaust memories.

Vladek’s Holocaust trauma plays an integral role in understanding Art and his relationship to his parents and their war experiences. As a child of Holocaust survivors, Art is inadvertently placed in a difficult familial situation. The effect of living through the Holocaust changed the whole course of Anja and Vladek’s lives and affected different facets of what would become their post-war personalities. However, Art did not live through these same experiences. The traumas of the Holocaust, so integral to the “founding” of the Spiegelman family, are something that Art can have no first-hand experience with (Elmwood 691). At the same time, the Holocaust still affects so much of Art’s life. This complicated tangle of memory and its effects comprises what Marianne Hirsch, a professor and scholar of memory studies, terms “postmemory,” which “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation that can be neither understood nor recreated” (416). Grappling with postmemory defines Art as a character, as he imagined Zyklon B, a lethal chemical used in the showers of Auschwitz, coming out of his own shower as a child (Spiegelman 176). Attempting to process his family trauma is at the core of Art’s relationship to both Anja and the Holocaust.

Reflecting the incomplete nature of postmemory, Art sees Anja’s memory as a puzzle, one he must piece together to make sense of his own self. Art, without explicitly expressing his motivations, turns to interviewing his father to begin solving this puzzle. However, Art had spent his entire childhood and adolescence without sparing much thought for the Holocaust. What, then, was the catalyst for his decision to learn more about it? Art’s inability to process his mother’s suicide is what propels him to try and understand his family’s past. As Stephen Tabachnick, a scholar specializing in graphic
novels, observes, “Spiegelman does not discuss openly the trade-off between Anja’s suicide and his desperate need to write *Maus*” (11-12). Art’s silence surrounding aspects of Anja’s death speaks of confusion and a lack of an ability to process what happened. Suffocating between the postmemory of his parents’ time in Auschwitz and the stark reality of his mother’s suicide, Art turns to his namesake, *art*, to focus. Attempting to grapple with the memory of his mother and all it represents, Art is propelled into the world of art in order to heal and process from his familial trauma (Tabachnick 11). This act of attempting to understand the past represents another facet of postmemory, in which the next generation must work to understand and frame their relationships to the trauma of the past (Adams 231). In an attempt to bear this burden, Art, as a second-generation child of Holocaust survivors, decides to process his mother’s death and the Holocaust through art. Mediating postmemory through art becomes an act of survival. Art’s pressing need to piece together his family’s past in order to understand his present has become tied to his ability to understand Anja’s memory. By choosing to frame his relationship to the past through art, Art reinforces his relationship to Anja’s memory as symbolic of his relationship to the Holocaust. Art’s memories of his mother, although almost debilitating in their guilt, become both the catalyst for Art’s understanding of the Holocaust and the end goal for Art’s exploratory process.

Fortunately for Art, through the unfolding of events, Anja’s suicide eventually becomes a topic of discussion with Vladek. This conversation, along with Vladek’s shared memories of Anja, help Art to start processing the “the chief trauma” of his life: Anja’s death (Morris 29). However, reflecting the role of postmemory in his life, Art needs an intermediary to understand both events. For that, he turns to his father. Anja’s role as a symbol of postmemory and Art’s relationship to the Holocaust is emphasized by the relationship between Art and Vladek during their interview sessions. Vladek serves as a mediator between Art and the memories of Anja’s death and the Holocaust. This role is essential because Art is unable to understand the past without someone to tell him what has occurred. Interestingly, Art’s conceptions of how he relates to the Holocaust differ from this viewpoint. Consciously, Art tends to link the Holocaust with his father, not his mother. He often lumps the two together, as when he tells his wife, Françoise: “I mean, I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father . . . How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? . . . of the Holocaust?” (Spiegelman
174). Art, by making explicit verbal connections between his father and the Holocaust, seems to see his father as a symbol of memory. Since Vladek is telling Art his Holocaust narrative, Art’s connection seems natural. However, Vladek functions as a conduit for understanding Anja, who represents Art’s relationship to the Holocaust. This is underscored by the fact that “Vladek is not portrayed as a survivor who needs to talk about his past, it is rather the son, Artie, who needs to listen” (Martínez-Alfaro 139). Art is the one with the need to find out what happened, to discover the memories that defined him since his birth. Vladek, on the other hand, is not demanding attention to his Holocaust narrative. He is merely answering Art’s questions, helping him to satiate his need to understand his mother and the Holocaust. Art’s hunger to understand, to solve the puzzle of Anja’s memory, is further emphasized by how the interviews with Vladek began. Art tells his father, “Start with Mom . . . tell me how you met” (Spiegelman 14). By needing Vladek to tell him about Anja, Art is linking his mother’s memory to that of postmemory. This emphasizes Anja, not Vladek, as a symbol of Art’s relationship to the Holocaust, a puzzle that must first have its pieces found through the role of a mediator.

The complicated relationships between Art, Vladek, Anja, and the memory of the Holocaust demonstrate how the weight of past atrocities still affects those living in the present. In so many aspects of Art and Vladek’s lives, Anja permeates their conscious and unconscious decisions. Her memory symbolizes the profound longing, idealization, and guilt that Art and Vladek feel towards her, and the past, during the entirety of *Maus*. Her legacy looms, specter-like, over every aspect of the narrative, lingering in the lives of her surviving family members. For Vladek, his wife typifies the unreachable past—a past infused with longing but tempered by the reality of the horrors of the Holocaust and Anja’s death. Vladek’s remembrance of Anja also shows how he relates to his Holocaust memories, through suppression and avoidance. Affected by his parent’s past, Art, a generation later, tries to make sense of his family’s experiences and how they have impacted his own life. For Art, Anja’s memory is like a puzzle, something to be discovered and pieced together. This investigative aspect is characteristic of post-memory and permeates the whole of *Maus*. Art must also come to grips with his guilt towards his mother’s suicide and the Holocaust, along with feelings of resentment towards the impact they have had on his life. Lacking definitive answers about how to process his past, Art must come
to his own conclusions about how to relate to his mother and the Holocaust. Despite both being impacted by the same person, the Spiegelman men each have a different approach to Anja and the Holocaust, processing and managing their memories of painful experiences in different ways. Memory, understood and handled so differently, is a powerful driving force, shaping both the lives of Vladek and Art and the narrative trajectory of Maus.
Works Cited


“Something Large and Old Awoke”¹

Ecopoetics and Compassion in Tracy K. Smith’s *Wade in the Water*

*Kaitlin Hoelzer*

Both historical and contemporary Black poets have used their work to identify and condemn problems stemming from racism in American society, as well as to suggest solutions to these problems. Indeed, as Arnold Rampersad notes in his introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry*, many Black poets use “poetry as a vehicle of protest against social injustice in America” (xxiv). Art is inherently political, even when its arguments do not overtly engage in political debates. As Lorraine Hansberry argues, all art is rooted in a particular social and political consciousness. The choice is “not whether one will make a social statement in one’s work—but only what the statement will say” (5). According to these Black theorists, in order to fully understand any piece of art, readers must understand the social and political context of the work.
Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’s work is often understood in terms of its formal and aesthetic qualities rather than its political components. However, the two are actually interconnected—Smith’s formal and aesthetic choices serve to support her political arguments. Her fourth volume of poetry, Wade in the Water: Poems (2018), examines racial and environmental injustice, participating in what Katherine R. Lynes has termed “African American reclamation ecopoetics.” Whereas ecocriticism has traditionally focused on pastoral aesthetics, Black critics like Lynes, Angela Hume, Camille Dungy, and others have expanded ecopoetics to address environmental degradation and the structural oppressions that connect environmental damage with ongoing racial injustice through both formal and thematic elements (Lynes 51). The critical ecopoetic tradition has failed to recognize and address the ways in which Black poets connect racial injustice to environmental degradation in their ecopoetry. Often, scholars identify Black poets who write about nature simply as poets writing about race, ignoring their themes of nature. While race undoubtedly informs the work of Black nature poets, analyzing these poems from the perspective of race alone erases the connection of environmental degradation and racial injustice addressed in the poems and thus perpetuates this violence. Black poets, such as Robert Hayden, Melvin Dixon, Tiana Clark, Claudia Rankine, and Lucille Clifton, have often been particularly sensitive to the connections between these injustices, having seen both racial violence and environmental degradation in their communities. African American reclamation ecopoetics is “a protest of human injustices to both other humans and nonhuman nature” and is a strong part of the contemporary Black poetic tradition (Lynes 55).

My paper will discuss Smith’s examination of the connection between environmental degradation and racial injustice as well as her response to these issues with a call for compassion for all humanity as well as the natural world. In doing so, I will situate Smith’s work in a particular Black conversation about restorative justice, demonstrating how her focus on compassion extends contemporary African American reclamation ecopoetics. Many prominent Black liberation theorists and activists, including bell hooks, Brittney Cooper, and Charlene Carruthers, have noted the importance of what they call love, solidarity, empathy, community, and compassion in movements for social justice. They identify a feeling for others that respects differences, motivates people toward liberation for all, and does not shy away from reality as being vital to any successful liberation movement. I will
use the term “compassion,” which literally means “to feel with,” to describe this revolutionary feeling. *Wade in the Water* identifies the link between racial injustice and environmental degradation, and readers are “confronted by the real, / By the cold, the pitiless, the bleak” (lines 7–8). At the same time, Smith’s book is also infused with a compassion that provides optimism in the face of oppression and a potential tool for healing. The poems “Watershed,” “Wade in the Water,” and “An Old Story” in particular draw attention to the damage done to both the environment and Black people in America, countering these injustices with a compassion that both Smith and other theorists see as essential to dismantling unjust systems and bringing about healing.

African American Reclamation Ecopoetics in *Wade in the Water*

Contemporary conversations about Black nature poetry are beginning to address the intersection between race and the environment in what has become known as African American reclamation ecopoetics, but this important theoretical understanding has yet to be applied to Smith’s work. Attention to racial injustice, environmental degradation, and the ways in which these issues overlap is present throughout *Wade in the Water*, making it part of the African American reclamation ecopoetic tradition. Smith’s poems “Watershed,” “Wade in the Water,” and “An Old Story” synthesize issues of both environmental and racial injustice, illustrating the connection between the two.

“Watershed” is an African American reclamation ecopoem that uses long lists and global imagery to reveal the overarching system that creates both environmental degradation and racial injustice. Pulling lines and phrases from a 2016 *New York Times Magazine* article titled “The Lawyer Who Became DuPont’s Worst Nightmare” as well as excerpts from narratives of survivors of near-death experiences, “Watershed” tells the story of a single instance of environmental degradation, but also universalizes the DuPont chemical crisis to argue that incidents of pollution and other environmental damage are indicators of an overall system that disregards the health and safety of both land and people. The poem opens with descriptions of the effects of
the chemical perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), which caused “deranged” and “skinny” cattle with “hair missing,” “brilliant chemical blue” eyes, “malformed hooves,” and “lesions” and that are recorded as “suffering slobbering / staggering like drunks” (lines 10, 20, 21, 23, 27–28). These horrifying descriptions come in short, disjointed phrases, illustrating the disturbing way the symptoms quickly cropped up in farmers’ cattle, and are repeated throughout the poem. Smith tells the story of one tragic occurrence of environmental degradation in lurid detail, thereby illustrating the dire consequences of such careless actions.

Compared with more traditional ecopoetry, the images of environmental horror in “Watershed” may seem out of place. However, Camille Dungy, a Black nature poet in her own right and editor of the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, writes that the category of ecopoetry must be expanded beyond the “placid and pastoral tradition,” noting that “as we advance our view of what it means to interact with the natural world and include conversations about environmental justice, ecology, and historically-informed environmental practices, there will be more room for nature poetry that might be viewed as politically-charged, historically-based, culturally-engaged” (762). Smith’s work enters this expanded region of ecopoetics, using nature poetry as a way to make an argument about the oppressive structures that create environmental degradation and racial injustice. “Watershed” makes it clear that ecopoetry is far more expansive than has been recognized, acknowledging not just the beauty of the natural world but also the dangers it faces.

Smith moves beyond chronicling a single event as she describes the global problem PFOA has become and introduces a chorus of voices affirming the importance of protecting the environment. “Watershed” details PFOA’s widespread effect on livestock, wildlife, and plants through contamination of the water table in long lists. One section reads,

PFOA detected in:

…

blood or vital organs of:

Atlantic salmon
swordfish
striped mullet
gray seals
common cormorants
Alaskan polar bears
brown pelicans
sea turtles
sea eagles
California sea lions
Laysan albatrosses on a
wildlife refuge in the
middle of the North
Pacific Ocean (lines 130–46)

PFOA has been found in water and animals throughout the world, making it a global concern. The global imagery of “Watershed” demonstrates that single instances of environmental degradation are part of a larger attitude that is dismissive of the environment.

“Watershed” also pays careful attention to the ways PFOA has affected the human population, arguing that individual environmental problems not only indicate a larger disregard for the environment but also a disregard for the common humanity of oppressed populations. PFOA is toxic to humans, and through contamination of blood transfusions and drinking water, it has caused birth defects, cancer, eye problems, vomiting, and fever (lines 67–76, 115–19, 123–26). Angela Davis and Macarena Gómez-Barris assert that extractive capitalism creates the need to dominate the land, stripping it of salable resources and contaminating it with the toxic byproducts of production (Davis 163; Gómez-Barris xvii). Thus, environmental damage is a symptom of a worldview that disregards the land in favor of domination and profit. Further, Black people are particularly threatened by the systems of domination and oppression created by extractive capitalism, and “Watershed” recognizes the “long history of environmental subjugation in which nature is contaminated by past acts of racial violence” as well as the fact that slave patrols, lynchings, and police brutality often make it unsafe to be outdoors as a Black person (Hume 80; Dungy 761). The environmental damage caused by extractive capitalism is tied to the historical and current domination and
exploitation of Black people through slavery, which was one of the earliest manifestations of extractive capitalism. Thus, the poem’s condemnation of DuPont’s individual actions calls for a justice that acknowledges the worth and freedom of Black people and all humans as well as the earth.

Spliced alongside these chilling descriptions and separated by italics are narratives of near-death experiences that call for better care for the earth and those who inhabit it, which continues to frame this problem not as an isolated incident but a global issue. In the poem, those near death are “swept away by some unknown force” and realize that “every individual thing glowed with life” and that the earth “is a true living being” that “has been weakened considerably” (lines 35–36, 79, 109). In “Watershed,” the earth seizes people near death and demands better treatment. Those near death see the world as interconnected and interdependent, representing the way in which individual environmental threats become global problems. The near-death experiences additionally draw connections between environmental degradation and harm to human populations. Those near death recount seeing “the myriad human faces with an incredible, intimate, and profound love” (line 147), extending the imperative to protect the earth to other humans as well. In this way, “Watershed” asserts the need to treat both the environment and all people, especially the marginalized, with justice and dignity.

“Wade in the Water” also exposes the violence that extractive capitalism inflicts on both Black people and the land by evoking slavery. Smith wrote this poem after seeing the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters perform. At first glance, “Wade in the Water” seems to be about a lively performance with “handclaps” and “stomps” (lines 13–14); however, the dance in question has a tragic history that recounts the enslavement of the dancers’ ancestors. Geechee Gullah, which is the area along the Atlantic coast that includes parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, also refers to the enslaved people who once worked there in cotton, rice, and indigo fields as well as the unique language and art that evolved in this isolated region (“The Gullah Geechee”). The Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters perform dances and songs created when their ancestors were enslaved in this region. The “rusted iron / Chains someone was made / To drag” (lines 15–17) are not simply an artful metaphor, but are the literal history of Geechee Gullah dance. Smith describes the beauty of the dance causing “a terrible new ache” and “scraping at / Each throat” (lines 4, 25–26)—feelings caused by beauty’s juxtaposition with the horrors of slavery that inform Geechee Gullah dance.
“Wade in the Water” demonstrates that the environmental degradation exposed in “Watershed” is rooted in extractive capitalism’s long history of slavery, domination, and exploitation. Extractive capitalism relies not just on domination of the land, but also on an underclass of exploited laborers, created by the historical enslavement and disenfranchisement of African and Indigenous populations and maintained by modern-day anti-Black racism (Davis 163; Gómez-Barris xvii–xviii). The acknowledgement of the legacy that slavery has left in the United States in “Wade in the Water” can be linked to environmental degradation. This legacy of human and natural plunder is depicted in the poem as the dancers pretend to wade in the water, invoking the water that carried enslaved people from Africa to the Geechee Gullah region. Like the descriptions of the claps and stomps in the dance, the image of water connects the performance to the injustices caused by slavery; however, this description of “the water / Where they pretended to wade” (lines 20–21) in particular also allows the poem to hint at the environmental degradation discussed in more detail elsewhere in the book.

In “Wade in the Water,” the Atlantic Ocean is metaphorically tainted by the forcible importation of enslaved Africans. With the knowledge that extractive capitalism created slavery, it follows that the waters of the world also have been and will continue to be literally threatened by the careless environmental practices of extractive capitalism. In Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements, community organizer Charlene A. Carruthers asserts that “capitalism, patriarchy, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy work together to destroy people and the land we depend on. . . . We see this collusion in extraction of land and exploitation of people” (113–14). This collusion is evident in the context of slavery expressed in “Wade in the Water;” plantation slavery relied on unethical practices towards both human life and agriculture. Like other Black nature poems, “Wade in the Water” “register[s] the structural forces and forms of power that both racialize and subject raced bodies and environments to degradation and violence” (Hume 80). Therefore, “Wade in the Water” participates in the tradition of African American reclamation ecopoetics by articulating an understanding of the ways in which extractive capitalism links both environmental degradation and racial injustice.

“An Old Story” closes Smith’s book with a haunting image of the devastation caused by domination and exploitation of both the land and Black bodies in the United States, therein arguing that these inextricably
linked injustices are structural, not individual. The poem voices a land that is “livid” and “ravaged” and a people whose “every hate [has] swollen to a kind of epic wind” (lines 3–4), describing the damage done to both the earth and humans as “the worst in us . . . taken over” (line 5). “An Old Story” asserts that individual beliefs become codified by the dominant group, making the individual “hate” swell to “epic” proportions, cementing a structural injustice in the United States that is more far-reaching than any one individual’s action. That the poem presents the end of the world as something that involves both structural environmental degradation and institutionalized human hatred argues that when racial injustice goes unchecked, so does environmental degradation, and vice versa. Because environmental degradation and racial injustice “work together,” these oppressions multiply for Black people (Carruthers 113). Black people not only face the daily threat of racial violence, but also are more likely to live in areas where the environment is poor, due to environmentally harmful governmental policies and corporate actions that disproportionately affect poor communities of color (Cole and Foster 10–11, 54–58; Hume 83). “An Old Story” asserts the structural nature of the problems of environmental degradation and racial injustice.

Like “Watershed” and “Wade in the Water,” “An Old Story” connects racial injustice and environmental degradation; however, “An Old Story” points this conversation toward future possibilities for compassionate change. The “swollen” hate and “ravaged” land build upon each other until they are countered with people taking “new stock” of each other and the land (lines 3–4, 14). “An Old Story” thus outlines the coming problems society will face if oppressive systems are not replaced by systems of justice and compassion. In this way, the poem reflects Lynes’s argument that African American reclamation ecopoetics take responsibility for the future, “demand[ing] stewardship of nature . . . and, in a manner of speaking, of other humans” (55). “An Old Story,” while condemning the injustices of the past, is also forward-looking, seeking to rectify past problems of environmental degradation and racial injustice in order to build a more equitable future for all. Scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor similarly notes that racism in the United States is not only about Black people, but is a symptom of a broader unjust system, writing, “When Black people get free, everyone gets free, [and] Black people in America cannot ‘get free’ alone. In that sense, Black liberation is bound up with the project of human liberation and social transformation” (194).
Reading Smith in this light, her poems seek to enact “human liberation and social transformation” that will create compassionate societal structures.

Compassion in Tracy K. Smith’s Ecopoetics

*Wade in the Water* contends that neither racial nor environmental injustices can be defeated without compassion. Indeed, the book underscores compassion as a force for liberation, justice, and healing, therein also offering a new way of envisioning the focus on the future of African American reclamation eco poetics. In so doing, Smith echoes what other Black women theorists of liberation, including bell hooks, Brittney Cooper, and Charlene Carruthers, have said as they center compassion as the foundation of any movement for restorative justice. They, like Smith, assert that compassion leads to community, enabling more effective resistance movements because it disavows hierarchy and acknowledges the problems people face, creating mutual respect in which all movements’ members are supported in their differences.

“Watershed,” “Wade in the Water,” and “An Old Story” in particular emphasize compassion as a weapon in the battle for human dignity and justice. These poems do not suggest that one should ignore the reality of injustice or rely on trite calls to “just love everyone” as the solution to systemic problems; rather, they pair compassion with an acknowledgement of ecological disaster and racist violence, because compassion requires that one acknowledges the injustice of the past and present in order to find healing in the future. Nor are calls for compassion a way to avoid concrete action, because “feeling with” requires both individual and collective work. Bell hooks’ two books on compassion argue that compassion does not mean ignoring difficult realities, but instead “allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life-affirming and life-enhancing” (*All About Love* 139). Thus, compassion, in the sense Smith and other Black theorists use it, motivates care and community to combat injustice and in turn creates a more equitable future.

For instance, “Watershed” demonstrates the way compassion creates recognition of and care for others in its use of quotations from near-death experiences juxtaposed with the story of DuPont’s pollution. These quotes
articulate the speakers’ realization of the importance of compassion; near the end of the poem, the speakers say, “Viewing the myriad human faces with an incredible, intimate, and profound love. . . . All that was made, said, done, or even thought without love was undone. . . . It was experiencing the luminous warm water that I felt the most connection with the eternal” (lines 147, 154, 158–59). In “Watershed,” it is not the story of DuPont that inspires the love the poem’s speakers feel. Rather, their epiphanies of compassion provide a counterpoint to DuPont’s actions, arguing that seeing “the myriad human faces” with compassion leads to a revolution in the way humans treat each other. One speaker’s inclusion of “the luminous warm water” in their revelation of compassion extends this care to all of nature. In “Watershed,” compassion allows people to recognize and work to end wrongdoing. Systems of oppression like extractive capitalism and white supremacy thrive on a disregard for the well-being of others (hooks, Salvation 9–10), whereas compassion brings “clarity” that “tells us what kind of world we want to see” (Cooper 93–97, 273). Compassion, then, is a foundational force to combat systems of oppression, because it creates care for others and turns such care into action toward concrete change.

Furthermore, the multitude of unidentified voices in “Watershed” creates a communal chorus that invites compassion. The poem pulls lines from many different people affected by the DuPont crisis and places them alongside the thoughts from those who have had near-death experiences quoted above to form this chorus. Smith does not assign the characteristics of race, class, gender, or sexuality to the plurality of voices she includes, instead leaving them anonymous. This plurality suggests a need for solidarity across the traditional boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality, or, in other words, true compassion for the self and the other—a “concern for the collective good” (hooks, All About Love 97–98). This call resonates with other contemporary calls, revealing Smith’s collection to be part of a larger national conversation about the role of compassionate community in social movements. For example, the Black Lives Matter mission statement declares their ultimate goal of “co-creating alongside comrades, allies, and family a culture where each person feels seen, heard, and supported” (“What We Believe”). Social movements must combat the multiplicity of oppression under the combination of white supremacy, patriarchy, and extractive capitalism with a tool equally able to connect “the myriad human faces” across race, class, gender, and sexuality. Compassion is that tool, for it moves
people toward solidarity and community while addressing the reality of past harms. In the same way systems of domination create a complex web that links racial violence with sexism, homophobia, and environmental degradation, “Watershed” illustrates that compassion can create structures in which every person and the environment is supported and respected.

In “Wade in the Water,” the repetition of the phrase “I love you” works to underscore compassionate community and elevate compassion as a liberatory force. Smith describes one of the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters greeting her by saying, “I love you” (line 2). The woman repeats “I love you” again and again “as she continued / Down the hall past other strangers” (lines 7–9). In the poem, though the group does not know one another, they are “pierced suddenly / By pillars of heavy light” (lines 10–11). Carruthers argues that “liberation is a collective effort” (25) and therefore, “eradicating oppression requires us to identify connections” (32) and “[value] people enough to believe we can be transformed” (56). The performers’ insistence on love manifests Carruthers’ appeal for collective support. As they declare compassion, the performers create a meaningful connection with the diverse audience. The poem’s declaration of love to a group of strangers, like the multiplicity of voices in “Watershed,” demonstrates the way compassion can create community, connecting people despite their differences.

The repeated refrain of “I love you” accentuates compassion’s creation of community, but also demonstrates the way compassion promotes care for the self, which is key to any revolutionary activity. “I love you” is repeated throughout the description of the performance, and this repetition among the Geechee Gullah descendant performers as they dance together voices their love for their community and thus implies that they love themselves as part of that community as well. They embody hooks’s emphasis that marginalized groups must shake off the self-hatred dominant power structures have instilled in them in order to find liberation, performing a compassion that identifies both the self and the other as worthy of love (Salvation 7–8, 41–66). Compassion for the self, for one’s community, and for strangers makes resistance possible by providing support systems. Because of this repetition of “I love you” to both strangers and Geechee Gullah descendants, every other action in the poem is inflected by the diverse community compassion creates.

“Wade in the Water” personifies compassion, arguing that compassion itself has the power to temper injustice and loose chains. Compassion is
infused “throughout / The performance,” manifesting itself “in every / Handclap, every stomp,” in “rusted iron / Chains,” and “in the water” (lines 12–16, 20). As compassion pierces the scene with light, the “rusted iron / Chains” of racial injustice and environmental degradation are “unclasped and left empty” (lines 16–18). This image clearly communicates the immense power compassion has to combat injustice—it is compassion itself, not any individual, that breaks the chains. hooks notes that compassion roots out “obsession with power and domination” and instead cultivates the idea that “everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (All About Love 87). “Wade in the Water” echoes this sentiment. Further, in the poem, compassion “drag[s] us to those banks / And cast[s] us in” as well as pushes itself into each audience member, “scraping at / Each throat” (lines 23–25). “Wade in the Water” mimics a baptism and confirmation by the hand of compassion. That compassion itself performs these actions again illustrates its potency in resisting oppression. Compassion is not merely the motivator of liberation, it is the liberator itself.

The book’s final poem, “An Old Story,” invokes a creation myth of sorts to offer a vision of healing through compassion and argue that the structures of the world must be reimagined. “An Old Story” begins with a storm, “ravaged” land, and “swollen” hate—a picture of what the world might become if the twin oppressions of racial and environmental injustice are left unchecked. Eventually, however, “something / Large and old awoke” (lines 2–3, 4, 10–11). This force causes the people in the story to “[take] new stock of one another,” begin to sing together, and “[weep] to be reminded of such color” (lines 11, 14–15). The “large and old” force coming back to life after being suppressed by hatred and destruction can be read as compassion, which reminds people of the brilliant and varied “colors” of the world. This awakening of compassion also brings healing to the ravaged land, replacing the storms with “a different manner of weather” and coaxing “animals long believed gone… down / From trees” (12–14). Of “An Old Story,” Smith has written, “I wrote this poem thinking it might be nice to take a stab at creating a new myth” that takes “the failings of the twenty-first century. . . and fashion[s] them into a story that culminates in humankind finding its way to a compassionate existence” (Gioia 181). The healing of relationships between humans themselves and between humans and nature that takes place in the poem comes from a reassessment of how the world functions and whom it serves. This reassessment facilitates a creation of a society based
on compassionate structures. Because “An Old Story” depicts a new society, it demonstrates compassion’s ability to incite expansive structural change, not merely individual transformation and community support.

In addition, this closing poem illustrates that compassion can transform resistance movements, making them inclusive and expansive and thus more effective at fighting the underlying systems of oppression that create myriad forms of injustice. In “An Old Story,” compassion guides people toward imperative structural change, and thus, the poem argues that compassion is essential to truly remove systems of domination at their roots, rather than focusing only on singular instances of oppression. As Akiba Solomon and Kenrya Rankin note in their book How We Fight White Supremacy: A Field Guide to Black Resistance, compassion is not a magical quick fix, but is a guiding force that creates “an enduring form of resistance that is radical, expansive, and transformative at its core” (183). The theorists discussed in this paper agree that in order to be successful, social movements must promote structural rather than individual change and must do so by addressing injustice in all its forms. “An Old Story” depicts the way in which compassion gives social movements the power and scope to dismantle oppression at its roots.

Conclusion

Near the beginning of Wade in the Water, we read, “For our own good we have to answer / For all that has happened” (23 lines 9–10). The collection as a whole offers up compassion as a way to answer for the injustices described therein. Compassion is undoubtedly good for communities and landscapes threatened by systems of injustice; however, healing the injustices caused by white supremacy, patriarchy, and extractive capitalism benefits all members of society. A society that functions through the exploitation and harm of others, including Black people and the land as well as other marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, and women of all races, is a society that degrades all of its members, even the most powerful. Members of dominant groups, though not affected to the same extent, are nonetheless negatively affected by systems built on extractive capitalism, because those systems restrict individuality and creativity while requiring indifference to destruction and injustice. Such a society cannot remain stable for long. Compassion, on the other hand, prioritizes justice and dignity for
all, ending environmental degradation and racial violence, as well as the personal restriction and moral apathy that spreads across unjust societies.

Tracy K. Smith’s book joins other contemporary Black women theorists in offering up a vision of a compassionate society that recognizes the value in all humanity and in the earth and that is committed to comprehensive structural change. In her touchstone essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde asserts that poetry “forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change,” thus laying “the foundations for a future of change” (224). Compassion makes the necessity of such change clear, but it is also the tool by which that change is accomplished. Poetry gives us a place “to hint at possibility made real” (Lorde 225). In this vein, Wade in the Water creates a world in which to explore the radical revolution that compassion can enact if we let it guide our actions and institutions. Wade in the Water urges us to start cultivating this compassionate revolution.
Notes


3 For more on compassion’s ability to create support systems in the face of struggle, see Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors’s memoir When They Call You A Terrorist, especially pages 5, 35–42, 67, 99, 106, 129, 138, and 164–66.
Works Cited


Profitable Reading or Literary Usury?
Interpretive Communities within and without The Merchant of Venice

Abby Thatcher

In The First Folio of Shakespeare (1623), John Heminges and Henry Condell address “the great Variety of Readers” in their editors’ preface and say, “From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number’d. We had rather you were weighd. Especially when the fate of all Bookes depends upon your capacities” (7). While Heminges and Condell were looking to woo undecided book buyers’ coin into their coffers, the larger truth of “all Bookes” stands: their fate does indeed depend upon the capacities of the “Reader.” “Fate” can be defined as both its historical longevity and as the enduring meanings and legacies of its text and characters, determined by the interpretive community of readers that encounters the work. Thus, over time the fate of Shylock, the Jew of Venice, as a character within and without The Merchant of Venice (1596) is dependent upon interpretive reading communities. As Stanley Fish’s coined interpretive communities operate by
the more traditional reading of written texts, rather than spectating, I use the more liberal sense of “read,” as the audience members viewing a performance are spectators expected to bring a certain literacy to the fore and must use similar practices to read the play on stage. “Reading” and “readers” are here largely synonymous with “spectating” and “spectators.”

But whether readers/spectators read Shylock as the vengeful angel of Jewish salvation, as by Hermann Sinsheimer, or as the hooked-nosed villain with rat-like insidiousness, such as in the “Third Reich” adaptations of Shakespeare’s work, Shylock’s cultural capital has changed in not only quantity, but quality over critical conversations since its first performance or its first printed appearance in the First Folio. This is rather axiomatic for reader response theory, as interpretive communities of readers shaped by, and in turn shaping, their cultural, social, political, and economic moment vary from one generation of readers to the next. What is curious is the cumulative effect of overlapping interpretive communities’ work on each successive reading of Shylock and the reading of other cultural “texts,” brought to bear upon the usurer’s proud figure and their unchecked, or unquestioned, latitude as they work with Shylock’s textual body. The effect of interpretive communities’ reading of Shylock’s Jewish form on the Jewish populations outside the text is especially disquieting and will be addressed herein. Through a close reading of Portia’s “close reading” of the judicial text and contract within Act IV, scene i of The Merchant of Venice, I will argue that communities of interpretation within the redlined ghetto of Shakespeare’s Venice demonstrate a need for governing practices or a code of justice for “readers” in (interpretive) power, the Christians. I will also argue towards the text’s lack of extant governing mechanisms to control interpretations that skew towards the oppressive and perverse in their effects. Moreover, my argument has much to do with questions for interpretive communities without the text, or external to the world of Shylock. I will present a case for the much needed work still to be done within reader response critical theory towards an ethical, generous, and ultimately just methodology of interpreting interpretive communities other than their own.

When Shylock is summoned to the Duke’s rooms for the deliberation of his contract with Antonio, the Duke pleads for Shylock to show forth “mercy and remorse” (4.1.19). Later, disguised Portia waxes poetic upon mercy, saying, “We do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render/ The deeds of mercy. I have spoken thus much/ To mitigate the
justice of thy plea” (4.1.195–198). Shylock’s insistent “I’ll have my bond” is his eventual undoing. He loses his property and is forced to become a Christian, made poor by the Christian’s court’s “justice” and Portia’s close reading of his contract informed by her own interpretive community. Portia could not have interpreted the text of the contract however she chose in the Christian court, as a central premise of reader-response theory posits that “interpretive communities are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it” (Fish 1908). As Portia belongs to and has been accepted by the interpretive community in power, and the Christian community has established practices, or ways, of reading their cultural and social texts, Portia reads within and for the benefit of the community.

However, although Portia’s reading of the contract is delimited within her community, there are few external limitations at play upon the interpretive community and how they choose to construct meaning. For indeed, in the words of Stanley Fish, interpretation (including his provocative claims regarding the interpretation of the law) is not “the art of construing but the art of constructing” (Fish 1902). While the narrative of Christian dogma and the practice of oligarchical law would have Shylock and the doge convinced that reading a contract in favor of the Christian right is right (as the court of Venice is filled with more rhetoric from the pulpit than the magistrate’s bench), Shylock from the beginning operates from an interpretive deficit, as he seeks to decode the contract, while Portia the Christian lawyer seeks to make the law. In addition, elements of the interpretive community itself—its power, its size, and its socioeconomic and political largesse—make its reading more potent, its constructed claims more “valid” and therefore heighten the sociopolitical impotency of the minority community, the Jewish people of Venice. Therefore, Portia’s reading of the text prevails and enables a practice of the law that leaves Shylock stripped of dignity and faith. Further, there seems to be little care given to the effect of such a close reading upon Shylock at the end of the play. The Christian interpretive community acts more as a fraternity or brotherhood than an objective and merely differing ideological group. Thus, it seems that communities of interpretation within the play lack an effective structure that mediates competing readings of texts and demonstrates how structures of oppression can be leveraged within large, majority interpretive communities upon minority interpretive communities with devastating effect.
Christians within the world of *The Merchant of Venice* had been taught to “read” a Jew as hostile, evil, opportunistic, and cunning and to read his being outside of the Jewish ghetto as transgressive; Shylock becomes many Shylocks in one to a given Christian, as they unfairly bring to bear external contexts or “texts” when they encounter the actual character in the Venetian marketplace. Thus, Shylock’s turn as the villain within the play is aided by characters’ readings of him in their interactions: called “the Jew” more times than “Shylock,” the fictional Venetians’ reading leaves the merchant socially poor. To read Shylock in the 21st century, a reader may turn to the trauma and tragedy of the Shoah, anti-Semitic attacks and slurs in use during the 20th century, the current state of economic and political conflict between Israel and Palestine, and each successive iteration of Shylock on stage (Bassi; Oz). Interpretive communities, reading by overlaying the accumulation of the past on the present text, bring new “museums” of Shylocks to bear as they construct the Shylock of their moment (Kennedy, 196). As in Jay L. Halio’s article on Shylock’s multiplicity of characters, within one figure being a “singing [of] chords” rather than one-dimensional monophonic lines, the reader writes and hears chords of their own making as they engage the play each successive time (Halio). These chords are built from cultural texts that postdate Shylock’s original production but still manage to shape his “birth” to new viewers in each (re)production. These cultural texts act as corrective blueprints to the community’s response. Any additional text drawn upon in the reading of the first shifts the reader’s perception of it. For example, using the cultural text of the Shoah to reread Shylock as a fully fleshed and fully persecuted victim is to “correct” and reconstruct readings of the past that would place Shylock fully as a villain.

These blueprints to correct Shylock’s meaning within and without the play are increasingly problematic the further given interpretive communities stray from the original text, leaving minority communities more vulnerable to hostile interpretive communities’ unjust readings and actions. For example, in Nazi Germany, *Reichskulturkammer* censorship imposed limitations upon both the text itself and, as a result, readers’ interactions and reactions to Shylock’s world. In 1942, lines that sought to humanize Jews such as the performance of “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (3.1.49) “fell to the Reich Dramaturg’s blue pencil” and were cut from Heinrich Schlosser’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Erfurt (Bonnell 147). This “sanitized version” became standard throughout much of the rest of Germany during the war; it seems
“a Jew could not be allowed to lay claim to humanity in Germany” (Bonnell 147). Similarly, in Hermann Kroepelin’s *Merchant* during the same period in Berlin, Jessica was rewritten as Shylock’s “adopted” daughter who was stolen away from her Christian parents at birth and has been longing to return to her rightful place among the “Aryan” elite (Bonnell 144–45). Thus, the *majority* interpretive community manipulates through “corrective” cultural texts the body of text, and consequently, the body of Shylock. Further, such an interpretation acted as oppressive propaganda for the *minority* communities of the “Third Reich,” including the Jews of Berlin, Warsaw, and Munich. When Shylock is persecuted as a result of his interpretation of the law, and Portia and the Christian’s majority interpretation of the law is allowed to run rampant upon his body and faith, such effects seem distanced and, well, *fictional*. A fictional court lacking mechanisms of checked power upon interpretive communities coming against others is impotent upon the page; a real court lacking mechanisms of checked power upon interpretive communities resulted in dreadful theory used to construct and validate inhumane practice.

Curiously, for a text that seems to yield immense harvests for the virulent anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, *The Merchant of Venice* did not lay claim to many audiences during the “Third Reich” period. Although it was the third most frequently performed Shakespeare play from September 1929 to January 1933, by August 1944 when theatres shut down, *The Merchant* had slipped to ninth-most performed play, with a total of thirty-three performances from February 1933 to August 1944 (Bonnell, 143–44). Critic Andrew Bonnell attributes such a drastic decline in popularity to Shakespeare’s “endow[ing] his Shylock with an ineradicable kernel of humanity . . . The play ultimately proved harder for the propagandists of genocidal anti-Jewish ideology to instrumentalize than . . . might be assumed” (174). As the stereotype is but the accumulation of shared interpretive community memory synthesized into recurring and homogenized figuration, the successful playing of Shylock as a negative stereotype depends upon the buy-in of interpretive communities to the shared memory.

Dennis Kennedy’s “memory machine” of theatre is useful here, as he argues that theatre acts as a machine that constructs, deconstructs, and then constructs again memories for its audience members (Kennedy). But rather than providing the “memory machine” of Nazi Germany’s *Merchant* with easily stereotypable fodder, Shakespeare’s original Shylock upon the page
resists and subverts the machine and its interpretive communities. Shylock resignified as a cold-hearted villain both on and off the stage is countered by Shylock’s resistance to the interpretive community’s transactive reading. The text remains firm that a Jew “hath eyes . . . [and] hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions” (3.1.49–51).

The resilience of Shylock’s character suggests that the author is not dead as the reader-response critical community necessitates she be, or that, at the very least, the text as blueprint resists additional “texts” as correctives. Thus, in transactional reader response, not all “texts” are equally valuable, or more correctly, not all additional interpretive texts yield as great a return upon interpretive community investment as others. While the text that Shakespeare originally penned represents an investment with infinite returns, the interpretive community stretches thin the line between profitable reading and literary usury when they engage in the practice of making unjust critical close readings—if unjust is using “texts” that manipulate Shylock grotesquely beyond his original textual bearing—that unfairly enrich the interpretive community in power while leaving the original text, character, and representative minority interpretive community poor. Ultimately, at the end of centuries of reading and rereading coupled with the accumulated, overlaid memories of all “texts” deemed relevant internally by interpretive communities in power, Shylock the character is left much as he is within the play: poor, manipulated beyond his own form and expressed desires, puppeted to say words he does not wish, without mercy from those who have benefitted from his continual literary fall, and (sometimes) baptized into movements to which he has no loyalty.

What to do, then, for regulating or governing external mechanisms for interpretive communities? Wolfgang Iser asked of Fish’s work on interpretive communities, “If there is no subjectivist element in reading, how on earth does Professor Fish account for different interpretations of one and the same text?” (Fish 1898). While critics continue to grapple with Iser’s question, and warrantably so, I ask a further question of reader-response interpretive communities and varying interpretations: accounting for different interpretations of one and the same text as a given reality, how does one mediate the resultant practices from varying and conflicting interpretations, especially as they negatively affect minority communities? Regardless of reading regulations within an interpretive community, is there such a thing as a “just” reading without and among varying interpretive communities?
Perhaps the question should be framed more pointedly: how do interpretive communities read justly? Mercifully? As Portia says, perhaps it is “mercy [that should] season justice” (4.1.192), in our reading of Shylock, and in our interactions with differing interpretive communities. Whichever “quality” we land upon in constructing the meaning of “just” or “merciful,” reader-response criticism requires further discussion and careful thinking, for much is at stake. We must also “consider this:/ That in the course of justice none of us/ Should see salvation” (4.1.193–95). Hath not a reader-response critic eyes? Perhaps the time has come to direct them towards the structural inequalities extant among interpretive communities, to break down the systems of oppression and damning interpretations that so harmed Shylock and may, if we are not just and merciful, harm us.


“Useful Delusions”

Tracing the Flying Africans in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *The Water Dancer* and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*

Emily Stephens

And Toby sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise. He said them all around to the others in the field under the whip, “... buba yali ... buba tambe ...”

There was a great outcry. The bent backs straighted up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn’t shuffle in a circle. They didn’t sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn’t matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to Free-dom. (Hamilton 171)
There is a popular Black American folktale about a tribe of Africans who, upon becoming enslaved in the American South, rose up into the air and flew away. Some suggest that the legend’s origin is the historical incident of Igbo Landing, where thousands of enslaved Nigerians committed mass suicide by walking into a Georgia swamp together (Allison). Others suggest that the legend finds its roots in stories of runaway slaves who seemingly disappeared into the air and communicated their plans with the code phrase: “Come fly away!” (Hamilton). Regardless of its origins, this story, called the legend of the flying Africans, has been handed down from generation to generation in Black communities as a testament of hope and perseverance in the face of great suffering. The tale whispers to its listeners: freedom is within your reach—keep striving.

For Black communities, the story of the flying Africans continues to represent freedom from oppression and trauma. Recently, Black female creators have reimagined the story in film, music, and literature. *Daughters of the Dust*, a 1991 film directed by Julia Dash, narrates the lives of the residents of Igbo landing. Beyoncé’s 2016 Grammy-winning album *Lemonade*, which calls for the liberation of Black women, uses imagery of birds and the ocean to reference the myth. Toni Morrison incorporates this myth into *Song of Solomon*; her character, Milkman, confronts his family’s past, and in doing so, gains the ability to fly. In Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, the protagonist Avey contemplates the incident at Igbo Landing as she embraces her connection to both her ancestors and her African culture.

More recent Black fiction (interestingly written by male authors) incorporates the story of the flying Africans by reimagining forms of the fantastical escapes from slavery. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his 2019 novel *The Water Dancer* explains the tale of the flying Africans, imagining that the escaped slaves did not literally fly but teleport. This gift, called “Conduction,” is only possessed by a few, but it allows hundreds to walk into the Virginian marshes and seemingly fly away. In the book, Hiram, who possesses the gift of a perfect memory, learns to harness Conduction by accessing his buried memories and uses the power to help others escape from slavery. Colson Whitehead also narrates a magical escape from slavery in his 2016 book, *The Underground Railroad*. However, instead of teleporting, Cora rides to freedom on a literal underground railroad. Just as Hiram must access his buried memories to learn to “fly,” Cora metaphorically descends into the darkness.
of trauma and rebirth in order to escape from slavery. While these novels may not literally depict flight, they retell the story of the flying Africans by reimagining the ways in which enslaved people may have disappeared from slavery and ran toward freedom.

These reiterations of the story of the flying Africans all have commonalities. In order to “fly,” the characters must embrace their pasts and trade them for new stories of hope. In her song “All Night,” Beyoncé remarks, “I’ll trade your broken wings for mine.” She suggests that she lets go of her past “wings” that would not let her fly—the trauma from her husband’s infidelity—and embraces her own power to fly. Morrison’s Milkman revisits his family’s past. In doing so, he reaffirms his identity and is finally able to fly. Marshall’s Avey lets her mind fly into the past in order to understand her identity. These retellings present embracing and rewriting trauma as the key to flight. They reinforce Whitehead’s claim that “sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useful truth” (290). Reimagining and repurposing the past may be seen as a delusion, but ultimately that delusion is critical to forging a future that includes obtaining freedom and embracing identity.

These stories do not just contain insight into overcoming trauma—they literally embody it. The legend of the flying Africans reclaims and repurposes history for survivors of slavery and their descendants. Sophia Nahli Allison, a writer for the New Yorker, states that “these stories [about the flying Africans] became a truth that enabled survival . . . it continues to represent black mobility towards liberation.” The stories become true as they create meaning for Black communities. Reclaiming history and turning slavery into a tale where the oppressed successfully escape oppression allows those who suffer from the effects of trauma to find hope and freedom. They trade their “broken wings” and fly.

When most critics discuss these adaptations of the story of the flying Africans, they use the label “magical realism.” Jesús Benito, Ana Manzanas, Begoña Simal, Daniel Bautista, and P. Gabrielle Foreman are just a few of the critics who label Morrison and other Black American writers as magical realists. Due to the number of critics who have associated Morrison with magical realism, her novels now top a google search for examples of magical realism. The term seems to be so commonly associated with Black American literature that even the back cover of The Underground Railroad states that Whitehead draws on elements of magical realism in the novel. The label
“magical realism” has become normalized and unquestioned by both critics and the general public.

While these novels do check the boxes of magical realist fiction, Morrison has expressed discomfort with the label, stating, “if you could apply the word magical then it dilutes the realism” (Davis). Echoing Morrison, I would even assert that the label “magical realism” is a form of colonialism. In claiming that the books are “magical realism,” outsiders of Black communities attempt to dictate what the Black experience is. Black voices, for whom enchantment and mystery are real and are an important part of their culture, have been overpowered by other voices. I intend to amplify Black voices by reiterating the claim that the label “magical realism” dilutes the real.

Additionally, Whitehead adds a unique contribution to the tradition of the flying Africans; his term “useful delusions” argues that stories do not have to be true, or historically accurate, from them to be useful (Whitehead 290). In fact, to embrace delusions is to defy the accepted reality. In other words, by embracing delusions, Black communities push back against other’s attempts to annihilate Black history. Black people can then rewrite their trauma, giving them the wings and the hope they need in order to overcome that trauma. In this essay, I will first examine how The Water Dancer and The Underground Railroad are extensions of the tradition of the flying Africans and how each novel uses that story to define trauma and freedom. I will subsequently argue how, as “useful delusions,” these stories embody more than just “magic realism”: they themselves are examples of Black American authors rewriting history and healing the wounds of history (Whitehead 290).

**Tracing the Flying Africans**

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ The Water Dancer invokes the story of the flying Africans by explaining that they flew due to the power of teleportation. This solidifies his place in a tradition of rewriting the narrative of slavery and trauma in order to give the oppressed power. Hiram’s past is framed with a version of Igbo’s Landing: his own grandmother, Santi Bess, led forty-eight slaves into The River Goose and teleported them back to Africa. The presence of this story among Hiram’s community mimics the presence of the tale of the flying Africans. Hiram says it exists as “a mix of rumor and whisper,” passed
on by word of mouth (Coates 92). And while Santi Bess does not literally fly across the water to freedom, the elements of Conduction, the name for the teleportation, mimic flight. In fact, Hiram, in attempting to outrun capture, contemplates his need to unlock his still mysterious power, which he calls “flight.” He concludes, “I was running, when what I needed was to fly. Not in my mind, but in this world. I needed to lift up away from these low whites, as I lifted away from Maynard and the river” (Coates 147). While he may not be literally lifting up into the air as in the story of the flying Africans, he is able to appear from place to place and carry himself away from the chains that bind him. In this way, Hiram is Coates’ version of a “flying African.” Like Morrison’s Milkman or Marshall’s Avey, Hiram is Coates’ modern inheritor of the tradition of flight.

Cora’s escape in *The Underground Railroad* ties more ambiguously to the story of the flying Africans. Because Whitehead does not mention Igbo Landing or even flight, it may seem that *The Underground Railroad* does not tie into the tradition of adapting the tale of the flying Africans. On the surface, the two stories seem to be total opposites: the image of the enslaved Black people disappearing into the blue sky emits sensations of liberty, weightlessness, and hope, while Cora’s descent into the underground suggests grittiness, confusion, and secrecy. As Caesar and Cora first descend into the railway, “a sour smell [emanates] from below” (Whitehead 66). There is no clean, unbridled air, unlike the sky that gave wings to the flying Africans. As Caesar and Cora ride to freedom “there [is] only darkness, mile after mile,” no sunshine, no blue sky (Whitehead 70). Although Cora admires the tunnel for its architectural wonder, the tunnel is still subterranean, literally the opposite of flying free into the sky. Similarly, the railroad does not promise freedom, but instead carries Cora from one version of slavery and oppression to another. While flight bears the enslaved Africans back to Africa and back to freedom, the railroad seems to only to shuffle Cora around on a horrid tour of American oppression. The lack of freedom and the literal darkness of the underground railroad contrast it with the legendary escape of the flying Africans.

However, the underground railroad bears more similarities to the flights of the enslaved Africans than may initially appear, particularly in its mystery and its ability to transport its passengers secretly and quickly. Lumbly, the engineer who takes them down the first time, has no explanations for the railroad’s existence. He admits mysteriously that “solving the problem of
ventilation . . . took a bit of time,” and when Caesar asks how it was built, he answers, “with their hands, how else?” (Whitehead 67). The mystery of the railroad is just as pervasive as the mystery of flight; Whitehead offers no explanation for the railroad, instead forcing the readers to accept its mystery. The lack of explanation surrounding Cora’s escape is just as potent as the tale of the flying Africans’ inexplicable depictions of flight. Similarly, the railroad’s ability to quickly transport its passengers from location to location mimics literal flight: Cora is able to travel almost seamlessly from station to station. While the literal passengers of the Underground Railroad were forced to flee into the swamps and woods and to run from house to house, this mystical underground railroad transports its passengers as quickly as though they were flying from station to station. Both the underground railroad’s mysterious existence and its apparently seamless transportation of its passengers allude to the tale, suggesting that Whitehead’s story inherits the tradition of rewriting the tale of the flying Africans.

Unearthing Trauma

These novels similarly contribute to the recent tradition of the flying African by agreeing with Morrison (and Beyoncé) that light and freedom cannot be truly achieved without first facing past trauma. In The Water Dancer, Hiram must unearth his buried memories of his mother in order to teleport. Harriet Tubman, while teaching Hiram about Conduction, instructs that “the jump is done by the power of the story,” by remembering “all of our loves and all of our losses” (Coates 278). In order to “fly,” to move from place to place, Hiram must dig up memories of loss that he had long since buried. Among the numerous horrors of slavery, he “knew men who had held down their own wives to be flogged” and “children who’d watched those men hold down their mothers” but “worst of all [he knew how the memory of such things altered [them], how they] could never escape it, how it became an awful part of [them]” (Coates 384). Hiram learns that the trauma of slavery can never truly be forgotten, as it becomes a part of those who suffered. However, despite the horror of the memories, the only way that Hiram can “fly away” to freedom is to open the “lockbox” in which he shut the memory of his mother’s sale (Coates 384). Through the power of embracing the memory of his mother, Hiram is able to teleport and fly to freedom. In other words,
Coates agrees with recent adaptations of the flying Africans: he reiterates that flight is achieved by embracing and accepting past sorrows, not by avoiding them. Perhaps, Sophia’s final decision that they “are what [they] always were . . . underground” carries that meaning (Coates 403). While Hiram can fly, he can only access that power by ironically embracing the weight of his trauma. Going “underground” with the weight is the only way to be free.

Unlike Hiram’s power of teleportation, the power of the underground railroad does not literally function on the power of Cora’s repressed memories. However, like Conduction, “flight” on the railroad is not an escape from hardship, but a journey through it. As Cora uses the underground railroad to flee slavery, she surfaces each time in places that introduce her to new versions of hardship. Her train ride is a tour of America’s atrocities against Black communities, from lynchings, to forced sterilizations and inhumane medical experiments, to the slaughter of entire communities and the death of Cora’s loved ones. When she surfaces, she is forced to face one question: “In what sort of hell had the train let her off?” (Whitehead 155). Cora’s tour down memory lane is not personal, like Hiram’s, but national. Each stop contains moments in history or symbolic events, suggesting that Cora experiences not her own trauma but the trauma of the nation. She is given the advice to “look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (Whitehead 310). The underground railroad is a tour of the Black American community’s hardships; Cora lives the trauma of oppression over and over on her flight to the north.

After experiencing these hardships, Cora goes underground, seeking to fly away on the railroad, just as Hiram is determined to fly away from his captures; it is under the ground that she faces her past traumas. Each experience brings about a new death: after each stop, she returns again to the railroad and is symbolically entombed. While some of her descents below the ground are more pleasant, fixed with lights and companionship, twice she becomes trapped in the tunnel, as if literally buried in a grave. Under the South Carolina station, Cora is trapped in the darkness and comes to the conclusion that “years ago, she had stepped off the path of life” (Whitehead 147). She faces her trauma, understanding that she “was a stray in every sense” and in doing so, faces metaphorical death (Whitehead 147). However, this entombment under the earth doubles as a womb, as she is reborn when she emerges from the tunnel. After she is trapped under the earth for the final time in Ohio in the “ghost tunnel,” she realizes, “On one end there was
who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light” (Whitehead 310). After Cora’s symbolic death is realized by coming to terms with her own trauma, she is reborn as a new person. This cycle of death and rebirth through embracing the past mimics Hiram’s need to embrace a new story each time he conducts, reiterating the concept that in order to flee towards the promise of freedom, past trauma must be confronted.

While Cora’s rebirth and Hiram’s teleportation may symbolize their flights towards freedom, they are never truly guaranteed safety. In this way, both Whitehead and Coates add to the current tradition of the flying Africans by arguing that trauma is not overcome only once, but over and over. Unlike the flying Africans (or Milkman, for that matter) who achieve freedom as their bodies take flight, both Cora and Hiram’s freedom is always in question. Even as The Underground Railroad ends, Cora reappears above ground yet again, her future is still unclear. She lives by the “slave’s choice”: “anywhere, anywhere but where you are escaping from” (Whitehead 311). Her repeated suffering upon each cycle of rebirth suggests that her struggles are not over at the book’s close. Similarly, Hiram does not flee north with Sophia but chooses to remain in Virginia: “underground” (Coates 403). Although he can go up North whenever he likes, he chooses to work in the South as a member of the underground railroad, close to the dangers from which he once ran. Furthermore, each use of teleportation requires a story from the past: each time he wishes to flee, he must remember and embrace his past. Coates and Whitehead, in making the nature of Cora and Hiram’s remembrance of trauma cyclical, argue that in order to maintain hope for freedom, trauma must be confronted not once but over and over.

But what exactly is the trauma that both Cora and Hiram—and each modern rendition of the flying African—experience? Critic Eugene L. Arva, in his book The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction, addresses the trauma that enslaved people in the Caribbean and their descendants face in his chapter “Surviving Slavery.” He asserts that their trauma is caused by “an elusive sense of identity” due to displacement from home and a lack of knowledge of ancestry (117). Although, in this case, Arva speaks of enslaved people of the Caribbean who experienced a different diaspora than the slaves of the American South, this loss of identity seems to be the main cause of at least Cora and Hiram’s trauma. Both lose their mothers at a young age and are not wholly embraced in their plantation’s
community. Cora is banished to the Hob while Hiram’s status as the master’s son elevates his rank and moves him from the fields to the house. Cora, as the train arrives to whisk her from the South, embraces her identity as “a stray in every sense. The last of her tribe” (Whitehead 147). Cora has no family, has no community. Hiram similarly is disconnected from his family because the memory of his mother “has been for so long tucked away, hidden away in a fog” (Coates 394). This disconnect from community, from family, and from ancestry perhaps causes the trauma that not only mars Hiram and Coates but also the communities that were displaced due to slavery and colonization.

Although neither Cora nor Hiram is able to completely repair their damaged families, they are able to come to terms with their past, and through their acceptance of the past they are able to “fly away” toward the hope of freedom. Arva likewise comes to the conclusion that keeping stories alive heals communities and repairs the trauma associated with lack of identity. In other words, the effort to keep stories alive is an effort to rewrite history not in the words of the oppressors but the oppressed. Morrison argues in her 1986 interview with Christina Davis, “the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in this importance because . . . the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is our own” (Davis 142). This history and thus the identity of Black people in the United States has been overwritten, ignored, “annihilated”: Black people must reclaim history and retell trauma in order to heal. Thus, stories of the past, such as the stories and truths of Cora and Hiram, are the wings of the flying Africans, connecting Black communities back to their roots and enabling them to embrace the hope of identity and freedom.

Magical Realism and “Useful Delusions”

These stories that heal trauma and give wings to the oppressed come in many forms: fiction, reality, and a mix of the two. For example, in *The Water Dancer*, Hiram embraces the truth about his mother; reality is his means of healing. Cora, in contrast, does not know the truth about her mother; the story of her mother’s escape is fictional. However, the story is still a means of healing
and strength for Cora. Whitehead, in showing Cora’s repeated reliance on an untrue story, suggests that stories do not need to be true in order for them to hold power. Most critics label stories that adapt the flying Africans to be fantasy: a delusion. They label novels such as The Underground Railroad and The Water Dancer as magical realism because they contain elements that seem to be magical. However, Whitehead suggests that stories, even fantasies, hold power that effects real change in the lives of those who hear them.

Many critics, in discussing retellings of the story of the flying Africans, use the label magical realism in order to analyze their novels. Others seem to recognize the injustice of using the term; when discussing Black fiction, they qualify their definition of magical realism. However, they still embrace the term to define the genre, suggesting that the label is deeply rooted in critical thought. Since these narratives reflect a real belief in the supernatural, some authors have taken fault with the label. Notably, Morrison explained her discomfort with the term in an interview with Christina Davis in 1989. She said, “I was once under the impression that that label magical realism was another one of those words that covered up what was going on... for literary critics it just seemed to be a convenient way to skip again what was the truth” (Davis 143-44). Morrison also stated, “my own use of enchantment simply comes because that’s the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew” (Davis 144). Belief in enchantment, in Black culture, is real. Stories that other cultures might label as fantasy, delusion, or magical, are actually reflections of reality. They are realism. To label these stories as magical is, like Morrison stated, a way of “annihilating” Black history and strips the Black community of their ability to recover from trauma through their stories.

Moreover, Whitehead contributes to the tradition of the flying Africans through his invention of the term “useful delusions” (Whitehead 290). He argues that whether the stories are true does not matter. Instead, their usefulness to those who believe them is more important than whether they are fact or fiction. Throughout the novel, Cora believes that her mother, Mabel, escaped from slavery. This story gives her hope that she too can escape. Although she denies that she is “a luck charm because Mabel got away” and feels resentment towards her mother for leaving her, Cora contemplates her mother’s freedom, wondering if she is a beggar on the street or a free woman living in Canada (Whitehead 46). Although Mabel is not mentioned frequently, the knowledge that she did get away sits in the back of both
readers’ and characters’ minds as a promise that freedom is possible. The story is a source of hope.

However, Whitehead reveals that that source of hope was not true but fiction. In the novel’s final chapters, Whitehead reveals that Mabel died in the swamp next to the plantation: she did not even make it a mile away. By deceiving the readers up until the end, Whitehead creates a similar hope in them, only to reveal that the hope was based on falsehood. Not only do the readers experience the deception, but they realize, in a moment of dramatic irony, that while Cora believes she is following her mother, she is actually forging her own path to freedom. Since Cora believes that one person escaped, she believes she can do it too. Although Mabel’s story is not real, it still gives Cora the hope to make it real in her own life. It is a “useful delusion”: it is untrue yet still has meaning in the lives of those who believe it (Whitehead 290).

While the word “delusion” suggests that the story or belief is false, it actually signifies believing in a narrative that is not dictated by the prominent culture to be real. The Oxford English Dictionary defines delusions as “the action of befooling with false impressions or beliefs; the fact or condition of being cheated and led to believe what is false.” While it seems that this definition is adamant that a delusion is believing something that is false, another definition provided by Oxford Languages suggests otherwise. They define delusions as “an idiosyncratic belief or impression that is firmly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality or rational argument.” This definition holds a key difference: delusions are not necessarily false but instead simply go against what is “generally accepted” as reality. In other words, delusions defy the accepted narrative. Whitehead mirrors this idea, illustrating that just because delusions are not accepted as real, that does not mean they cannot be. As an example, he states three delusions: “that we can escape slavery”; that “the negro deserved a place of refuge”; and that America exists, since a country founded on “murder, theft, and cruelty” “shouldn’t exist if there is any justice in the world” (Whitehead 290-91). Although these are delusions, they are believed in and made real. America should not exist, yet it does. Black communities cannot find refuge, yet in some cases they do. Just because Mabel did not escape the plantation does not mean that Cora cannot. In his definition of “useful delusions,” Whitehead suggests that stories that defy the dominant
narrative may be seen as delusions; however, they can be powerful because they create hope, which leads to action and, ultimately, reality.

**The Flying Africans and the Power of Stories**

“Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking” notices Cora (Whitehead 119). White people continue to manipulate the truth about Black experiences, just as the museum Cora works in alters the history of slavery and Black oppression like a shop window. “The presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways,” argued Morrison (Davis 142). Black stories have been persecuted and censored, demoted as fantasy and omitted from history. Labeling Black authors as magical realists similarly ignores the truth that they tell about their perceptions of reality. By stripping away Black stories, white people have stripped away Black identity.

Then what is to be done? In the words of Morrison, Black voices must be given the opportunity and platform to do “the job of recovery” which is “their own” (Davis 142). They must be allowed to tell their own stories and reclaim their own history. In Hamilton’s version of the flying Africans, words are the true power that causes the Africans to fly. “Toby sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise,” just as Hiram spoke the story of his mother, and just as the story of the flying Africans is written, sung, acted, and spoken (Hamilton 171). Stories, or in other words, *delusions*, have power. The trauma that Black communities in the U.S. face as the inheritors of an annihilated history can be overcome as they are given the space to reclaim and retell their history and their stories. Then, they will be able to “rise on the air” and “fly away to Free-dom” [sic] (Hamilton 171).
Notes

1 Art Taylor, Robert Gringer, Daniel Bautista, Jesús Benito, Ana Manzanas, Begoña Simal, Stephen M. Hart, and Wen-chin Ouyang are several of the critics who use the term magical realism to define black authors’ works.

2 Eugene L. Arva, uses the term magical realism, although he admits that the magical elements are “far from being reality” but still “signify the real” (Arva 185). P. Gabrielle Foreman uses the term “amplified reality” to explain the effect of magical realism.

3 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Latin American writer commonly labeled as magical realist, argued, “the sense of wonder and infinite strangeness which emerges from much Latin American writing is a true reflection of the complex realities of Latin American experience, not merely the product of feverish, literary imagination” (Minta 37).
Works Cited


Criterion
A history of identifications wreaths the conversations surrounding *The Man of Law’s Tale*. Characters are dissected and pulled apart in a menagerie of analysis and evidence that attempts to pull together the meaning of their representation. Within this menagerie, the identification of a group of outliers who experience forms of discrimination floats around the discourse. The Man of Law engages in this act of othering in his narration of the Tale, categorizing women as exotic or dangerous while following the titular character Custance in her travels across Geoffrey Chaucer’s known world—from Rome to Syria to Northumberland. The ramifications of this othering of women are often explored within the Tale by literary critics, but rarely does this analysis bleed over into reality and its harmful effects thereon. Performative language, introduced by J.L. Austin and expanded upon by Jacques Derrida, allows literature to be viewed in terms of the way it imprints back onto reality. As the name implies, performative language is language that performs an action. Sentences are often seen as relaying or describing information, but Austin makes the categorization that
certain sentences, when said, are a type of action in themselves. He labels these “performatives” (Austin 5–6). Austin’s performatives allow a glimpse into what the Tale offers outside of itself, especially as it relates to the status of othered women. Regardless, literary critics often view this discriminatory othering as a necessary practice of the Tale, referring to it in terms of positive othering rather than recognizing Chaucer’s work as a repetition of false prejudices.

This view, “positive othering” takes the elements of othering found within the Tale and introduces a new lens for looking at it—that is, seeing the ways othering functions as a strategy for critique. Elizabeth Robertson, for example, posits that “Constance’s apparently passive submissiveness is more complex than it seems . . . She inspires extreme and often irrational violence in others, but she herself is neither an instigator nor a perpetrator of that violence” (161). Chaucer others Custance in terms of her passivity, juxtaposed with violence in religion, thus creating a strong case for an alternative nonviolent approach. The Tale, then, becomes a carefully hidden critique on the inherent violence of religion during Chaucer’s time. In similar hindsight, Keiko Hamaguchi writes, “Chaucer may have been trying to change contemporary attitudes and to soften prejudices by representing Custance sympathetically, as someone whose plight resembles that of real foreign women in England” (439). Promoting this sense of sympathy may be Chaucer’s way of portraying an indirect critique of xenophobic behaviors by encouraging sympathy toward Custance’s plight as an outcast. Jill Mann, also lending her voice to this discourse, claims that passivity is Custance’s power over suffering—a means of conquering. In this light, the passive role into which Custance is othered is not a means of subjecting her to men by showcasing her differences from men; rather, “Woman’s subjection to ‘mannes governance’ thus becomes in this tale a paradigm of the human condition. Woman’s ‘thraldom’ to man is replicated in man’s ‘thraldom’ to God” (547). Each of these critics seem to engage with the logic that Chaucer must utilize discriminatory othering as an effective strategy to critique elements he introduces in the Tale. This logic twists discriminatory othering so it may be viewed in terms of its positivity rather than its negativity; however, these assertions come at the expense of the Tale’s lead female character, introducing the contradiction of critiquing one discriminatory system by reinstating another.
In the following paper, I seek to rectify that contradiction by engaging in a multilayered analysis, applying the lenses of intersectionality and performative language to *The Man of Law’s Tale*. Previous critics have not openly applied an intersectional lens, given that intersectionality as a term is fairly new, but many seem to appeal to this sense of layered experience—those social and political identifications that create interlocking forms of oppression. Robertson refers to it as a type of “elvishness” in which Custance is merely an esoteric system of interwoven differences that construct her as a highly intangible being (178). Cord Whitaker also acknowledges that the Tale engages in the act of othering through a matrix of religion, gender, and class, but he does not outright use the intersectional term to define this observable matrix (1). Patel’s definition of intersectionality, then, in addition to a textual analysis of the Tale, will demonstrate the existing parallelism between the women of the Tale and the twenty-first-century women in the United Kingdom. The women in the Tale are categorized similarly to their United Kingdom counterparts but are othered specifically into exotic and dangerous categories. The concept of the performative will then be applied to this intersectional analysis, revealing how the literature imprints onto reality through the use of codified repetition. Patel indicates the means by which reality imprints onto the Tale, and the performative indicates the means by which the Tale imprints back onto reality. The two, when taken in tandem, indicate the mechanisms that cement the work as not a critique of the discrimination of intersectional women, but rather a cyclical perpetuation of that discrimination.

**Pragna Patel and Intersectionality**

In her United Nations presentation, Pragna Patel discusses the concept of intersectionality and its urgent need to be implemented in discussions related to equality. She describes intersectionality as “capturing both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination” (Patel). The term explains that discrimination does not only pertain to one instance or one identification, but multiple. Purposefully categorizing women
to ignore their intersectional status presents instances of forced identity assimilation, replacing their complex identities with simplified and contained substitutions. This behavior indicates how women are frequently organized into categories that do not accurately represent their identities, and yet they are expected to maintain such categorizations with quiet acceptance. There are two instances in particular that Patel highlights in her statement which I will also apply to the Tale.

The first example is that of Asian women who come to the United Kingdom as foreign brides. In this capacity, many are subjected to forms of domestic abuse. However, according to the ‘one year rule’ and other such programs, they are denied the protection needed to escape such marriages. Instead, they are required by law to remain in the marriage for at least one year before they can seek divorce and remain in the country. These women face deportation should the marriage be terminated earlier for whatever reason (Patel). This matter, though most notably concerning gender in regard to domestic abuse, is also a racial matter where it concerns immigration and the risk of deportation. Such a junction creates the compounded nature of intersectional discrimination. The women in these circumstances must don a passive, quiet acceptance in response to their suffering, as there are no means of escaping the present system they occupy—a system that ignores the intersectional nature of their plight.

The second example Patel introduces is that of the challenges faced by the multicultural model. This approach often categorizes multiple minority communities into strictly homogenous cultures, disregarding the multitude of identities, and therefore the multitude of intersectional situations, in which minority individuals find themselves. Patel further recognizes that those who come to power in these particular models are often self-appointed men who have a set of expectations for the people they supposedly represent. This expectation is one of religious and cultural conformity—more precisely, conservative religious and cultural conformity (Patel). Again, just as is seen with the example provided by Asian women, those who face the multicultural model find themselves stripped of voice and assimilated into a homogenized identity of quiet passivity in which they are to weather suffering while another individual speaks for them. The multicultural model, however, also reveals that this assimilation is composed of the religious and cultural ideals the self-appointed leader has decided upon and is not representative of the intersectional quality of the community they represent.
Application of Patel to the Tale

The women’s identities in *The Man of Law’s Tale* bear a striking, albeit unfortunate, resemblance to these aforementioned intersectional situations. As the narrator, the Man of Law’s presence permeates the story. He becomes a self-appointed ‘leader’ through his descriptive choices, categorizing the women based on the way he perceives them. This is most apparent in his narrative breaks—sections where the story halts in order for the Man of Law to relay his thoughts. Among the first of these instances is Custance’s departure from Rome to Syria in which she becomes the young bride of the Sultan to assure his conversion to the Christian faith:

I trowe at Troye, whan Pirrus brak the wal
Or Ylion brende, at Thebes the cite,
N’at Rome for the harm thurgh Hannibal,
That Romayns hath venquisshed tymes thre,
Nas herd swich tendre weping for pitee
As in the chambre was for hir departing;
Bot forth she moot, where-so she wepe or singe. (Chaucer 288–294)

The Man of Law uses a litany of historical figures in comparison to Custance as if to say that it is her inevitable fate to be taken away, much like it is the inevitable fate of these historical figures to enact their historical events. But associating these historical figures with Custance implies an innate sense of heroism accompanying her solemn duty as a faithful servant to Christianity. She will be remembered for her gallant deeds in the same way the figures she has been placed beside are remembered for theirs—memorialized in the tears of those who recognize her harrowing yet unavoidable journey. However, this heroism is only reserved for Custance. In another narrative break, the Man of Law exemplifies the villainy of the Sultaness after relaying her plan to avoid conversion by overthrowing the Sultan and placing Custance on a rudderless ship, sending her out to sea:

O sowdanesse, rote of iniquitee!
The Man of Law exposes the Sultaness’s negative qualities through this narration even though the actions of both Custance and the Sultaness demonstrate devotion to their respective religions; Custance agrees to marry the Sultan on the condition that he converts to Christianity and the identity that accompanies it, while the Sultaness rejects conversion to maintain her Muslim identity and heritage. However, in each attempt to preserve her religion, the Man of Law brands the Sultaness as a wicked creature while he sees Custance as praiseworthy. The Sultaness, unlike Custance, does not yield to the model of Christianity set forth by the Man of Law. In retaliation, he slanders the very nature of her character. This same style of narrative break used to express villainy emerges in another appearance for Donegild. Like the Sultaness, Donegild refuses to yield to the Christian influence that Custance’s character represents. Instead, she also attempts to dispose of Custance by setting her adrift at sea. The Man of Law’s predicted response, of course, is to describe her in terms of her villainy:

O Donegild, I ne have noon English Digne
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye,
And therefore to the feend I thee resigne.
Let him endyten of thy traitorye.
Fy, mannish, fy! (798–782)

These narrative breaks indicate that the Tale possesses instances of a self-appointed leader defining the identities of women for them, aligning with the information the multicultural model divulges. As shown with Custance, the Sultaness, and Donegild, there emerge two categorizations into which the Man of Law organizes women based on these descriptions.

The first of these categorizations can be identified as the exotic other. The exotic other is interpreted to be the highly desired, ideal form of the other for the Man of Law. This is manifested in the heroines of the Tale: good, righteous women. Custance is the prime example, distinguished from men because of her submissiveness and passive acceptance to their
active force upon her life: the Sultan “hath caught so gret pleasance / to han hir [Custance’s] figure in his remembrance” (Chaucer 186–187), that he demands Custance’s hand in marriage to fulfill his desire. In return, it is not Custance herself who decides whether or not she will marry the Sultan, but her father, who uses this opportunity to convert the Sultan and his people as, “No Cristen prince wolde fayn / Wedden his child under oure lawes swete / That us were taught by mahoun, our prophete” (222–224). This behavior is precisely what marks her as ideal or desirable to the Man of Law—her willing acceptance to ‘ben under mannes governance” (287). The female, in this case, transforms into something foreign through her passivity and submissiveness, becoming highly contrasted against the male counterpart in the process. But these qualities, rather than being seen as inherently negative, instead create a desirable association with the woman, and her artificialized foreignness is twisted into a type of exoticism. Thus, the exotic other is both a foreign and ideal thing. But much like the multicultural model given by Patel, Custance—and other exotic others—do not begin as such. They had to be shaped.

One of Chaucer’s source materials for the Tale derives from Nicholas Trevet’s Of the Noble Lady Constance. Although sharing the same central character and story of Custance, they describe her in dissimilar ways. Trevet’s Custance is intelligent, having been “. . . taught the Christian faith and instructed by learned masters in the seven sciences, which are logic, physics, morals, astronomy, geometry, music, and optics” (13–15). In contrast, the Man of Law emphasizes that

In hir is heigh beautee without pryde
Yowth without grenehede or folye.
To alle hir werkes vertu is hir gyde.
Humblesse hath slayn in hir al tirannye,
She is mirour of alle curteisy.

Hir herte is verray chambre of holiness (Chaucer 162–167)

This new identity of beauty, youth, virtue, humility, courtesy, and holiness imposed by the Man of Law disregards Trevet’s Custance’s intelligence, indicating a deliberate choice to erase such characteristics—those characteristics that would suggest Custance could think for herself.
Hermengild follows in similar footsteps to Custance’s identity reorganization. She is the exotic other who finds religious and culturally-infused norms and conformities imposed upon her. A Pagan woman who converts to Christianity, she transforms from “Dame Hermengild, constablesse of that place” (Chaucer 539) into a “doghter of his [Jesus Christ’s] chirche” (567). She symbolically accepts the identity Custance offers through her conversion, disregarding her prior religious identity in favor of the new religious identity associated with the exotic other’s ideal traits: beauty, youth, virtue, humility, courtesy, and holiness. Hermengild subjects herself to not only the will of God but also the predisposed identity of exotic others that the Man of Law enforces through the guise of religion.

Sheila Delany rightly analyzes that these women are “to be seen not as a woman at all but rather as an emblem,” or merely a conglomeration of virtues (1). Delany notes this as a positive mold after which both men and women are to model themselves, but her view fails to take into account that this mold strips women of all identity except those characteristics the Man of Law deigns to keep in his re-creation of what he believes is the ideal woman. Delany is right only insofar as she refers to this series of characterizations as a mold, but this mold is merely that of a newly organized, homogenized identity, not necessarily something to model oneself after.

As foils to exotic others like Custance and Hermengild, the Sultaness and Donegild instead become dangerous others: those women who refuse assimilation into the predisposed models Patel describes and actively work despite them. When faced with the possibility of having to forcibly convert from Islam to Christianity, the Sultaness declares “The lyfe shal rather out of my body sterte / than Makometes lawe out of myn herte!” (Chaucer 335–336). This preference for death over breaking Mohammed’s Law sees her sending Custance off on a rudderless boat, and it is from this boat that Custance arrives in Northumberland. There, Donegild may not refuse assimilation on account of her religion like the Sultaness, but she does refuse assimilation on account of Custance herself, calling her “[s]o strange a creature” (700). What incites her to action, however, is her son’s decision to marry Custance. She views this as a “despit,” or an insult, believing “hir cursed herte brast atwo” should she allow Custance—and what she represents—to remain in Northumberland (699, 697). These women, the Sultaness and Donegild, become the antithesis of the Man of Law’s idealized women. They are not the heroines but the villains, highly resistant to assimilation and therefore
dangerous others. Although the Sultaness refuses assimilation on account of religion and Donegild on account of Custance’s character, both refusals are tied to the nature of Custance. Both, in some way, reject the identity Custance represents and reject being brought into it. This tension is largely what causes these women to take on the villainous role against Custance to protect their identities, only being able to do so through their manipulation of power. This is a “mannish” behavior that becomes the second reason for their identification as dangerous others.

Though the women in the Tale form a central part of the action, they possess little in the means of being able to operate systems of power directly. Men, on the other hand, are the only gendered individuals in the Tale who wield legitimate power, connecting intent to action: the sultan’s desire to “love hir whyl his lyf may dure” brings Custance to Syria. It is “by judgement of Alla hastifly” that Custance is saved from trial, and it is God himself that is the active force of power keeping Custance safe, as there is “No wight but God” to save her during times of duress (Chaucer 189, 688, 476). Just as Custance relies on these male figures, so does Hermengild who wields what she refers to as “The wil of Crist” (566). She recognizes this power as not her own, but as the name suggests, Christ’s. Furthermore, Hermengild “wex affrayed” of this newfound power, aware of the possibility that should she reveal herself to be Christian by relying on it, her Pagan husband might have her slain (563). In these instances, Custance and Hermengild yield to the male figures of the Tale in faith and fear, once again aligning themselves under the status of exotic others in which they are passive creatures to men.

The Sultaness and Donegild, on the other hand, are well-associated with their ability to engage in secrecy to actively manipulate power from men. As dangerous others, they do not fit the model identified by Patel and established by the Man of Law, weathering the happenings of life with passivity or adhering to a self-proclaimed leader. Instead, they take power for themselves. These women disrupt the paradigm, adding to their “dangerous” status. Susan Schibanoff analyzes this situation in terms of “rhetorical proximity,” in which the similarities between two supposedly different people are seen as a means of promoting hostility between them and not commonality (571). In the Tale, the Sultaness uses her son’s council to overthrow him and to dispose of Custance at the same time. In response, the Man of Law describes her as “Virago, thou Semyram the secounde! / O serpent under femininitee. . .” (Chaucer 359–360). Virago, meaning a
masculine or shrewish woman, and Semyram, referring to Queen Semiramis of Assyria who was said to have gained royal power and legitimacy by impersonating her son, draw masculine comparisons to the Sultaness as she seizes power—something over which the Man of Law believes she is not meant to have direct control. Likewise, Donegild engages in acts of trickery to gain power. After hearing the news of Custance’s pregnancy, she intercepts and forges letters meant for her son, Alla, to drive the two apart. As a result, The Man of Law describes her with:

Unto thy malice and thy tirannye

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Fy, mannish, fy!—O nay, by God, I lye—

Fy feendly spirit, for I dar wel telle,

Though thou heer walke, thy spirit is in helle! (779, 782–784)

Donegild gains power by forging her son’s letters, and the Man of Law defines this action as tyranny. He marks her as a “mannish” or unwomanly woman. Both the Sultaness and Donegild, in associating themselves with types of power—though illegitimate—bring themselves in close alignment to men, usurping power from them. In being so similarly associated through an illegitimate power, the Sultaness and Donegild distance themselves from the idealized, exotic others but come closer to men as they control and take power. They break what it means to be a woman and are brought especially close to what it means to be a man as a result. This proximity ascribes to them the identity of extremely dangerous beings because they blur the carefully constructed lines of categorized gender created by the Man of Law. They directly threaten his established system and, by extension, the Man of Law himself.

Suppression of the Other

These characteristics allow insight into the dangerous other’s composition. Sheila Delany posits that “So unnatural are Donegild and the Sultaness that they are addressed not simply as bad women, but as not truly women at all: ‘virago,’ ‘serpent under femininity,’ ‘feigned woman,’ ‘mannish,’ ‘feendly spirit’” (68). These are women who are defined as not only dangerous but
as not even existing as women because they do not identify themselves in the way that the Man of Law has prescribed. They are not a collection of goodly virtues, but rather a conglomeration of everything opposed to the Man of Law’s depiction of women. Because of their deemed dangerous nature, both the Sultaness and Donegild are killed during the course of the story. They are forced into the silence of the grave because of the danger they pose to the ideal.

The exotic other fares no better. As Patel illustrates with the examples of Asian women and the multicultural model, these women are forced into their own type of silence, and their suffering remains ignored. The Man of Law describes Custance’s reactions as diluted and small throughout her own story. When she is married off to the Sultan, the Man of Law only recounts that she “[f]ul pale arist and dresseth hir to wende, / For wel she sheeth there is non other end” (Chaucer 265–266). This behavior continues when she receives the order that she and her son must leave Northumberland. The Man of Law describes her with only “a deedly pale face” (822). But such diction does not make an appearance in Trevet’s telling. When married to the Sultan, Trevet’s Custance shares the weeping loss with the rest of her people in Rome, but she does not don the pale face (Trevet 67–68). When she must leave Northumberland with her son, Trevet’s Custance declares, “May the day never come that the land should be destroyed because of me and that because of me my dear friends should suffer death or harm”; but again, there is no mention of the pale face (344–345). She goes neither silently nor stoically as she is portrayed to have gone in The Man of Law’s Tale, where the Man of Law has faded out the identity underneath Custance’s “pale face.” Throughout Custance’s trials, this blank face is a reminder of the passive ways in which she accepts and adheres to her suffering quietly. After all, among Custance’s very first words are: “Wommen are born to thraldom and penance” (Chaucer 287–288). This statement is precisely what the exotic other comes to represent: the figure passively differentiated from men that is most desirable because of that passivity and quiet acceptance. The emphasis of those qualities as virtues implies that women are to be seen and not heard according to the Man of Law. As mentioned by Patel, such characteristics carry a harmful weight in which women weather unnecessary suffering.

Although Custance is the prime example of this, Hermengild comes to represent these notions as well. Despite Hermengild’s assimilation, she is offered no protection by her new identity. The Man of Law relays that “[t]
his knight, thurgh Sathanas temptaciouns / Al softly is to the bed y-go, / And kitte the throte of Hermengild atwo . . .” (Chaucer 598–600). It is the deliberate action of cutting Hermengild’s throat, the very part of her that allows her to speak and her last faculty of self-determination, that causes her death. Even after adhering to the passive identity the Man of Law wishes, Hermengild’s voice—the notion of her ability to speak for herself—is still a risk to be controlled. Even while submitting and assimilating, there is no respite for the exotic other.

Performative Language

This suppression of both the exotic and dangerous others is not exclusive to the Tale. As shown by Patel, the reality of intersectional categorization is found imprinted on the literature, but this same literature may imprint back onto reality. Jacques Derrida broadened J. L. Austin’s theory of performatives in his essay “Signature Event Context,” in which he highlighted the nature of repetition in performatives. As Derrida puts it, “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a ‘citation?’” (18). That is to say, performatives are backed by codified repetitions in language that create historical and social realities. For a performative to function, it must be previously recognized or tied to some familiar phrasing or statement curated by past repetition. In short, language is codified inasmuch as it can be repeated and recognized from this repetition. A common example of this phenomenon is the phrase, “I do,” often exchanged during the wedding vow. The groom or bride may not necessarily complete the marriage vow if he or she were to say something such as “Okay.” The situation requires the use of the performative “I do” for the ceremony to be complete.

The existence of performative sentences implies that there are certain types of utterances that do something. In this same way, literature may also “do something” as it brings into reality the ideas and concepts it seeks to discuss. A state of affairs emerges into existence through the very words literature uses. Characters, ideas, and concepts form as a result of the performative action of literature—it is engaged in the act of world-making.
through its language. Literature itself, then, has an active role in shaping the world it comes into, bringing things into being. As the Man of Law weaves his story, he quite literally engages in performance to tell this Tale to the other pilgrims. And, for this performance—this Tale—to function, it must rely on codified repetitions of the past. As *The Man of Law’s Tale* attempts to bring into reality a critique of discriminatory othering by portraying such discriminatory othering, it merely repeats the historical and social reality it has built itself upon while simultaneously adding to that historical and social reality by repeating it. That repetition fuses with the collective memory of discrimination’s meaning, especially as it relates to the intersectional women of the Tale. The Tale reminds itself that discriminatory othering exists while also suspending the concept and looping it endlessly. This pattern begins to inscribe harmful identities on real bodies—real women. They are either passive items or disposable villains. But, again, this only works because of the previous historical and social backing literature builds itself upon. As a result, Derrida theorizes that “the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content” (18). The original intention of the speaker can never be fully realized as, in some respects, they will be overwritten by the historical and social backing that belies their work. If it is true that Chaucer is merely providing a critique, the critique must stand next to the historical and social backing it invokes. It is as much about the intentionality of the work—how this intentionality is accomplished—in addition to the underlying mechanisms of language that may, in fact, work against Chaucer’s supposed critique.

**Conclusion: Othering and Performative Language**

Many critics have been able to discover commentary that the Tale provides on aspects of positive passivity, religious strength, and racial solidarity, and this analysis is not meant to dissuade us from ever finding positive elements in the Tale. In careful balance, however, it must also be noted that the characters of the Tale, especially the women, are created in categorized identities curated by the Man of Law. The consequences of such behavior devastate intersectional female identities into exoticized or stigmatized
simplicities. And as is seen through Patel’s words on intersectionality, such is the unfortunate case for women existing outside the Tale and in reality today. The Tale, then, is stuck in repeating past discrimination while reinstating it—becoming part of that history itself. It constantly reminds us of what seems to be an inescapable existence of suffering rather than suggesting an attainable future free from discrimination. The Tale’s intention to critique—as illustrated by Derrida—does not hold, especially when contrasted against the historical, repetitive system it invokes for critique. If anything, the Tale is a reminder of discrimination as a powerful history. This history exists, has existed, and will exist. It is a concept that cannot be critiqued into nonexistence. But perhaps, in light of this understanding, our behaviors can be adjusted. We exist in the careful balance of being able to recognize discrimination as a history, but also being able to act in spite of that history with the very words we use. As we engage systems of discrimination it becomes important to always question: are we truly critiquing, or are we just missing the mark?
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Aboriginal and European Relationships in Voss, A Fringe of Leaves, and Riders in the Chariot

in terms of Homi Bhabha’s Theories of Hybridity, In-Betweenness, and Third Space

Deniz Cansiz

The Australian continent, which has been home to the Indigenous people of the land for thousands of years, had been falsely labelled as ‘terra nullius’ by the European explorers to justify their colonial missions, even though they knew the land had native inhabitants. The mission of the European settlers to establish a penal colony for Britain concluded with them delegitimizing the validity of the Indigenous population’s existence in Australia, resulting in a negative outcome for the lives of the Indigenous people who had a very deep physical and spiritual
connection to the land. After their thousands of years of autonomy in the land, the Indigenous people were degraded to lesser roles in the land, having to “conform to an identity created for them in advance of [the Europeans’] entry into [the continent]” (Reynolds 69). The racial oppression faced by the Indigenous people of Australia was a result of the ideas brought by the Europeans, like the binary oppositions with which they divided the world into two, as their idea of the perfect and civilized white society needed the concept of an uncivilized and backward society to oppose it. Patrick White, as an Australian author whose interests lie in the spiritual state and the need of a national identity of White Australia, focuses on the dichotomy between the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia and the European settlers, as the binary oppositions between the two cultures and their relationships are in the core of Australian history. White, through his analysis of the fictionalized struggles and experiences of characters in his works *The Fringe of Leaves*, *Voss*, and *Riders in the Chariot*, creates a medium for the reader to understand the similar and different aspects of Aboriginal and European cultures. Additionally, as a postcolonial Australian writer, by rendering the interchanges between two different cultures possible, he lets the reader psychologically and genetically examine hybrid figures that are a reality of colonial Australia. This study will, through the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, investigate the process in which hybrid figures are created in colonised nations while examining the effects of hybridity and in-betweenness on the psyche of both Aboriginal and European characters in the selected works of Patrick White.

**Theoretical Framework**

The concept of hybridity coined by the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha occupies a very important place in the postcolonial discourse. It could be argued that hybridity is an inevitable consequence of the colonial practices as it is born out of the interactions of the colonised and the coloniser. The hybrid people, as figures who carry the cultural or genetic materials from both sides of the colonial spectrum, could be said to be creating an opposition to the binary thinking as they do not fit into the essentialist thoughts. Bhabha, in his work *The Location of Culture*, defines hybridity as:

> [A] sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces, and fixities; it is the name for strategic reversal of the process of domination through
disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects (159).

Cultural hybridity as a theory exists to describe the effects that being situated in conditions of colonial antagonism and binary opposition have over the construction process of cultures and identities of societies, and it is taken from literary and cultural theory (182). Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of cultures, and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” in the postcolonial discourse (158). As hybrid identities emerge from the interrelations of the coloniser and the colonised, their existence, owing to the fact that they carry the cultures of two different societies, forms a strong antithesis against essentialist cultural identity. As Fuss states, “the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness of a given entity’ is exactly what Bhabha’s theory of hybridity opposes” (XI). Bhabha accepts hybridity as a form of being that has been situated in an in-between space, where the “cutting edge of translation and negotiation” is set in, which he calls the third space (Bhabha 269, Rutherford 210). So, what Bhabha defines as the third space is a metaphysical space where newly formed cultures born out of the cultural transactions of two different cultures blur the limitations set by the established culture and identity based on the categorisation and the binary oppositions of the colonial centre. He explains his theory of third space in an interview as follows:

For me, the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space,’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority (Rutherford 211).

According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meanings and representations have no “primordial unity or fixity,” and it can be said that Patrick White, in his works, physically shapes out this ambivalent third space in the form of the Australian desert, where the autonomy of both the Aboriginal Australians and Europeans do not persist (55).
There have been other writers inspired by Homi K. Bhabha’s arguments regarding hybrid identities that emerge in colonial and postcolonial societies. These writers, like Bhabha himself argues in his works, discuss this third space as a middle ground between two opposing cultures. A postcolonial writer, Law, discusses in her work that third space is important in cultures as an in-between space that works to negotiate the hegemonic practices and the dualistic colonial binary thinking (109). Another postcolonial writer, Papastergiadis, defines the hybrid identities that are positioned within this third space as a “lubricant” between two cultures as they can transverse both cultures with counter-hegemonic actions, destroying the binary thinking of the colonial systems, and work as a bridge between two different cultures and races (261). As a continent that has been home to the Aboriginal Australians for thousands of years, the arrival of the European people proved to be a destabilising factor for both the ancient traditions of the Aboriginal people and the European identity on this new and harsh land. So, analysing the interactions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters in Patrick White’s works might, for that reason, unearth the process in which the hybrid figures are created and the general effects of hybridity and being situated in an in-between third space over the psyche of a nation, as well as of individuals from different cultures. In the rest of the article, by using Bhabha’s theories of hybridity and third space as a critical lens, this paper will examine the intercultural relations and its results.

Hybridity in Voss, A Fringe of Leaves, and Riders in the Chariot

Although the binary oppositions were set by the colonizers to perpetuate their colonial dominance in the lands they claimed, the results may turn out in a way they might not have anticipated. Homi K Bhabha, in his work *The Location of Culture*, talks about his theory, which is directly related to the lives of people whose racial identities are formed in societies where there are clashes between a coloniser and a colonised group. As a result of this clash between two societies, hybrid identities that carry the cultural values and biological characteristics of the two opposing groups emerge. So, the idea of
a fixed identity that has been at the core of colonial discourse is challenged. Patrick White focuses his writing on the effects of being a member of a colonial society over individuals as a writer whose fiction usually discusses the state of the Australian psyche at a critical time in the history of the continent when it was trying to establish itself as an independent country in the political world, rather than a part of the British commonwealth. Although there was a concern for establishing Australia itself as an independent nation, there was also a concern for establishing a unique Australian culture in an environment where there was still a clash of cultures. Therefore, the importance of examining both the Indigenous and European characters’ experiences and relationships together to have a better understanding of the emergence of new cultures from two existing cultures cannot be denied.

Patrick White, in his works *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, creates a narrative where he relocates the European outsiders in changing physical and psychological states, especially by their relocation in the Australian desert. The vast and empty desert of Australia is a place that could be considered to be a neutral space that enables the negotiation between European and Indigenous characters. These characters who have been relocated, through their interactions with the Indigenous people, have a change of consciousness. Johan Ulrich Voss and Ellen Roxburgh, the protagonists of *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* respectively, undergo a complete transformation of mind. They turn into hybrid figures who grow a better understanding of the otherized people in their cultures through their sufferings and experiences in the untamed landscape of Australia, which could be interpreted as Patrick White’s physical projection of the metaphysical third space between the European world of understanding where they belong and the Aboriginal world they have been thrown into. Unlike *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* where the white European protagonists travel into the Black world, intentionally or unintentionally, *The Riders in the Chariot* focuses on the story of a half Indigenous, half European person who has already been displaced into the whitened and Europeanized world because, as a part of the ‘stolen generation’ of Australia, Alf Dubbo has already been taken away from his Indigenous tribe and his ties with his Indigenous roots. Just like the other characters, Voss and Roxburgh, who suffer in the Indigenous world, Alf Dubbo, in *Riders in the Chariot*, suffers as a half-Black person at the hands of the white people who adopt him. He gets abused and exploited in the white world under the guise of benevolence, paralleling the benevolent guise of the colonizing European.
In the first two novels, Patrick White dives deep into colonial Australian history, but in the third novel, *Riders in the Chariot*, he discusses and criticizes the society of contemporary Australia. In *Riders in the Chariot*, the dominance of white identity has already been established in the continent, and while White examines the socially and spiritually hybridised characters in *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, with Alf Dubbo of *Riders in the Chariot*, he examines a biologically hybrid character that challenges the binary oppositions better than the cultural hybridity. The blackness of the half-Black Dubbo, in a land that was once the home of the Indigenous people but now dominated by European culture, causes him to be alienated from the white-dominant society. As his blackness alienates him from the white-dominant society, the fact that he has been taken away from his Indigenous tribe at a young age means that he can never go back to his tribe as a person who has not been through the initiation process of the Indigenous people. In the whitened world he is alienated to, with his memories of his childhood in an Indigenous tribe with his Indigenous mother, he is in a state of in-betweenness. Healy talks about Dubbo in his work as such:

In the beginning, he is himself a torn creature, caught between the imposed abstractions of Mr. Calderon’s Christ and the rich but discrete memories of youth in an Aboriginal community (201).

Patrick White, through the character of Alf Dubbo, who is biologically a hybrid of White and Black societies, fictionalizes the struggles of the unfortunate members of Australia’s ‘lost generation.’ As a part of the ‘lost generation,’ Dubbo’s experiences of feeling like he does not belong in any place are also depicted throughout the novel, directly showing the experiences of a person who is in a state of hybridity. Dubbo is depicted as a person who has “always been at war” (437). His war is waged against his own hybrid nature that attracts the racist attitudes of the society along with his feeling of alienation from both the White and the Black world. Dubbo is torn between his Indigenous roots and his life in the white-dominated world where he does not feel welcomed. In one part of the novel, Dubbo reflects on his hybrid nature and the complexities it brings to his life as follows:

His mind was another matter because even he could not calculate how it might behave, or what it might become once it was set free. In the meantime, it would keep jumping and struggling, like a fish left behind in a pool—or two fish, since the white people, his guardians had dropped another in (437).
This quote directly shows the struggle and confusion of Dubbo about his own identity. As it has already been stated in the theoretical framework section of this work, hybridity is celebrated for its ability and power to reverse the discriminatory effects caused by ideas of fixed racial identities formed in colonial settings. Although this power is good in one sense, after seeing the psychological state of the half-caste Alf Dubbo, it cannot be denied that the same binary oppositions that the hybrid figures’ existence disrupts also cause them to feel a cultural and existential cringe, owing to the fact that their non-binary existence does not fit into the binary thinking of the world.

Throughout his life, although he is half white, he shows a resistance to the pressures of white culture that try to destroy and disregard his Black side. In the novel, Dubbo has a black tin box in which he puts everything meaningful in his life:

> Everything he did, any fruit of his own meaningful relationship with life, he would lock up in a tin box, which grew dented and scratched as it travelled with him from job to job, or lay back and secret underneath his bed, while he played the part of the factory-hand or station roustabout. Nobody would have thought of opening that box. Most people respected the moroseness of its owner, and a few were even scared of Dubbo (427).

The black tin box, hidden under his bed and “dented and scratched,” could be seen as a physical representation of his Indigenous self, hidden away and harmed. Although he resists the white culture, the only thing he gets from the white world is his skill in painting that he acquires from one of his white guardian families, but even when he is made to paint the figure of Jesus Christ, he immediately portrays him as a darker man, contributing a part of his Aboriginal spirit into his art. Despite the fact that he hides his hurt Indigenous side in the white-dominated world, his dual existence affects his life in every way.

Even though they do not face the same kind of racism Dubbo faces, just like Dubbo, Johan Ulrich Voss and Ellen Roxburgh are also alienated in their white-dominated societies. Although Voss is German, he is seen as an outsider by the white aristocratic society of Australia, with people commenting that he is a peculiar person who has no place in the colonial Sydney society. Just like him, Mrs. Roxburgh too has been otherized and alienated by the aristocratic British society and has been called a British ‘savage’ on many occasions. Long before her hybrid identity comes out during her time with the Indigenous
people, her marriage with the aristocrat Austin Roxburgh transforms her from a farm girl from Cornwall to a ‘proper’ lady. Her origins as a farm girl distance her from the British and Sydney society, and another character in the novel, Miss Scrimshaw talks about Ellen’s home, Cornwall as “a remote country . . . of dark people” and says “I cannot remember ever having been on intimate terms with any individual of Cornish blood. All my family were fair” (16). So, even from the start, these two non-Aboriginal characters could be argued to be closer to the otherized Indigenous people than they are to the Centre, the aristocratic class of Sydney. Voss even thinks of the Indigenous people as “his people,” seeing himself as a part of their society and looks at the land and the people in a different way than the traditional colonizer figure would do (250). This state of being in between two cultures creates a space for these characters to empathise with the Indigenous people, owing to the fact that, although in different contexts, they go through similar experiences.

It cannot be denied that in the history of colonialism, the figure of the explorer has been a very important one. Although the figure of explorer, especially in colonial societies, has been connotated with heroism, when this figure is analysed through a postcolonial perspective, it may be viewed as an invader whose actions are merely for further dominion and power of Europe, although he has been masked with heroic intentions. So, Patrick White’s use of the figure of an explorer in *Voss* is quite ironic, and important, as the protagonist of the novel in the end, through the course of the novel, turns from a simple explorer who is only there for colonial purposes to a figure that has become closer to the Indigene. White cites the journals of the Prussian explorer Ludwig Leichhardt as his basis for *Voss*.

Another apparent resemblance between the journals of Leichardt and the process of hybridisation in the fictional works studied in this work is the power of sharing food as a way of forming connections in societies. In Ludwig Leichhardt’s journals, there are many examples of white people eating food like lizards, snakes, and other creatures that they would not have normally consume in their ‘civilized’ world, in order to survive. In *Voss*, when the titular character, in the climactic moment of the novel where the transformation of Johan Ulrich Voss has been completed, has the witchetty grub placed on his tongue, he, in a way, becomes one with the Indigene. When the journals of Leichhardt are examined, it is impossible not to notice the racial differences that divide the two groups, the Indigenous people and the European explorers, become increasingly weaker and the lines that
separate the Black and White groups get blurrier, as during their expedition into the desert, they are all equally subjected to the mercy of the desert and nature, and this causes them to be on equal grounds. In the journals, Leichhardt and his group get lost on one occasion, and they eat lizards. The food, which the white man would not have ever considered feeding on in normal circumstances or in his normal environment, suddenly becomes essential for his survival in the desert. It cannot be disregarded that the act of sharing food is a form of bonding in human communication, and Ellen Roxburgh’s assimilation into the Indigenous society is also constantly shown to the reader through the motif of food in *A Fringe of Leaves*.

An important argument of colonial Britain for a long time was the myth of the cannibal native. They would use this myth to justify their imperial and colonial actions to bring ‘salvation and culture’ to the people whom they deemed as ‘savages.’ At one point of the novel, Ellen participates in the cannibalistic ritual of the Indigenous tribe, and it is again a climactic point for her process of hybridization and transformation into a half-Indigene. In this section, Patrick White clearly separates the practice of cannibalism performed by White and Black people in the novel, with the Indigenous people’s practice of it being a form of ritual cannibalism that is not a natural or persistent part of their diet; instead, it is the white people who are shown as the ones who indulge in a form of cannibalistic behaviour that is simply the “abomination of human behaviour” as said by Ellen in the novel (299). This reversal of the myth of the cannibal native again provides the reader with a question of who the savage and who the civilized is and who decides on the identity of the two.

Ellen’s process of hybridization also goes on with her involvement in the female rituals of the tribe. Her identity as a Cornish farm girl who has later been transformed into an English lady is again highlighted through her being reminded of her rituals in the farm while she is attending the tribal rituals. When her past and present states have been examined, one can state without a doubt that Ellen’s life as a farm girl before her transformation into a British lady is closer to the Indigenous way of life than to her life in the aristocratic British society. Although she is an outsider, Ellen even fully participates in the corroboree, a celebration of the Indigenous tribes, and at that moment, she sees “the sudden vision of Mr. Roxburgh,” as if, in the form of her late husband, the ghost of her European colonial identity is calling her back from the process in which she is becoming more like the Indigene, but it
is not enough to prevent her from taking part in the ritual (311). Later, when she is talking to the Commandant, in response to his question, “Did you take part in their corroboree?” she answers, “Oh yes, I joined in, because I was one of them” (399). For the Commandant, whose mind works in a binary system that has fixed expectations of races, the notion of a lady of a high-class society taking part in the ‘primitive’ rituals of the Indigenous people is out of the question, but Ellen forms an opposition to the binary thinking and forms or even turns into a bridge between the European and Indigenous world. Ellen is even physically transformed to resemble the Indigenous people. She is totally stripped of her clothes, with her skin blackened and her hair completely chopped away, and in her time with the Indigenous tribe, she leaves her European clothes and looks and physically becomes someone closer to the Indigene.

Patrick White, through the experiences of the convict figures as well as Voss and Mrs. Roxburgh, shows the reader how an otherized European person is closer to the Indigenous people. Both Ellen and Voss draw parallels to their homelands when they first go into the inner parts of Australia, where the Indigenes live. Even before he goes into the wilderness and his process of change begins, Voss reprimands the local people because of their rejection of the native landscape saying, “A pity you huddle […] your landscape is of great subtlety” (12). And his words suggest that the change from a foreigner to Indigene has already started as he says, “I am at home. It is like the poorer parts of Germany. It could be Mark Brandenburg” (12). There is also a parallel drawn between the convicts and the Indigenous people in the novels. In Voss, through the character of Judd the convict, whose rejection from his home in imperial Britain and the fact that he gets sent away to Australia as a convict positions him as an outcast in the colonial world that has been constructed by the Europeans. Judd states in the novel if a person lives and suffers in a place for long enough, that person never leaves it for good, as their spirit will still be there (539). What this convict, Judd, suggests in this part of the novel is simply the summary of the hybridization process that Voss goes through in the novel. The white convict figure in A Fringe of Leaves, Jack Chance, is also seen as an Indigenous person in the tribe. The readers see that Jack Chance has mastered the language of the Indigenous tribe he is living with and has also absorbed their culture and seems to be speaking his native language again with great effort in one part of the novel. He is so alienated to the society he was banished from so much that he says that “men are unnatural
and unjust” (309). He views the colonial society that banished him as unjust people, rejecting his chance to go back.

Towards the end of Voss, at the moment of his death, the titular characters’ blood flows directly into the land, making him merge with the Australian land physically after his spiritual connection and hybridization has been completed. After Voss’ death, Judd says, “His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately” (480). This comment of Judd, the convict, on this event adds more to this connection. He later says, “Voss left his mark on the country. The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there. He is there in the country, and always will be” (538). Thus, the explorer figure, merely an instrument of the colonising powers, turns into a hybrid of Indigenous and European cultures. It shows the transformative possibilities of the European from simply an invader who threatens the lives of the Indigenous people into a hybrid. This process of hybridization not only affects the white people, but also the Indigenous people who interact with them. In Voss, Jackie, the Aboriginal guide of the expedition, who gradually masters English, interprets the meaning of the burial platforms and the important parts of his Indigenous culture to the European group. He explains the significance of the serpent in his culture to Voss:


By using the white people’s language, Jackie helps them better understand his own culture and becomes a bridge between two cultures, just like a hybrid is expected to do, and as Papastergiadis states in his work, he becomes a “lubricant” between the Europeans, and the Indigenous culture (261). This everlasting effect of the encounter between the Black and White does not momentarily change the Aboriginal boy Jackie, but he gets completely changed as a result of this cultural encounter. After Jackie kills Voss, he immediately runs away from his tribe too. After his escape, he wanders naked and alone in the desert. In his time alone in the desert, he is haunted
by the knowledge he got through this process: “He was slowly becoming possessed of the secrets of the country” (511). What he sees but remains unable to express is the possibility of a shared culture and life in Australia for both the Black and White cultures.

So he did not tell Dugald much beyond some uninteresting facts concerning the mutiny of the white man. All else he kept to himself. For it is not possible to communicate lucidly with men after the communion of souls, and the fur of the white souls had brushed the moist skin of the aboriginal boy as he shuddered in the briga-low scrub (511).

Just as Voss, with his blood spilling into the land, becomes a part of the land and gives a part of himself into the continent, the Aboriginal boy Jackie is forever stained by whiteness. With the cultural exchange he has been through throughout the novel, he too becomes a hybrid, just like Voss, and although Ellen returns to the ‘civilized’ world at the end of A Fringe of Leaves, it is apparent that she will not return to England, but will remain in Sydney, and it is suggested that she will remain there as the wife of Mr. Jevons, as a new kind of European person, whose white culture has been changed a little bit through her encounter with the Black people. Finally, Alf Dubbo, forever stuck in-between the European culture and the Indigenous Australian culture stays as a symbol of a multicultural Australia.

Conclusion
Homi K. Bhabha’s theories of hybridity, in-betweenness, and third space are still able to articulate the inevitable consequences of the intercultural relations in colonised societies. Suggesting that literary works subjectively fictionalise the actual or imagined histories and experiences of a given period and place in the world, this study analyses the relationships of Black and White characters, as well as the process that leads to and the consequences of hybridity in colonial Australia through a close reading of Voss, Riders in the Chariot, and A Fringe of Leaves by Patrick White and reinforces the arguments of Bhabha regarding hybridity and its effects in the deconstruction of the binary oppositions that divide Black and White nations. The Indigenous and European characters in the novels, as in the case of Ellen Roxburgh, Johan Ulrich Voss, Dugald, Jackie, Jack Chance, and Alf Dubbo, have a change
of psyche through their experiences with different ontological models and cultures. So, the idea of a fixed identity that has been at the core of colonial discourse that has been perpetuated through the binary oppositions between cultures have been undermined by the white characters who show themselves to be closer to the Indigenous people in many respects, even the agent of colonial powers, a European explorer being turned into a half-Indigene spiritually shows the impossibility of any fixed racial identity.
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Contributors

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