

CALLIOPE



NUMBER 19 – Spring 2026

CALLIOPE

Number 19

2026

Department of English
California State University, Bakersfield

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Printed by the CSUB Print Shop

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Department of English:

Calliope California State University, Bakersfield
9000 Stockdale Hwy., Bakersfield, CA 93311

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Managing Editor

Dr. David Barrera

Lead Copy Editor

Darci Ross-Smith

Copy Editors

Gabriela Alas

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Design Editors

Kelly Dimas Gonzalez

Eveny Herrera

Julian Gutierrez Lucero

Cover Art and Images

Darci Ross-Smith

English Department Chair

Dr. Emerson Case

Publication of the College of Arts and Humanities
California State University, Bakersfield

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Managing Editor's Introduction & Acknowledgments

The 2026 Editorial Team is delighted to bring you *Calliope* Number 19. The Department of English's publication has consistently served as an important space for sharing undergraduate and graduate student writing & research in and across the College of Arts and Humanities at California State University, Bakersfield. This year brought in a high volume of compelling writing submissions from students ranging from majors in English, Art and Art History, and Theatre. Each of the original essays presented in Number 19 went through a rigorous blind review process to ensure all essays reflect scholarly integrity at CSUB.

Every original essay in Number 19 was developed by a CSUB student in the College of Arts & Humanities. The Spring 2026 students of English 4750, in particular, have worked throughout the semester to review, edit, and design the current publication. Please extend an applause to this year's *Calliope* Editorial Team: Gabriela Alas, Kelly Dimas Gonzalez, Chelsea Gonzalez, Julian Lucero, Eveny Herrera, and Darci Ross-Smith. I would like to especially thank Darci for continuing to serve as the Lead Copyeditor for *Calliope*. For producing art work for *Calliope* this semester—whether flyers, posters, or cover art—I would like to thank Chelsea, Darci, and Julian.

Many thanks to the Department of English, particularly English Department Chair Dr. Emerson Case, *Orpheus* Advisor Dr. Adam Schuster, and Academic Support Coordinator Analía Rodriguez. Funding for *Calliope* Number 19 has been provided through an Instructionally Related Activities (IRA) Grant, the Department of English, the Arts and Humanities Dean's Office, and the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Thank you to the Instructionally Related Activities

(IRA) Committee and the Division for Student Affairs, Dr. Case, Dean Alicia E. Rodriguez, and Provost Deborah Thien. Thank you also to Melanie Ascione and the CSUB Printshop for assisting in the printing of *Calliope*'s physical copies. Another thanks to Rebecca St. Croix Martinez in guiding our students in *Calliope* and *Orpheus* to design the Humanities Office Building display case for this year and the previous. Lastly, and most importantly, thank you to all the students, from the Editorial Team to the student authors. Congratulations on your publication! It has been an honor to serve as Managing Editor for *Calliope*, a noteworthy publication of the College of Arts and Humanities at CSUB.

Dr. David Barrera
Assistant Professor of English
Calliope Advisor and Managing Editor
California State University, Bakersfield



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Body, Gender, and Genre



Body, Gender, and Genre

The four essays in this section are connected by their scrutiny of patriarchal and heteronormative expectations and their delivery in literature. Yelitzia Amador Orozco analyzes the effects of patriarchal society and expectations on the characters in two plays, *The Children's Hour* and *Fefu and Her Friends*, as well as how even female-centered and queer spaces are affected by these norms. Michelle Whitaker's essay on "The Bloody Chamber" examines performative femininity as a mode of both empowerment and complicity in a patriarchal system. Auna Hernandez traces the choices made by the protagonist of *Let Us Descend* and how this character is able to reclaim autonomy in an oppressive culture through the choices she makes. Finally, *Not a River* is explored by Devyn Hollis, who compares the two young girl characters to their archetypal references and nature symbolism, emphasizing how they, like their counterparts, are stripped of their autonomy in a patriarchal society, and she also tracks how the author subverts these cultural norms to set these girls free. This section presents works that engage critically with the dominant narrative in meaningful and interesting ways, displaying a sample of the impressive research CSUB students are producing in this field of critical theory.

— Darci Ross-Smith, Lead Copyeditor

“Girls, Lights Out!”: Why Women Gathering Disrupts the Patriarchy

by Yelitza Amador Orozco

When women gather, it reveals the fragility of the patriarchy. From queer desire in Lilian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* to the fractured psyches in Maria Irene Fornés’ *Fefu and Her Friends*, audiences witness as women are punished: not for their actions, but for refusing to conform to mainstream ideals. Theatre gives the audience a glimpse into what really happens when the doors close and men aren’t around to keep their wives silent. These award-winning plays challenge cultural systems that silence women’s voices, distort their connections, and ultimately demand their submission or erasure. Examining both pieces together demonstrates how emotions like desire and anger destabilize the social order in ways that must be punished. The plays do not offer easy resolutions; instead, they focus on how systems punish women for existing outside the rigidity imposed on them.

As a key figure in American avant-garde theatre, Fornés is renowned for culturally diverse and linguistically challenging plays with strong female leads. Fornés’ curiosity allowed abstract theatre to thrive, and of her many skills, her best-known was the ability to create unique storylines from objects found at second-hand shops. It was through feeling the fabric of a simple chiffon dress that Fornés came up with the plot for *Fefu and Her Friends*. Seven women reunite in New England after years apart to plan a fundraiser to support education, but what happens

behind closed doors is anything but good. Littered with mixed reviews after its debut, the play received criticism for its messy, confusing deconstructed staging. First staged in a NYC apartment, the play begins Part I in a traditional auditorium configuration. In Part II, audiences are divided and allowed to explore other spaces in the apartment (kitchen, bedroom, study, lawn), where scenes are repeated to allow the audience to experience Part II in the order that calls to them. They explore different parts of a home (both a literal home and a theatrical setting) and hear secrets women wouldn't reveal to anyone but close friends. The audience then returns to the auditorium for Part III. The sequencing of the dramatic structure and use of private spaces allow the audience to watch women exist in intimate and vulnerable moments.

This tight focus on the group and each individual woman in *Fefu and Her Friends* works to show how patriarchal ideals destroy and distort women's relationships and identities, forcing them to internalize the very beliefs that oppress them. The play opens with the women gathered in the living room, observing the unique relationship between the defiant, headstrong Fefu and her husband (who is mentioned but never seen onstage). For fun, Fefu and her husband play a game: she loads blank cartridges into the shotgun, sticks the barrel out the window, and fires at her terrified husband. When her friends question the dynamic, Fefu goes on to defend her husband, claiming, "Women are restless with each other. They are like live wires" (Fornés, 118). Her explanation reflects a deep, visceral discomfort with femininity because, to her, women should remain silent and not ques-

tion why they perform certain acts to satisfy their husbands, and she openly admits that she is jealous of the power that men have. To Fefu, when women gather, all they can do is distract themselves until the men arrive to tell them how to think, so when she plays this game with her husband, it is one of the few times she can feel in control without speaking.

In Part II, Fefu shares a tender moment with her friend, Emma, and becomes the very live wire she criticizes. This level of intimacy causes Fefu to become distressed, especially in the moment she acknowledges how much she enjoys Emma's comfort. She tells Emma about a cat that, no matter how much the cat hurts her, she feels she must keep feeding him because she's scared of what might happen if she doesn't. Through Fefu's rant, she indirectly explains how she hates the patriarchal expectations put on women, even as she must conform to them for her own safety. Emma responds to Fefu's distress with a kiss that allows Fefu to regain her composure. While it is unclear why Emma kisses Fefu, this action challenges Fefu's concern for safety, as it is evident that women can feel safe in one another's company.

While Fefu and Emma share a heartfelt moment in the bedroom, Julia struggles to keep her poise. The room is bare. It more closely resembles a psych ward than a bedroom. Still recovering from an accident where she hurt her head, she now suffers from hallucinations and breaks in and out of consciousness. Unlike the other ladies who have a friend to talk through their woes, Julia is accompanied by visions of "judges" to whom she delivers her harrowing speech. We never see or learn of these judges,

yet we know they plague Julia's mind. The judges say she looks better with a smile, so she never drops it. The judges don't like how aware she's getting, so Julia understands why they punished her: to prevent her from questioning the fragility of the system that labels curious women as difficult and insane. No matter how often she adapted to their harsh standards, they still wanted her dead. It's why she mentions Fefu in her sorrows because she knows what happens to women who come close to discovering the truth. It doesn't matter whether you obey the patriarchy's rules because they'll continue to change.

Through the distorted settings in Part II, each woman reveals how patriarchal structures shape her experience of reality. Fefu, however, allows the audience to see how the patriarchy forces women to live a life of lies if it will keep them safe. Fefu's unease with female friendships, combined with her admiration for men, guides us through her struggle by making her feel isolated from the friendships meant to uplift her. Yet Julia is so deep into conformity that she is no longer certain which beliefs are hers and which she is forced to hold, pushing her into isolation. This is what patriarchy encourages when women gather. Women can host events, but they can never be leaders. Women can speak but never share their opinions. Women can come together, but they can never get too close to one another.

Best known for her political activism during the McCarthy Era, Lillian Hellman did not let being blacklisted from Hollywood stop her from becoming a pioneer for female playwrights. Much of her work centers on

challenging social injustice, which is fitting, given her outspoken background. Of all the plays written by Lillian Hellman, none would prove to be more controversial than her debut *The Children's Hour*. Inspired by the real-life events of two Scottish teachers, Hellman aimed to demonstrate how far a lie can ruin someone, yet her play remains one of the most memorable for its queer representation. Hellman illustrates how women who challenge societal expectations, particularly regarding sexuality, face punishment through social isolation.

Despite their contrasting personalities, the bubbly Karen Doby and the more reserved Martha Wright manage to co-found an all-girls boarding school. After the school struggled in its early years, its success has eased the demands on the women, allowing them to consider the future. However, Martha and Karen become the target of a malicious rumor, prompting the town to speculate about the nature of their partnership: that they might actually be lovers. Despite efforts to disprove the rumor, they lose a libel lawsuit and the boarding school they built together, and suffer public scrutiny from the entire town. Act III begins two weeks into a period of isolation following the legal and social consequences, when the two women are alone together at the school for the foreseeable future. Martha's bond with Karen threatens the heteronormative values upheld by marriage at that time.

Karen's relationship with her fiancé, wealthy doctor Cardin, lacks the substance to keep either of them fulfilled. We can see traces of their uncertainty in their shallow conversations throughout the play. Their affec-

tion seems rehearsed rather than natural. It reflects the constrictive nature of living in a society that views heterorelationships as the only way to feel satisfied. To Karen, her happiness depends on getting married to fulfill this social quota. It's only when Cardin expresses his desire to move out of the city that he and Karen have a genuine conversation about the nature of their relationship, highlighting the insecurity he's felt about her friendship with Martha. In a desperate attempt to keep him longer, she proposes having kids rather than working through those complicated feelings. Children represent the final stage in achieving success in a society that only cares for the womb and not the woman. Karen believes that if she loses Cardin, then she loses her chance at happiness. It's her desperate attempt to keep it. Children are not responsible for fixing their parents, so it's no surprise that both characters acknowledge that their relationship is over.

As they come to terms with this new reality, Martha confesses to Karen, "I've ruined your life, and I've ruined my own. I swear I didn't know it, I swear I didn't mean it" (Hellman, 67). After Cardin reluctantly leaves, Martha is compelled to tell Karen that she does love her "the way that they say" and to express remorse and guilt for feeling something that felt natural. She enjoyed the time she spent with Karen building their boarding school together, but she hated seeing Cardin enter their shared space. She couldn't understand why Cardin and Karen's relationship bothered her. To Martha, their friendship was rewarding, yet something inside told her she had more than platonic feelings for Karen.

External pressures convince her that she is immoral for experi-

encing those emotions. This furthers the idea that women are not allowed to think or feel freely. They must follow the rules that decide where their happiness comes from because if it's not for the greater goal of fostering offspring, then it is irrelevant. Despite the women caring for children whose families would rather ship them out for someone else to deal with, their status as educators and caretakers is not enough to be respected. They have already accomplished the final step in what many in the 1930s believed was a woman's only responsibility: to care for children; however, since there is no man involved in the process, it's not the correct way of achieving success.

Throughout both plays, Martha's and Julia's refusals to conform serve as a form of resistance and a challenge to the patriarchy. When their refusals meet opposition from their peers, these ladies resort to martyrdom. For them, their truest selves cannot exist in a world that punishes them, because even when they give up everything that brought them joy, it becomes clearer that the only thing the patriarchy desires is their unhappiness. Death appears to be the only way the women can preserve their integrity and autonomy. If their presence does not carry much weight in the living world, then perhaps their absence will result in a change in the afterlife.

After dealing with the aftermath of Karen and Cardin's broken promise, Martha finally speaks a few words, saying, "I don't want tomorrow. It's a bad word," before wishing her darling goodnight (Hellman, 66). Even with Martha expressing the desire she's always felt, she can't help

but feel trapped. She doesn't want tomorrow because she knows nothing will change. She will never fully express her true self, even after opening up to the one person she thought would understand. After her sorrowful confession, Martha takes one last look at Karen before exiting the stage, leaving Karen alone. Silence fills the air until the audience hears a gunshot, implying that Martha has taken her life, but Karen remains still. Martha chooses to leave the world on her own terms rather than conform to society's expectations. It is not an act of guilt, but the only way she can preserve her freedom in a world that scrutinizes women's relationships.

Shortly before her death, Julia utters the haunting line, "Woman is not a human being. She is: 1-a mystery. 2- another species. 3- As yet undefined. 4 – unpredictable; therefore wicked and gentle and evil and good which is evil" (Fornés, 35). Julia offers a perspective on the patriarchy similar to Fefu's. Julia recognizes the expectations placed on women like her, but she is painfully aware that she must conform to maintain peace. Unlike Fefu, who envies men for their power, Julia understands that even though men hold all the power, they still desire more. She understands that men still need women, even if they don't realize it. Despite Julia acknowledging that she needs to conform to a certain set of ideals to maintain peace, she is unable to truly reach that peace, no matter how much of herself she gives to fit the patriarchy's image of the ideal woman.

This self-awareness makes her death necessary, as even her thoughts threaten the line of reality. More importantly, it shows that no matter how much women yield to societal pressure, it will never be

enough until they sacrifice every part of themselves to fulfill others' desires before their own. Julia and Fefu become foils for each other. They crave the freedom associated with men, but their different approaches to it led to a shocking ending in which Fefu shoots Julia. While the patriarchy would prefer neither woman to succeed in achieving equality, it would rather punish the one who sees through the web of lies.

By understanding the systems that encourage conformity as traditional ideals, women can challenge these norms through reflection and emotional vulnerability. Although the fates of Julia and Martha are tragic, their deaths serve as a reminder that it's not their actions that cause their downfall, but their refusal to conform to a society that demands uniformity and complicity.

Nothing threatens the fragility of a system built on lies more than female intuition. That's why the patriarchy pushes for women to judge one another. Not only does it create a society that views female suffering as inevitable, but it also prevents men from doing any work to fix the system that causes them harm as well. Analyzing both works together reveals how female friendships can disrupt social stability, necessitating punishment. The plays' endings are tragic, but they are needed to show audiences that conforming to others' expectations only brings suffering.

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Casting Off the Mask: Performative Femininity, Spectacle, and Complicity
in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"
by Michelle Whitaker

In examining performative feminism in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," it becomes evident that femininity does not simply exist as a constructed identity, but rather as a spectacle shaped, mediated, and sustained through the presence of an observing gaze. Carter's work suggests a far more complex dynamic than a straightforward celebration of feminine self-expression; instead, it reveals a paradoxical relationship in which empowerment and objectification coexist, often indistinguishably. While performance may appear to offer women a means of agency and self-definition, Carter ultimately demonstrates that such performances remain deeply entangled within patriarchal systems that condition their meaning and reception. Through a close reading of the narrator's self-fashioning, the Marquis's gaze, and the text's recurring imagery of display, ornamentation, and embodiment, Carter exposes the instability of performative femininity as a mode of empowerment, revealing it instead as a site of both resistance and complicity.

First, the central theme of theatricality—so prominent in Carter's work—demands attention not only as a stylistic device but as a structuring principle of identity itself. In "Angela Carter's Fetishism," Christina Britzolakis asserts that "dramatic performance in all its varieties — masquerade, carnival, burlesque, travesty, cross-dressing, drag — leaps out at

the reader from the pages of Carter's texts as both style and subject" (43). This observation situates Carter within a broader feminist and postmodern discourse that emphasizes gender as performative. However, Carter's narrative complicates this theoretical framework by demonstrating that performance is not merely a tool for subversion, but also a mechanism through which power is internalized and reproduced.

This complexity is immediately evident in the narrator's self-perception. Early in the text, she describes herself as "a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away": a line that reveals not only her awareness of her desirability, but her understanding of herself as something to be consumed (Carter 11). This moment is crucial because it illustrates that the narrator does not simply perform femininity for an external audience; she anticipates that audience and constructs herself accordingly. In this sense, her identity is already mediated through the gaze before it is ever explicitly imposed upon her. Rather than existing as an autonomous subject who later becomes objectified, she is formed within that process from the outset. This internalization of spectacle reflects what Britzolakis identifies as Carter's engagement with femininity as a constructed image, yet Carter pushes this idea further by revealing the psychological implications of such construction. The narrator's participation in her own objectification complicates any reading of performance as inherently liberatory. While the act of self-fashioning may suggest agency, it simultaneously reinforces the structures that necessitate such performance in the first place.

This paradox becomes especially visible in Carter's use of visual

and material imagery, particularly in moments that emphasize adornment and display. The ruby choker, one of the most striking symbols in the text, encapsulates this tension. The narrator describes it as “bright as arterial blood,” an image that is both beautiful and violent, seductive and foreboding (Carter 3). The necklace functions as an ornament that enhances her appearance, yet it also evokes the image of a wound, foreshadowing the violence that underlies her position within the Marquis’s world. In wearing the choker, the narrator participates in her own aestheticization, but this participation does not grant her control over its meaning. Instead, it situates her more deeply within a system that equates femininity with display and vulnerability.

Anna Pasolini’s concept of “The Body as an Inscriptive Transformative Surface” in her book, *Bodies That Bleed*, provides a valuable lens through which to understand this dynamic. Pasolini argues that identity emerges through “negotiations and struggles between self and social perceptions about oneself, the proper/appropriate role positions one is allowed to occupy, acceptable or discouraged behaviours, normal and deviant ways of giving an account of or defining one’s experience,” emphasizing the fluid and contested nature of subjectivity (73). In Carter’s narrative, the narrator’s body becomes precisely such a site of negotiation, marked by competing forces of desire, fear, and power. However, while Pasolini highlights the potential for transformation and agency within this framework, Carter’s text underscores the limitations of such possibilities when they are constrained by unequal power relations. Pasolini writes, “In

any case, the body becomes the surface on which change is made visible, at times conceived of as a limit (usually the human body) but more often as the primary site in which desires can be fulfilled and constrained identities can be freed (usually the animal one)” (61).

The Marquis’s gaze exemplifies this imbalance with disturbing clarity. His attention is not merely observational, but possessive, transforming the narrator into an object curated for his pleasure. The intensity of his gaze renders her hyper-visible, yet this visibility does not translate into empowerment. Instead, it reduces her to a surface upon which his desires are projected. This dynamic reflects broader feminist critiques of objectification, yet Carter’s narrative makes it visceral and immediate. The discovery of the chamber serves as the culmination of this process of objectification. When the narrator encounters the preserved bodies of the Marquis’s former wives, she is confronted with the literal endpoint of being reduced to an object. The description of “the dead lips smiled” grotesquely parodies the aesthetic ideals of feminine beauty, transforming them into something horrifying and lifeless (Carter 26). In this moment, Carter collapses the distinction between performance and permanence: the women are no longer performers, but artifacts, frozen in a state of eternal display. This scene forces both the narrator and the reader to confront the consequences of a system that prioritizes appearance over autonomy.

Thulfiqar Alhmdni’s study, “Improvisation and Radical Objectivizations Identities in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*: A Lacanian Reading,” provides further insight into the psychological dimensions of

this dynamic, particularly through the concept of the mirror stage and the fragmentation of the subject. As Alhmdni explains, “The mirror stage refers to the moment when an infant recognizes their own image...creating an imaginary sense of wholeness that persists throughout life, even as the subject remains fragmented and divided” (798). This framework is useful in understanding the narrator’s relationship to her own image, as she navigates the tension between how she perceives herself and how she is perceived by others. However, Carter complicates this model by demonstrating that awareness of this fragmentation does not necessarily result in liberation. The narrator may recognize the constructed nature of her identity, but she remains entangled within the structures that sustain it. Furthermore, Alhmdni’s discussion of the Real as “associated with trauma, anxiety, and the breakdown of language and cultural norms” resonates strongly with the chamber scene, where representation itself begins to fail in the face of horror (798).

Carter’s use of radical objectivization further reinforces this critique. The Marquis’s treatment of women as collectible objects reflects a broader cultural logic in which femininity is commodified and consumed. His wealth and power enable him to curate not only art, but human bodies, blurring the line between aesthetic appreciation and domination. The narrator’s position within this collection underscores the fragility of her agency, as her identity is continually shaped by forces beyond her control.

In Lea Anderson’s article, “Guilty Women: An Analysis of Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* Utilizing Laura Mulvey’s Theories of Sco-

pophilia and Female Narrative Roles,” the application of Mulvey’s theory of scopophilia deepens this analysis by highlighting the role of visual pleasure in reinforcing patriarchal power. Anderson notes from Mulvey’s article that “the female figure connotes a source of male fear linked to the castration complex,” (Mulvey 13, as cited in Anderson) and that the male gaze resolves this anxiety by “asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (Mulvey 14, as cited in Anderson). Mulvey’s concept of the gaze, as interpreted by Anderson, suggests that women in narrative are often positioned as objects to be looked at, their value determined by their ability to satisfy male desire. This framework is clearly reflected in the Marquis’s relationship to the narrator, whose visibility becomes a condition of her value. At the same time, Anderson emphasizes that “mechanisms of patriarchal fiction...normalize corresponding mechanisms that function in actual society,” reinforcing the connection between narrative structure and lived experience. Yet Carter complicates this framework by granting the narrator a degree of self-awareness and participation. She is not entirely passive; her curiosity and desire for knowledge drive her actions, particularly in her decision to enter the forbidden chamber.

However, this agency is not uncomplicated. The narrator’s actions occur within a framework that has already defined the boundaries of her role. Her curiosity, while seemingly autonomous, ultimately leads her deeper into the structures that constrain her. This tension highlights the central paradox of Carter’s critique: participation in one’s own narrative

does not necessarily equate to freedom from the systems that shape it. In reintegrating these critical perspectives with sustained close reading, it becomes clear that Carter's exploration of performative femininity resists simple categorization. It is neither wholly empowering nor entirely oppressive, but rather exists within a space of contradiction and instability. The narrator's self-fashioning reflects both an attempt at agency and a form of compliance, revealing how deeply intertwined these dynamics are.

Ultimately, "The Bloody Chamber" reveals that femininity as performance cannot be disentangled from the conditions under which it is viewed, interpreted, and consumed. Carter's work exposes the limitations of empowerment that relies on spectacle, demonstrating that such performances remain vulnerable to appropriation and control. The narrator's experience illustrates that even acts of self-expression can reproduce the structures they seek to resist, complicating the notion of performative empowerment. Rather than offering a clear resolution, Carter leaves readers with an unsettling recognition of the persistence of these dynamics. By foregrounding the interplay between agency and objectification, she challenges us to reconsider the extent to which identity can ever be fully self-determined within systems structured by power. In doing so, "The Bloody Chamber" not only critiques patriarchal constructions of femininity, but it also reveals the intricate and often contradictory ways in which those constructions are internalized, performed, and sustained.

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Discovery and Recovery of the Self in *Let Us Descend*

by Auna Hernandez

In order to have autonomy over one's Self, one must first have control over their Self; that is, their identity as an individual. For many women of color, doing so can be arduous due to the distinct disadvantages that are imposed upon them by the systems of oppression that encompass them. An example of such would be in Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend*, where Arese experiences the undertaking that is carving out her own Self in a revolt against the enslavement she experiences. Arese goes through a series of steps to become more than an enslaved Black woman, to reclaim and maintain her individuality and independence in a striking sequence of events. In *Let Us Descend*, every one of Arese's experiences and choices combine to form the path that lets her reclaim her sense of Self.

To start, there are the relationships that Arese forms with the people around her. The bonds she forms with other slaves, such as her mother, her lover, and the friends she makes are in themselves acts of defiance. To be able to have someone to depend on, emotionally if not physically, forms the kind of kinship that slave owners would loathe. To be a part of a community is a key factor in having an identity as an individual, as one must have a sense of self that one can then relate to others' sense of self. Every bond that Arese has is then another mark of her as an individual, in spite of those who would shackle her in both spirit and flesh, and with her mother and lover, who are both ripped away by her Sire and the Georgia

Man, those bonds and those memories help carry her through her journey. There are the bonds she has with friends she makes, who hold each other aloft in spite of the Georgia Men and the Mistress of the sugar plantation. There is the relationship she has with the spirits she senses, who are not only part of her culture, but are with her in a way that the masters and owners cannot take from her. There is the brief dalliance she has with Bastian, which acts as a brief respite from the horror of her situation: “Everything slows...I will take these caresses, these thin pleasures, for myself. I will devour this tenderness...” (Ward 246). These are all bonds that she chooses to have and moreover does not allow herself to be obligated to them if she does not wish to be. She neither ties herself to Bastian and the community he is a part of, living precariously on the fringes of society, nor does she tie herself to Aza’s wishes to be the new vessel of her worship. Her relationships are her choices, and she will have them in spite of any who would oppose her, whether it is the Georgia Man or an authoritarian spirit. The only tie she accepts is the one to her child, who in turn acts as a symbol of the new life she makes for herself. In this way, Arese refuses the shackles that would only replace the ones the slave owners put on her, and instead finds the key to her own freedom.

Another key factor in this is Arese’s bodily autonomy; that is, her decisions and security in her own body. The first example of such would be the training she goes through under her mother’s instruction, by training in a way that not only deepened her connection to her heritage, but strengthened her body as well. Even when her body’s strength faltered due

to the harsh conditions of the journey to the slave pens in New Orleans, even the knowledge of such self-defense would be leagues more than any other in her position. Following the line of gifts from her mother is the ivory pin she kept in her hair. This ends up being a more dependable form of defense than the training that she had, and it offers an invaluable sense of security: "...pat my hair for the bit of ivory I slipped back inside: my one piece of armor" (Ward 114). While she could not take on a league of slavers with this, it had the potential to be her last line of defense on any man who tried to force himself on her. This is a huge step to securing her bodily autonomy, as she has this secret defense that no one knows about, that could not be taken from her even if she was stripped to nothing. Another way Arese secured her own autonomy was by deciding who to be vulnerable with; that is, who she had sexual intercourse with. In a world where she was constantly in danger of unwanted attention, being able to choose her intimate partners and to do so of her own volition is incredibly significant. By choosing to take Safi as a lover, and even being with Bastian, Arese empowers herself by deciding who she shares her body with: notably, not at the whims of the white men who would take her as a "fancy" sex slave.

To have the option of having a choice at all, let alone to make them, is another major milestone in regard to Arese being her own person. Even if her choice is inaction, that in and of itself is still a choice, which is critical for someone who has been robbed of so much agency. Throughout the novel, Arese's ability to make decisions that affect herself and her sur-

roundings, even in small ways, is monumental, such as when she reached out to her mother for help with her Sire: “I tell my mother, haltingly... ‘He come at you again, you run,’ she says” (Ward 15 & 17). This may have had the consequence of being separated from her mother, but it saved her from having the same experience as her. Another notable choice was during the journey to New Orleans, when she helped the woman Phyllis in the river: “The woman in front of me... ‘I don’t know how to swim’... ‘If the water picks you up, kick like you running’...” (Ward 71). Because of this, Arese likely saved her from drowning like one of the men later on, and she eventually made a friend out of her. One of her more prominent decisions was when she had to make the decision between poisoning the master or not, and while in the end he still passed, the fact that she had the option to affect that outcome at all is nothing short of extraordinary. Throughout the novel, there was also every time she chose to either listen to or ignore the spirits around her; whether it was Aza, They Who Take and Give, or the Water, those were all decisions that only she could make. Every choice Arese made to help, to hurt, or to heed were all on her. These were choices that only she may know about, ones that sometimes no one may ever know the result of or how it could have gone differently, but they were her choices nonetheless, and eventually, Arese’s choices culminated into an ending that she was satisfied with.

Additionally, one of the biggest markers in Arese’s ability to carve out her own identity is her ability to affect and direct her fate. Throughout the novel, she influences where she ends up until she makes her own

path, which is an astounding achievement as someone suffering from the horrors of slavery. Arese was able to alter her fate as a “fancy” slave where she would be little more than a sexual object and instead managed to orchestrate ending up at the sugar plantation as a maid. She says, “I know plants...Mushrooms’...man takes a step back...he knows a little of mushrooms too” (Ward 117). Even her threat of her knowledge of mushrooms to an earlier buyer had been beneficial, as she then knew to feign otherwise with the Mistress. Later on, there was her decision to escape the hole and flee from the sugar plantation entirely, taking her own path by refusing to live like Bastian and the others like him, half-starved and terrified of discovery. Nor did she submit to become a vessel for Aza and live only to be a source of the revival of Aza’s worship. Instead, Arese became her own person; she became Arese the individual, who escaped through her own means, her own choices, and her own whims. She remains strong in her decision to stay in the abandoned building she discovered. While she thanks Aza for her help in getting her there, she stands her ground in where her path has led her, claiming her fate, and her Self, as her own.

As a woman of color, the significance of Arese’s journey to establishing her individualism, from start to finish, is nothing short of formidable. Even though Arese and her journey may be fictional in nature, that does not take away the symbolism of her story. To find her independence, not just as an enslaved individual, but as a Black woman, makes her an icon because for Arese, she is not just a woman, and she is not just Black, but she is both, compounding the sort of challenges she faces: “I

see a *black* woman. To me race is visible every day, because race is how I am not privileged in our culture” (Kimmel 7). This quote from Michael Kimmel’s *The Gendered Society* made me think of Arese, and what she represents, because she is part of a multilayered issue. To take a term from Lois Tyson’s text, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, this is the “double bind” that is experienced by many women of color: to face difficulties not just because one is a woman, or a person of color, but a woman of color who faces oppression from every direction. This makes the symbolism of Arese’s journey that much more impactful, in that even with every disadvantage she is given by the circumstances of her birth and her life experiences, she still manages to make choices, gain autonomy, recover her identity, and maintain her freedom. Just because Arese’s story is new, or fictional, does not make the message behind her story any less significant, as she is based in real and aged problems.

The symbolism of Arese’s journey also extends to the historical side of the equation. The significance of part of the setting being in Louisiana, most notably New Orleans, is not something to discount, according to *From Slavery to Civil Rights: On the Streetcars of New Orleans 1830s-Present*: “New Orleans from the first was a slave society...in 1850 the largest markets for slave commercialism in the South took place in New Orleans...slaves made up just less than half the population...”(McLaughlin-Stonham 27–29). While *Let Us Descend* is a fiction novel, Ward based it off of her own research into New Orleans, because of the history that she wanted to commemorate:

...one of the reasons that I wanted to write this book is because I... heard a show that was about...the slave pens and the slave markets of New Orleans...the historians said that out of the dozens and dozens of slave pens...only two markers where slave pens were and one of them was in the wrong location...started to tear up when I heard that because I felt like all of the people...all of that had been erased from the landscape...it felt very wrong. (Littlefield et al. 138)

Ward's intention with Arese's journey was to create a memorial of sorts, in order to honor the sort of pains that so many slaves had gone through. In this way, Arese's journey is a way to bear witness to some of the pain that so many enslaved Africans and African Americans endured, to "...explain how a people could have developed the dedication to human liberty and dignity...at the same time have developed and maintained a system of labor that denied human liberty and dignity every hour of the day" (Morgan 6). This statement from "Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse" by Edmund Morgan reinforces just how cruel and hypocritical the enslavement and treatment of slaves were. Consequently, the erasure of that history could only be even more so. By revisiting this history and painting a picture of even a fraction of what these people had to go through, Ward's depiction of Arese's journey and character then becomes a commentary, a memoir, and a revolt, as an enslaved woman of color who was able to make choices and carve out her own path. To make choices as a slave woman, even in a

historical fiction novel, then becomes an insurrection in a way, as it fights back against the horrors of the past. Almost as if saying, even perhaps retroactively, that as human beings, those like Arese are individuals, they are people, and this cannot be taken from them.

Altogether, Arese's journey is a gradual process that culminates in her securing her freedom in mind, body, and spirit. Through the course of the novel, she is able to secure her position as Arese the individual, someone who is more than just a slave girl with no sense of Self. She makes bold steps to be her own person and make her own choices, and her ability to do so cements her happiness of where she ends up at the conclusion of the novel. Moreover, her ability to recover and attain her autonomy and sense of self is historically significant, in that she acts as a symbol of the past, a witness to pain that would be otherwise forgotten. Her experiences, as written by Jesmyn Ward, act as a window into the past of the endless fight for personhood that so many have endured.

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Princesses, Sex Objects, and Saviors: The Recontextualization of “Rice
from Ashes” and Fairy Tales in Selva Almada’s *Not a River*
by Devyn Hollis

Selva Almada’s *Not a River*, an award-winning work that takes place somewhere in Argentina, is a confounding piece of literature for many reasons: the timeline of events is never clear, relationships between characters are mercurial and change at a moment’s notice, and the ending itself is an enigma amongst enigmas. Despite the complete absence of clear-cut answers, the most perplexing aspects of the book are Mariela and Luisina (Lucy), two sisters who died either prior to or sometime during the events of the novel yet continue to “live on” as ghosts that can be seen, heard, and touched by others, apart from their mother, Siomara, and Uncle Aguirre. Decentered by the dominant male narrative, partly due to excessive amounts of men within the book,¹ including the three main male characters, Tilo, Enero, and El Negro,² Mariela and Lucy act as both victims of pedophilic predators and the patriarchy *and* as miraculous saviors of men who have similarly been victimized by violent acts deemed necessary by the patriarchal community residing on the island. In orchestrating the girls’ dual roles as prey and protectors, Selva Almada connects Mariela and Lucy to archetypal fairy tales, princesses, and magical rescuers, specifically, “Rice from Ashes,” Argentina’s version of the popular Cinderella folk tale; consequently, Almada also ties Mariela and Lucy to flora and fauna because fairy tales and women as a whole are both heavily linked to

nature—a powerful, uncontrollable force that man has always attempted to dominate and master.

Archetypal characters, story beats, and morals found within fairy tales—which were often created and shared by women during household chores (Boyd)—reflect the dominant experiences of women, especially given how almost every folk tale, regardless of culture or region, features marginalized and/or oppressed characters, whether human or animal. The use of archetypes in literature, and storytelling in general, originates from human beings noticing “rhythm[s], or recurrent movement” typically found in “the natural cycle;” furthermore, “rituals” are an essential part of human life, society, culture, and religion, wherein “it is the deliberate expression of a will to synchronize human and natural energies...” (Frye 1257). In the case of ancient fairy tales and folk tales created by women, archetypes and “rhythms” are therefore used to reconnect women and nature, two victimized beings that lack agency and have been stripped of their powers by patriarchal forces (Frye 1257).

Men and women who internalized misogynistic teachings would have dichotomously seen women as both dangerous and advantageously vulnerable: The ability to conceive and carry life within their bodies and to independently nourish children grants women with sexual and reproductive powers not bestowed upon men, hence men feel the need to control and censor women’s lives and freedoms. The same is true of animals—one can have as many ewes or mares in a field as they please, but rams or stallions must be carefully separated from females and males, lest a herd

become overpopulated or fights occur between prized males. Returning to the concept of female “rhythms,” menstruation, conception, reproduction, and nursing are all “rituals” that take place in human beings and other animals³ and typically repeat in a “natural cycle” characterized by the passing of time⁴ (Frye 1257). Controlling female sexuality, freedom, and roles was a culturally and communally accepted practice in the ancient world, which was substantiated by patriarchal assumptions that nature and female bodies should be dominated: “The shift from nomadic existence to agricultural practices—practices founded on a belief that the natural world could be controlled and manipulated—permitted the conceptualization of animals as sluggish meat-making machines and reluctant laborers, and women as breeders of children” (Gruen 63). As such, women and nature were effectively subjugated simultaneously or at least nature was attempted to be mastered soon before women’s bodies and minds were oppressed; nevertheless, nature itself could not be mastered easily, nor has it ever been completely controlled and regulated by men. On the contrary, nature has been victimized, torn asunder, and subjected to cruel and unusual violence through global warming, overpopulation, deforestation, pollution of multiple kinds (light, plastic, water, etc.), and gas emissions, yet it has never and will never bow to humankind—tornados, hurricanes, wildfires, and storms are proof enough of its uncontrollability. Mother Nature enthralls and crushes mankind, not the other way around. In their inability to govern nature, misogynistic and patriarchal men have shifted their oppressive actions and behaviors to women, since they see in women what they

are unable to wholly control:

Man seeks the Other in woman as Nature and as his peer. But Nature inspires ambivalent feelings in man, as has been seen. He exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and he dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will;... woman embodies nature as Mother, Spouse, and Idea; these figures are sometimes confounded and sometimes in opposition, and each has a double face. (de Beauvoir 163)

The marginalization of both women and nature has occurred throughout history, hence women and nature have always been connected through simultaneous victimization by patriarchy and unbridled abilities envied by men (i.e., unseen reproduction within a literal womb or the earth's "womb," such as how a tiny seed becomes a giant tree or grain, nourishing life from one's own body, etc.). In the unsteady alliance between women and nature, formed within the context of pain and oppression, fairy tales and folk tales created by women not only depict innocence, naivete, and vulnerability in the face of the patriarchy and nature itself, but also provide oppressed characters with an "out" or freedom granted by mysterious—often powerful or even divine—figures who appear in nature or are literal embodiments of nature and animals.

As discussed previously, fairy tales typically depict a female-centered narrative, partly because they were likely created by women who desired to represent their own life circumstances, feelings about said circumstances, and traumatic experiences, such as infanticide, familial

deaths, or sudden illnesses, thus “help[ing] individuals and the community to account for psychological states such as depression and anger, or social conditions such as marginalization and alienation” (Vejvoda 45). Argentina’s version of the well-known and beloved Cinderella folk tale, referred to as “Rice from Ashes”⁵ or “Cenicienta,”⁶ represents female “marginalization and alienation,” especially from one’s own family and/or members of the same sex, which is resolved through relying upon the natural world, unknown divine figures encountered in nature, acts of compassion, and fate or destiny to guide one to improved circumstances and status (Vejvoda 45). “Rice from Ashes” follows the typical Cinderella archetypal story beats, characters, and overall messages, but differs slightly in a few key ways, such as Cenicienta caring for and eventually being forced to slaughter her lamb, there is no ball or festival that Cenicienta attends nor does she dance with the prince, a “riverbank” is an important setting within the story, and God plays a prominent part in the folk tale, as he appears in the guise of a “little man” who requests a drink of water from the previously mentioned riverbank, thus testing Cenicienta and her stepsisters’ compassion and treatment of unseemingly strangers (“Cinderella,” Bierhorst 121, 122). Despite these differences, Cenicienta’s dependence upon the natural world, both in terms of flora and fauna, matches Cinderella’s reliance on nature to survive and overcome her oppression. Indeed, a case could even be made that “Rice from Ashes” portrays nature as salvation and rescuer to an even greater extent than Cinderella, particularly due to the portrayal of nature acting in accordance with Christian or Catholic imagery and

characters.⁷ Although religion is not dominantly at the forefront of the folktale, it is always present and acting in the background to ensure Cenicienta's safety, comfort, and eventual rise in status; effectively, animals, such as ants and birds, and trees operate as God's modes of intercession and immediate deliverance (Bierhorst 120-121). In a similar vein but with drastically different outcomes, Selva Almada's *Not a River* is a failed fairy tale, where oppressed and victimized girls never receive their happy ending, courting princes are wolves in disguise, and fairy godmothers do not appear to rescue those most in need of saving.

Almada connects *Not a River* and "Rice from Ashes" in a multitude of ways, almost all of which center around Mariela and Lucy; in doing so, Almada recontextualizes fairy tales and folk tales with the potential of failure and loss, whether of a future in general, happy ending, or freedom from one's circumstances or abuse. Archetypal fairy tales, especially those involving princesses, follow a typical formula: A girl or young woman is in a precarious or abused position, often due to forces outside of her control, such as a stepmother, evil sorceress, or other powerful entity, but is saved by nature and/or divinity working together to improve her circumstances, usually without the girl intervening by herself or attempting to change her fate by herself. The conclusion is usually an escape from her previous wretched state, wherein she is fulfilled by marrying a prince, thus establishing marriage, sexual submission and monogamy to one's husband, and accepting fate as ordained by others upon an impossibly high pedestal. In contrast to Cenicienta, who passively accepts assistance

without taking initiative to alter her life, Mariela and Lucy never wait for others to help or rescue them; rather, they have learned to rely upon themselves and each other. Cenicienta is saved from her entrapping life and status by being whisked away by the prince riding on his horse, after he too has adhered to fate's course in the shape of a prophecy that instructed how to find his future wife (Bierhorst 123-124). Mariela and Lucy attempt to escape their confinement on the island by making their own decisions without permission from divinity, fate, or an older figure deemed suitable by the patriarchy. When they accept an invitation from a "group of boys" to "drive them to a dance in town," similar to being invited to a ball by princes who carry princesses off in a carriage, the girls act out of accordance with fairy tales' established narratives—even going so far as to think about how their actions would punish their mother:⁸ "Mariela thought it would be no bad thing to be gone a few hours, make their mami worry a bit. Then next time she'd think twice before throwing them out" (Almada 63). Consequently, they must be severely punished not only for attempting to escape outside of their predestined fate, but also for rejecting patriarchal standards and rules for young women; Mariela and Lucy therefore die in the truck they were riding in while returning to the island, as do the seven other teenagers within the vehicle (Almada 65). Unlike Cenicienta's happy ending, which resulted in permissive sexuality within the context of marriage, marital bliss, and life (both in the sense that she is in a renewed, elevated state and that she may become pregnant, according to the patriarchy), Lucy and Mariela's *unhappy* ending is one plagued by

punishment. Their sexualities are taken advantage of by pedophilic men, they can never escape or grow beyond the age when they died, and they are no longer able to escape the island.

In its very essence, *Not a River* reconstructs and reevaluates fairy tales and folk tales, yet it primarily revolves around “Rice from Ashes” and Cenicienta, who is represented through Mariela and Lucy, the unfulfilled and unsaved “Cenicientas” of the novel. The majority of Almada’s story and its main plot take place on an unnamed island in Argentina, whereas “Rice from Ashes” is a folk tale passed down in Argentina, thus it is safe to assume that it is set in Argentina. Unlike “Rice from Ashes,” though, men and male narratives are predominant within the novel, as the narrator of the folk tale immediately establishes that it is a story focused entirely on women: “People tell the story of a girl who lost her mother. They say her father turned around and married a woman who had two daughters of her own. The cruel stepmother made her husband’s daughter the house servant... the two stepsisters would have nothing to do with her” (Bierhorst 120). Beyond these first few sentences, the father is never mentioned again, and no expectations are set for Cenicienta’s father to step in and rescue her from abuse and mistreatment. Consequently, the narrator inherently assumes that the reader would not question or anticipate the father to intervene, especially since no legitimate reason(s) are given for his neglecting Cenicienta, such as a severe illness or death. The folk tale is therefore not simply a story of victimization and abuse committed by a member of one’s own sex; it is also a demonstration of silent, acquiescent

male violence. One need not actively choose cruelty—raising one's hand or voice, executing psychological warfare or emotional terrorism—to become an abuser, victimizing the innocent, helpless, and vulnerable.

In contrast to “Rice from Ashes,” men in general and the dominant male narrative within the novel are not only complicated by obvious and subtle factors, but the story's narrative is also outright thrust upon readers with such an intensity that the female counter-narrative is almost entirely lost. If the synopsis found on the back of *Not a River* is to be believed, Enero, El Negro, and Tilo are the main characters of the novel; however, Almada subverts expectations by positioning Mariela and Lucy as the primary driving forces of the plot, who are simultaneously victims and saviors, dead and alive. One may argue that the girls are merely deuteragonists to the main characters or share the three men's status as main characters, and both thoughts are excellent points; nevertheless, these beliefs play right into Almada's assumptions that readers would unintentionally or intentionally place men in higher or equal importance to Mariela and Lucy, let alone other female characters. The patriarchal narrative exudes itself with such an intense force that it even subjects the reader to its deliberately misogynistic designs because it effectively deprioritizes and decenters women, forcing them to submit to men and be deferred by readers, whether consciously or unconsciously.

It should be further emphasized that *Not a River* switches between characters' perspectives through a third person limited point of view, mainly centering on Enero, Mariela, and Lucy;⁹ hence, predation, objecti-

fication, and victimization combine to effectively create a narrative that is perpetually in conflict with itself. The conflict in question occurs because Mariela and Lucy are the current objects of Enero's lust, despite being minors,¹⁰ as he notices "their asses," how one has "bigger tits," and how he "watches them leave" (Almada 37, 39). Enero defends his pedophilic desires by claiming that "the island women grow up quicker than in town" (Almada 38). Meanwhile, Mariela and Lucy have been normalized and numbed to sexualization from both boys and grown men to the point that they do not question if they are victims of a patriarchy that affirms and encourages pedophilia—the thought would never naturally cross either of the girls' minds. Instead, they become excited and intrigued by male attention:

Some guys in the bar watched her [Mariela] go past and said something, quietly so she couldn't make it out. She likes feeling the men's eyes on her. A kind of heat that rises from her belly and makes her cheeks burn. (Almada 59)

In the same way that male violence emerges silently in "Rice from Ashes," societal acceptance and encouragement regarding pedophilic desires, defenses surrounding said desires, and predation of the innocent do not necessarily involve loud or obvious acts of violence. Contrary to popular belief, it is the quiet, unstated violations committed by men—looking a girl up and down, flirting with girls less than half one's age, unnoticed sexual statements and allusions that pass without interrogation—that do the most damage through desensitization.

Systemic, silent violence is a throughline that runs through *Not*

a River, “Rice from Ashes,” and the subjugation of women and nature, which created an alliance between the two entities, as found in fairy tales, folk tales, and mythology. Selva Almada coalesces ecofeminist theories and “Rice from Ashes” into her novel, combining them into the tragic figures of Mariela and Lucy, who embody and represent nature as victims of the patriarchy and as saviors of undeserving men. When they are first introduced to the reader and main characters, the girls are immediately connected to flora and fauna due to “the smell of green grass given off by their long, newly washed hair, still dripping at the tips, flowing and black as cowbird feathers” (Almada 36-37). Aside from “the smell of green grass,” which is self-evidently attached to the earth, the fact that Mariela and Lucy’s hair are described as being “black as cowbird feathers” denotes that Enero is not merely associating the girls with birds, suggesting freedom and flight from their current circumstances (Almada 36-37). He is referring specifically to *males* of the brown-headed cowbirds species that are characterized by their “glossy black plumage and subtle brown head,” in contrast to the females whose feathers are an “unmarked brown” (“Brown-headed Cowbird”). Consequently, Enero seemingly cannot imagine the girls outside of a male-centered context but must reorient and situate the girls as both objects to be sexualized and beings whose sexualities cannot exist in a vortex without a male to create balance.

The initial descriptions of Mariela and Lucy expand to include their bodies, wherein their legs are described as having “tiny hairs on their thighs shining like *fish scales*. And that smell of *cut grass* they both give

off, from all over their bodies” (Almada 37; emphasis added). The mention of “fish scales,” which suggests bodies of water and animals living in said water, recalls the very beginning of the novel when Tilo, Enero, and El Negro fought to fish out and kill what is most likely a river stingray that is given female pronouns by the men: “Pump and reel, pump and reel. She’s hugging the bottom. Get her up, get her up” (Almada 37, 3). In addition to the animal’s female attributes, the phrase “pump and reel”¹¹ is highly sexual, as “to pump” something can be defined as “mov[ing] (something) up and down or in and out quickly and repeatedly,” implying sexual intercourse¹² (Almada 3; “Pump”). “Reel” is also part of a phrasing that can have sexual connotations implied within it, as to “reel someone in” typically indicates that one is attempting to or has successfully attracted another person, whether that refers to being able to influence the individual or attracting them sexually/romantically (Almada 3). Moreover, in the context of fishing, to reel a fish in means that the fisher has literally and forcefully gained control over its body, and the fisher can then begin the process of retrieving the fish to either kill and consume it or release the animal back into the water. Similar to the scene with the river stingray, Mariela and Lucy are “fish” being “reeled in” by Enero’s obvious flirtations and sexual desires, which are the imagined “pump[ing]” of a victim hooked and controlled by a predator (Almada 37, 3).

The “smell of cut grass” that emanates from the girls’ bodies is another example of nature being controlled and dominated by mankind, since grass does not cut itself; a separate entity must decide to trim it, cut

it down partially, or eradicate grass entirely, most likely due to it becoming overgrown (Almada 37). Grass that is growing excessively or wildly indicates that it is healthy, living, and developing due to outside factors, such as increased rain, the sun, and/or fertilizer. The choice to mow or cut grass therefore means that an individual did not want it to continue growing at a natural rate, but would prefer it in a diminished, controlled, and newer or “younger” state, as that which was cut down would have been older growth, leaving behind immature, damaged grass. Mariela and Lucy are effectively cut down by the pedophilic men around them, who prefer their youthful, pubescent bodies that have not fully matured; they cannot age and eventually grow into women because the men desire that their bodies and minds remain young. As such, the patriarchal and pedophilic male community are granted their wish when Mariela and Lucy perish by drowning in “deep mud..., just a few inches of water” after the truck they were in flipped into a ditch, thus they are never able to mature into grown women (Almada 64). Despite being deceased, they continue to “live on” in the novel as teenaged girls but are only ever acknowledged by men when they are sexualized and objectified, as seen when a male islander warns Enero to “Watch it with those two! There’s poison in their pussies!” (Almada 38-39). The girls are dead and lost to the world, yet for male sexual gratification Mariela and Lucy become living, breathing teenagers forever trapped in pubescent bodies.

Depictions of women and nature allied together in both *Not a River* and “Rice from Ashes” culminate in Mariela and Lucy becoming the

penultimate versions of saviors found in both fairy tales and the Christian New Testament: simultaneously, they are fairy godmothers and Christ figures who appear in times of need to save the undeserving and sinful. Due to their deaths and sexualization, Mariela and Lucy are unfulfilled “princesses” who would never be rescued from the dominantly patriarchal, misogynistic, and male-centered community and narrative, which stands in contrast to “Rice from Ashes,” wherein women are prioritized over men in almost every aspect. Although the girls could not be rescued from the patriarchy, they are able to subtly transcend its domination by becoming fairy godmothers and Christ figures who rescue Tilo, Enero, and El Negro after they have been beaten and severely wounded by other men living on the island. The three men are punished by the patriarchy they once protected and adhered to after they commit an egregious sin: killing the river stingray and then proceeding to “chuck[ing] it in the river” without express permission or approval (Almada 51). Effectively, the patriarchy hurts itself in its inability to reconcile its conflicting views and beliefs—it is perfectly acceptable to enact violence on the innocent and vulnerable, unless one goes against unspoken and undefined expectations within a tight-knit patriarchal community.

Mariela and Lucy have been consistently hurt by systemic abuse and pedophilia throughout their lives; though it may appear that they exist to “heal” or “fix” the three men, this cannot be further from the truth. In reality, they act as martyrs of the patriarchy who rescue the undeserving and unchanged, as it is unlikely that Enero or El Negro will turn away

from a system that ultimately benefits them; however, Tilo is still young and innocent, and is the only one out of three who never objectifies or views the girls as sexual conquests.¹³ In the end, Mariela and Lucy appear as fairy godmothers who whisk the men away in a “boat” that was seemingly found by chance, implying that the girls magically summoned it to send the men away from the island (Almada 87). Their last words to the men—“Get out of here, since you can”—suggests that, though they are able to help others escape, Mariela and Lucy never will, thus endowing them with divinely limited magic, similar to some stories wherein a magical rescuer requires help from outside sources to accomplish their will, such as princes, divinity, or nature (Almada 87).

Although Christianity is not truly present within *Not a River*, Almada establishes that the girls are not merely fairy godmothers; rather, they are both fairy godmother and representation of Christ as a salvation that needs to be sacrificed before said salvation can be truly fulfilled. In “Rice from Ashes,” Cenicienta’s “little lamb” is the only thing that “keep[s] her company,” yet the stepmother demands that the animal be butchered (Bierhorst 120). Despite multiple attempts to avoid its¹⁴ death, the lamb is ultimately killed; in its guts is a “golden cup” that Cenicienta uses to draw water when a “little old man,” later revealed to be God, suddenly arrives and requests a drink (Bierhorst 123, 121-122). In the Bible and Christian iconography, Christ is often portrayed as a lamb who must be sacrificed in order to save the world from its sins, similar to how Cenicienta’s lamb had to be killed in order for the prince’s fate to come true: “On

her deathbed the queen told the prince he would someday marry a woman who would bring him a cup of gold, because this was the fate predicted by the prince's fairy godmother when he was born" (Bierhorst 122). Similarly, Mariela and Lucy must be killed not only for their transgressions against the patriarchy, but because their eventual fate was to save Tilo, Enero, and El Negro from severe injuries and potential death. It did not matter that only Tilo was truly innocent as, according to Christian doctrine, whole cities and communities will be spared for the sake of a single righteous person (Gen. 18:16-33). As Christ-like figures, Mariela and Lucy are sacrificial lambs fated for slaughter to save men who will likely never fully recognize the pain, anguish, and suffering they endured at the very same men's hands who victimized and crucified the girls for simply existing.

Selva Almada's recontextualization of "Rice from Ashes" exposes the darker, unseen potential of ancient fairy tales—what occurs behind closed doors, rampant eroticization of young girls by the patriarchy, and how princesses who rebel against the fated narrative are cruelly punished for their offenses. Almada uses a fairy tale characterized by nature, divinity, and a primarily female-focused narrative to reverse, remake, and reorient women's position and status within folk tales and her own novel. In doing so, she not only unveils the normalization of predation and silent violence committed by men unto young women but also exposes the innate power of Mariela and Lucy to act as fairy godmothers and redemptive saviors who rescue undeserving characters similarly wounded by the

patriarchy. In transcending victimization to become redeemers, the girls' actions open a way for Tilo, Enero, and El Negro to reject their current misogynistic paths littered with broken, used women; however, it is ultimately up to their decision to start anew.

Notes

¹ As far as can be found, the only other female character on the island is Mariela and Lucy's mother, Siomara, who is seen and heard during the book's chronological timeline; however, Diana Maciel, Tilo's mother, is another female character living off the island who is only encountered through flashbacks.

² Eusebio, Tilo's father, may also be considered a third main character or a secondary main character because he and his drowning continually haunt the narrative.

³ I am, of course, aware that not all animals or humans feed their babies via breastfeeding but chose the word "nursing" because it generally connotes the decision and ability to feed and care for children, regardless of how that may literally take place or look like on a day-to-day basis.

⁴ For the majority of human beings this might look like the four phases of the menstrual cycle, which takes place over the course of 24-38 days, 9 months of pregnancy, breastfeeding until a child is roughly two years, etc., though these periods of time change with most animals.

⁵ Although "Cenicienta" is a popular title for the story, I will continue to refer to the fairy tale as "Rice from Ashes" within the paper, as the version I cite uses that title over "Cenicienta;" as such, whenever I mention Cenicienta, I am referring to the girl found in "Rice from Ashes" (she is not given a name, but I will use Cenicienta for ease), rather than the story itself.

⁶ Cenicienta literally translates from Spanish to English as "ashen

one” and means “Cinderella” as a name: Cenicienta “literally describes someone covered in or associated with ashes, which is why it became the Spanish name for the fairy tale character Cinderella, who was known for sitting among the hearth’s ashes” (“Cenicienta”).

⁷ Given the fact that Argentina is predominantly Catholic, it can be assumed that Catholicism as a specific denomination is at play in “Rice from Ashes,” rather than Christianity in general.

⁸ Siomara, Mariela and Lucy’s mother, is perfectly fit for patriarchy’s standards, since she punishes and berates her daughters for their promiscuity and sexual desires (internalized misogyny); as such, the girls making decisions without her express permission and wanting to retaliate against Siomara is to also enact revenge upon the patriarchy.

⁹ The girls’ perspectives typically combine Mariela and Lucy’s actions and thoughts, as though they are one united being rather than individuals, as can be seen by the common use of “they,” “the girls,” and “we,” both in verbal communication and in narration (Almada 36-38, 40, 58, 61-64, 80, 83-84, 87). This is not to say that Mariela or Lucy never act of their own accord, but rather their behaviors, motivations, and actions are frequently merged or coincide with one another.

¹⁰ Although readers are never informed of their exact age, Enero believes that they are most likely “fifteen” or “sixteen” (Almada 38).

¹¹ Although there is an actual fishing technique where one pumps and reels their fishing rod, given the fact that the river stingray is blatantly referred to as “she” and “her” by the men, it is not a large leap to apply a

sexual sub-text to the phrase; furthermore, the fishing rod can be seen as a phallic substitution or symbol (Almada 3).

¹² It should also be mentioned that “pump” is an exact rhyme for “hump,” another word that is slang for sexual activity, typically with vulgar or offensive connotations (Almada 3; “Hump”).

¹³ If anything, the teenaged boy seems confused by sexual comments, as seen when Tilo “ask[s] what the guy meant” when one of the islanders says that Mariela and Lucy have “poison in their pussies” (Almada 39).

¹⁴ Although the lamb is only ever referred to as “it,” thus stripping the animal of any clear gender, the lamb is certainly supposed to represent Christ, as will be demonstrated (Bierhorst 120-121).

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2

L a n g u a g e , L e g a c y , a n d L o s s



Language, Legacy, and Loss

The four essays in this section analyze psychological impacts of colonialism as depicted in literature. Jocelyn Martinez analyzes the use of speculative fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, where the use of magical elements helps rewrite the narrative of despair associated with forced migrations. Logan Scott's essay on *Dictee* examines Theresa Hak Kyung Cha use of avant-garde multimedia as a tool to narrate the trauma of political exile and the loss of her native language. Julian Caro traces the socio-psychological effects of reclaiming self-worth in a society dominated by Eurocentric beauty standards in *Maud Martha*. This section concludes with Michael Ibarra's essay exploring the metaphor of spectrality from the vantage of an unintentional colonizer in *Voyage in the Dark*. The authors commentary on the generational wounds colonialism has inflicted on populations worldwide are the results of the dialectic-driven curriculum offered at CSUB.

A Voyage into Post-Colonialist Spectrality

by Michael Ibarra

Colonialism and its effects on now independent countries still haunt them to this very day. Cultures and societies were wiped out in favor of imperialist agendas, with some never fully recovering even after the occupation ended. These countries now exist in a liminal realm, with their independence clashing with the echoes of colonialism. One of the better metaphors to describe this dual nature is that of the specter. Specters refer to ghosts, existing in a space between life and death, just as post-colonial territories still exist in a midpoint between true freedom and subjugation. This metaphor, as well as the idea of duality, is ever-present within Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark*, particularly when referring to the main character Anna Morgon. Acting as a self-insert to Rhys' own thoughts, experiences, and reflections, Anna Morgon experiences firsthand the spectrality of colonialism through the lens of an unintentional colonizer, forced into adapting to her imperialist culture and yearning for the color of the Caribbean that is not hers.

It is first important to establish the origin of the spectral metaphor. While it is accurate to assess Seolji Han's article on the subject as the most comprehensive, the idea of the spectral metaphor was outlined by Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran. Within the introduction of the collection *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, they state that "...spectrality is a central theme..." within not just *Voyage in the Dark*, but all of Rhys' writ-

ings (Johnson and Moran 6). They theorize this as Rhys often described herself as ghostly, even though she denies autobiographical elements in her novels (Johnson and Moran 7). Regardless of the intentionality behind the similarities, Anna Morgan has elements of Rhys within her, and one of those is the ghostly feelings they share. The very first page of the novel makes this clear, as Anna narrates that in London, “The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different” (Rhys 7). While not an inherent allusion to the specter, Rhys indicates a nebulous otherness Anna feels and layers it on top of her senses. One can expect a foreign land to look different and smell different, but to state that the internal sense of self is different creates an uncertainty in the reader that feels difficult to relate to yet resonates with. The otherness is described in such an uncanny way that we, as readers, begin to feel the spectral nature in the text itself. This intention in the form reflects the claims of Johnson and Moran, as they state, “Both thematically and stylistically, then, the representation of a haunted and haunting sensibility is at the core of Rhys’s aesthetic” (8). Not just thematically is the specter present, but so too in the structure of the text, the word choice, and the very fabric of the novel. It is the aesthetic values that they focus on in the introduction, and certainly, it is part of the focus of Hans’ article as well. However, where they differ is in terms of scope.

Han is of agreement with the aspect of Johnson and Moran’s introduction that deals with aesthetics. She states as much in the very title, purposefully calling it “The Spectral Aesthetics in Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in*

the Dark.” Han goes on to state that “...spectrality in *Voyage in the Dark* functions not solely as a tool for representing individual psychology but also as a narrative strategy” (204). This is readily apparent in the text, but Han goes further to connect the narrative strategy in terms of a post-colonial reading of the novel, particularly with the idea of collective subjectivity. She states that “The spectral appearances of circumatlantic connectivity in Anna’s hallucinating narration show Rhys’s subtle understanding of the sufferings of slavery, which haunts the present” (Han 215). While the connectivity of the Atlantic is obvious to anyone with cursory knowledge of the last few centuries, Han seems to create a strong metaphor for the idea of a spectral connection. Hundreds of millions of years ago, the continents of the Atlantic were connected as one in the form of Pangea. Now, during and after the colonial era, that connection exists as an indirect one; despite being separated by oceans, they are connected by the crops they traded, the resources they stole, and the people they enslaved. This connection, not physical yet still existing, becomes spectral. How Rhys chooses to showcase this is through the novel’s form.

Choosing a first-person narrative allows readers to feel the liminal state Anna finds herself in via her own thoughts and observations. The beginning portion is filled with memories and dreams of the Caribbean. As the novel goes on and Anna’s life becomes increasingly tragic, the narration begins to deteriorate. The idea of hauntings pop up, such as in part three where Rhys writes, “It was one of those days when you can see the ghosts of all the other lovely days. You drink a bit and watch the ghosts

of all the lovely days that have ever been from behind a glass” (122).

The memories had, before, been positive. Now, they represent a fleeting hallucination of better times, never to be experienced. The choice to call these memories *ghosts* is important. It personifies the memories, as well as subtly indicating their liminality. The personification allows them to have a great emphasis and impact on Anna’s psychology, remembering them as if they were old friends rather than fleeting echoes of her senses. Glass is also an important choice in this passage; it is transparent, tricking those who do not know better into thinking there is nothing in the way. In a way, glass as a material is spectral, seeming to exist and not exist at the same time. However, these observations focus solely on Anna’s experiences, which are inherently limited despite being the very form of the novel. Harald Loendorf notes as such in the article “Two Tunes: Jean Rhys’ *Voyage in the Dark*,” by stating that “In order to fully understand her motivation and behaviour, one has to take into account that her upbringing as a coloniser in a colonial environment, her unexpected identification with the colonised, her gender and the way she is treated in consequence of the above all” (24). This reframing of Anna is important to the spectrality of the novel, as she is not simply in the liminal space of being Black or being White, but rather in between being a colonizer and being colonized.

The distinction between the spectrality of race versus that of colonization, while seemingly irrelevant, is important when considering the feminist qualities of the novel. Women under patriarchal hierarchies are, in their own ways, colonized. Loendorf establishes this reading by stating

that “British colonization is not only a colonisation [sic] of geographically remote regions, or a general indoctrination of minds, but means an attempt to suppress female minds, to invade territories of the female soul” (32). Perhaps no greater example of this reading exists than Hester, Anna’s stepmother and representative of the “British” nature that Anna tries to adapt to. The first introduction of Hester says as much as Anna speaks on her voice, stating that “Now that I’ve spoken you can hear that I’m a lady. I have spoken and I suppose you now realize that I’m an English gentlewoman” (Rhys 50). The unique descriptor is full of unspoken sarcasm and spite that the reader understands as Hester cuts Anna off and reveals her bigotry. The descriptors are important here; Anna states Hester is a prim and proper “lady,” indicating a snobby undertone in her stepmother. “Gentlewoman” also follows English, indicating it as an important trait for Hester and subtly revealing a colonized state of mine. Anna’s encounter with the obvious “English gentlewoman” allows the reader to understand why she clings to the Caribbean. Hester detests this about Anna, wanting her to fit into the status quo and become “colonized” as she is. This is not to say, however, that Anna is free from the colonist label, as her very identity exists in a spectrum of such a distinction.

Anna is a White Creole, which is in itself a spectral label. To be white is to be, racially, a part of the colonizers, but to be creole is to be, ethnically, a part of the colonized. Anna knows this and projects a feeling of self-hatred in her identity to others. At one point she states, “I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white,” referring to Fran-

cine, a black servant at her father's Caribbean estate whom she is close to (Rhys 62). There is no indication that Francine does dislike Anna, let alone dislike her for her race. This hatred is simply a projection, a fear of whiteness and what it means. Anna goes on to say, "...I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being white and getting like Hester, and all the things you get old and sad and everything" (Rhys 62). This self-hatred is palpable, but it also indicates a fetishization of Blackness. To be Black is to face the full brunt of colonial occupation, a thought that does not even occur to Anna. Francine as a character is also full of unknowns. Despite the admiration Anna feels for her, little is known about Francine as a character. This is, of course, the negatives of such an internalized narration, but there is a purpose in the flat characterization. Han observes that "The opacity of Francine's character in *Voyage in the Dark* seems to indicate Rhys's own frustration over her status as a white Creole and a descendant of a slaveholding family" (216). Perhaps self-consciously, Anna, and as such Rhys, feels it is impossible to empathize with Black Caribbeans due to her ancestral crimes. These crimes haunt Anna, acting as specters that hang over her. However, she refuses to acknowledge, or lacks the ability to do so, the humanity behind either side of the colonizers or colonists. To Anna, Hester is an old, decrepit colonizer, not a woman who has been withered by a patriarchal society to parrot British exceptionalism. To Anna, Francine is the epitome of the Caribbean, not a woman of color trying to survive under the boot of imperialism.

Due to their inseparable similarities, some argue that this blinding

trait of Anna's reflects Rhys' own blindness. Such is the case with Mary Hanna's "White Women's Sins or Patterns of Choice and Consequence in the Two Endings of *Voyage in the Dark*," in which she argues that the original ending of the novel cements the post-colonial reading much stronger than the one Rhys ended up publishing. This original ending leads to Anna dying of blood loss from the abortion, leaving an already tragic tale irreversibly horrific. Much of Hanna's criticism backs up much of the established characterization of Anna thus far, and thus the characterization of the novel's form as well. Hanna observes as Anna dismisses the possibility of being a cleaning lady that "To this white Creole girl who insists she 'hated being white,' being a servant is not an option: it is not 'white' to do physical work, and it is not acceptable to serve whiteness while sweating and suffering in charcoal" (148). There is a form of hypocrisy in this thought process, as her desire to be Black does not come from any desire to live the experiences of colonized people of color. The culture of the Caribbean is all Anna desires, not the reality of it. This is, of course, expected of Anna as a woman who fetishizes the Caribbean she immigrated from. To Hanna, this fetishization is more accurately naivety. Anna certainly demonstrates childlike traits outside of her refusal of labor jobs. Like children, she daydreams, shown through her interspliced memories of the Caribbean. There is also passivity in Anna's actions and words, many of which are unspoken and regulated to her narration. Thusly, if Anna is a fragment of Rhys and Anna holds all of these negative traits, is this then not a reflection of the author?

Hanna's main argument in her article comes down to preferring the original ending. This ending held a piece of memory before her death, one that implicated a very young Anna Morgan in a racial tirade due to her rage toward Hester. Hanna states that "The published ending excises the moment of internal psychological and emotional epiphany when Anna's split-self fully integrates as an 'I' before her death" (139). By remembering her sins as she dies, Anna is, in some ways, absolving them upon her death. She is finally taking a side, that of the Black Creole, looking to the English side with only contempt. Hanna ends her article by stating that Rhys' "original ending changes the pattern of the entire text from being a novel of a failed love affair and displacement told by an English 'tart' to being a West Indian emigrant woman's tale of redemption that interrogates the construction of gendered Creole whiteness in colonial Dominica" (160). This conclusion, however, exists only without the framework of the specter. There is merit to the original ending of *Voyage in the Dark*, but if published, the spectral thematics of the novel cease their haunting of the text. Anna Morgan is put to rest in the original, unable to be burdened by her liminal nature any longer. Yet, that is of course not the case with the published version, with the final lines of narration as Anna stares at a ray of light being, "I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about being new and fresh. And about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And about starting all over again, all over again..." (Rhys 159). She does not find happiness, nor does she experience irreversible tragedy. She simply experiences repetition. Repetition

is a common element of the novel's form and thus is a common element of Anna herself. In this circular, reciprocal pattern lies the spectral, liminal space between beginning and end. Specters have no end any longer; they exist now only to observe and yearn for something that no longer exists. The colonized do so as well, existing in a perpetual state of yearning for the haunting of colonialism to cease. This, as a white creole, is Anna's closest tie to the Caribbean she loves.

Rhys, as carefully as she planned the language of *Voyage in the Dark*, so too planned Anna's characterization. Anne Cunningham is one to note Rhys' usage of "negative feminism," stating that "the Rhysian protagonist demonstrates that a feminine subjectivity based on negation and failure is preferable to the prescribed choices available to women" (376). With the post-colonial, spectral, and self-inserted framework in mind, Rhys is being honest in her ability to truly connect with the tragedies of colonialism. She is not like Anna. She can reflect on her situation, producing a masterpiece of literature that underpins her liminal sense of self. Happy endings for women, and especially women of color, were nigh impossible at the time without sacrificing the very aspects of oneself. Compromises need to be made, just as Rhys compromised her ending. Anna could have lived a normal life if she chose to conform, but to do so would rob her of herself, that being the naïve and daydreaming woman who longs for the warmth of the Caribbean. There is of course death, as Hanna prefers. However, that is not an intentional choice Anna makes in either version of the novel. Rhys' published version admits to a much

more tragic truth: there is no choice for Anna that would not change her. Her only choice is to live a colonized life or to die free of such a burden. Then, there is the in-between where she lies: the specter, the space the colonized lay in and the space women are forced into under English patriarchy. A ghost exists between life and between death, haunting the world again and again, temporally stuck in that moment in time. Thus, Anna's only possible fate where she can exist, and be true to her identity is in her tragic, yearning haze. Perhaps in an attempt of a cyclical structure, or by pure coincidence Rhys' second line of the novel cements this, being, "It was almost like being born again" (Rhys 7).

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Maud's Journey for Love: A Postcolonial & Socio-Psychological Reading
of *Maud Martha*
by Julian Caro

Throughout key moments of Maud Martha's life, which are presented as vignettes within the novel, she can be seen struggling to reconcile her natural human desire to be loved and her damaging notions of self-worth. These feelings of inferiority stem from her living in 1920s and 1930s America as a Black woman, where the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture depicts black Americans and black women in particular as being less desirable. It is due to these lingering effects of a colonized culture that she has been subjected to experience the effects of double consciousness; however, Maud reclaims her agency over such forces by proving to herself that she is fundamentally a "good" person who is worthy of love.

Maud has a satiable and human desire for love, which remains mostly unfulfilled throughout her life. This longing for emotional affection was created from a lack of love in her youth, and can be observed within the opening vignette titled "descriptions of Maud Martha," where she vainly compares herself to her older sister Helen and decides that she is not as beautiful. She further notes that "To be cherished was the dearest wish of the heart of Maud Martha Brown" (Brooks 344). Maud yearns to be cared about in a loving way, signifying the inadequacy of such love, through her desire. This emotional scarcity can further be seen through her appreciation for dandelions. Maud's primary fondness for dandelions

is due to their “everydayness” or commonness that is associated with the flower, as well as their lack of intricacy despite fitting within the flower classification (Brooks 344), further reflecting her self-perception as an individual. Thus, Maud’s young and impressionable mind formulated unstable ideals around her self-worth.

The Effects of Postcolonialism

Maud’s inability or difficulty to obtain love is not due to any fault of her own, but rather due to the lingering effects of colonization, which have manifested through the negative perception that others have displaced onto Maud, resulting in her internalization. Black Americans have been made to believe that, due to their African features, they are inferior and therefore less desirable. Maud exhibits this sort of thinking when she speaks of her own beauty, saying, “Pretty would be a little dream-colored thing with curly hair. Or, at the very lowest, pretty would be a little curly-haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it. Whereas, I am the color of cocoa straight...” (Brooks 33). Maud reveals that she believes that dark brown skin is not “pretty” or beautiful. She has been conditioned by society to believe that she is not capable of the label of pretty, at least the type of beauty that has been propagated to her.

Postcolonialist critic Frantz Fanon writes about the origin of this inferiority in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, specifically about black males:

If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties ~or him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation.

(Fanon)

Fanon's idea is applicable to Maud because she constantly compares her phenotypes, such as her dark skin or her hair, to those of a white woman. This notion that her black features are genetically inferior creates conflict within Maud's self-esteem, further deteriorating her sense of desirability.

This battle for love remains as an undercurrent in Maud's psyche, influencing her actions and even her attitudes, which she attempts to reason against. In the chapter "Low Yellow," Maud is reasoning to herself that she is still worthy of earning Paul's love and of having a marriage, "...I am what he would call —sweet, and I am good, and he will marry me. ...He will fight, of course. He will decide that he must think a long time before he lets that happen here. But in the end I'll hook him..." (Brooks 34). Despite society making Maud feel inferior, she is keen to have her desires met. She believes that she is enough and that, despite her features, she can still obtain Paul's hand in marriage because she is a good person. Scholar, Valerie Frazier, speaks about Maud's relation to Paul's features in her article, "Domestic Epic Warfare in *Maud Martha*," writing, "Maud Martha feels that her dark skin is a hindrance in her relationship with Paul,

her beau, who demonstrates society's Eurocentric standards of beauty. She locates the attraction of Paul as a site of battle, internalizing feelings of inferiority and doubt because she possesses African features," (4). Maud is not only told that her black features are less desirable, but she also believes that Paul's features, who more closely match the socially dominant white man's features, are beautiful. This only heightens her feelings of anxiety surrounding her physical beauty and worth, creating a sense of imposter syndrome within her relationship with Paul.

The ideology against which Maud battles is reaffirmed to her by local black newspapers, confirming a widespread sense of internalized racism. Maud wonders as to why the black-owned newspaper would spread self-destructive beauty standards which are tied to Eurocentric notions of beauty; "Negro [presses] front pages beamed the usual representations of womanly beauty, pale and pompadoured..." (Brooks 114; Zay 68). This indicates how black Americans have echoed Frantz Fanon's ideas of being less desirable because they are not members of the "superior" race but of the socially "inferior" race. This attitude affects their self-esteem and self-worth. The colonization of African Americans began with the slave trade as, they were brought to a new land, where they were forced to endure years of slavery within America. However, the effects of their colonization persisted, even in a "free" state that did not permit slavery, such as Chicago. Where notions of black beauty being inferior were continuously spread, even through media such as black newspapers.

Maud's submergence in a country that sees her as inferior has forced her to undergo the feeling of seeing herself through the eyes of the dominant Anglo race, and thus to see herself as a member at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Maud experiences this heightened form of perception when she is in the playhouse with Paul:

"There must be a play going on in there and this is probably an intermission," Maud Martha whispered again. "I don't know why you feel you got to whisper," whispered Paul. "Nobody else is whispering in here" ...Maud Martha laughed a nervous defiant little laugh; and spoke loudly. "There certainly isn't any reason to whisper. Silly, huh." (Brooks 47)

It is here where Maud is conscientious of how she and Paul may be perceived, as she whispers in an attempt not to disturb anyone else more than what they might have done simply with their black skin and their presence. What Maud is experiencing is, described by W.E.B Du Bois, in his essay, "The Souls of Black Folk" in which he coins the term, double consciousness or a sense of, "... always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings..." (Du Bois). It is because of this double consciousness that Maud whispers in the playhouse when no one else is whispering. However, once Paul makes her

aware of her double consciousness, she speaks up and even belittles her behavior as being “silly” (Brooks 47). When Maud was not being foolish, but was feeling the effects of double consciousness, which was heightened by her and Paul being the only people of color in the playhouse.

Another instance in which Maud sees herself not through her own eyes, but through the eyes of the socially “superior” class is when she once again applies white beauty standards to herself, but through the lens of her husband, Paul. She begins to ruminate over what Paul must be thinking as they are walking together, and believes that he is conscious of her own blackness:

He wonders as we walk in the street, about the thoughts of the people who look at us. Are they thinking that he could do no better than—me? Then he thinks, Well, hmp! Well, huh!—all the little good-lookin’ dolls that have wanted *him*—all the little sweet high-yellows that have ambled slowly past *his* front door—What he would like to tell those secretly snickering ones!—That any day out of the week he can do better than this black gal. (Brooks 34)

This worry about Paul’s thoughts comes off as extremely negative towards herself, and it displays not only Maud’s difficulty surrounding her self-esteem but also indicates an unresolved conflict between who she is and who she is not. This display of double consciousness is particularly interesting because she not only sees herself through the perception of white men and women, but she also recognizes that Paul must see her through this same lens (Washington 456) and must feel embarrassed to claim her as his wife.

Maud is forced to feel the harrowing effects of double consciousness, which is in itself an effect of colonialism, within her own marriage.

The socio-psychological effects that double consciousness and colonialism have had on Maud are not always explicit, but rather internal. In the foreword to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that:

Colonial women exhibit their identification with whiteness, for example, by attempting neurotically to avoid black men and to get close to (and ultimately cohabit with) white men; a process Fanon dubbed 'lactification.' This self-contempt manifests itself in other ways: as anxiety, in the presence of whites, about revealing one's 'natural' Negro inferiority; in a pathological hypersensitivity that Fanon dubbed 'affective erethism.' (Appiah)

Although Maud does not completely seek lactification, by pursuing a white male, most likely due to feelings surrounding her own blackness. She does pursue Paul, who has slightly more Anglo features. Maud has a conflict, in which complete lactification would result in an admission of her own disparity as a black woman. Yet, Maud does exhibit affective erethism through the symptoms of anxiety when she is around white people in the playhouse, or even when she negatively fantasizes about what Paul thinks of her. Maud is torn between accepting herself and her black skin, and between listening to society and being ashamed of who she is.

Maud has attempted to overcome personal misconceptions surrounding her self-worth by attempting to be a fundamentally “good” person, all in an attempt to earn love. In the vignette “at the Regal,” Maud comes to the decision very early in her life that, “What she wanted was to donate to the world a good Maud Martha” (Brooks 14). The decision in itself is an attempt to reclaim agency over her damaged self-perception by deciding to be someone who, in her mind, is worthy of love, a good person. This reveals that Maud has been taught to believe that love is not unconditional and will only be received if she works hard enough to obtain it. Furthermore, this implies that Maud has not been good enough to earn love, which she has internalized, influencing her life.

Maud learns that she is a good person, not in a grand way but in her kitchenette, in a microcosm that reflects her character to herself, allowing her agency over her self-identity. Maud’s epiphany regarding her own goodness is seen in “Maud Martha Spares the Mouse,” in which she frees a mouse that she has caught from the trap in her kitchenette:

Suddenly she was conscious of a new cleanness in her. A wide air walked in her. A life had blundered its way into her power and it had been hers to preserve or destroy. She had not destroyed. In the center of that simple restraint was—creation. She had created a piece of life. It was wonderful. “Why,” she thought, as her height doubled, “why, I’m good! I am *good*.” (Brooks 45)

This is a moment in which Maud deems herself as being a “good” person. She has complete power over another being, and ultimately decides not to end its life but to spare it. Therefore, the mercy that she grants the mouse signifies to herself that she is a good person; therefore, marking one step closer to her being worthy of this earned love that she seeks.

Cocoa is hugely significant in Maud’s life, as she navigates racism and belittlement that question her self-worth. The first instance in which we see what cocoa symbolized to Maud is during “Tradition and Maud Martha,” where Maud’s mother annually prepares cocoa while Christmas tree decorating is done. Cocoa represents a sense of familiarity and an act of love to Maud. This is further echoed when Maud quits after a day’s work with Mrs. Burns-Cooper because she is treated inhumanely, and decides “Why, one was a human being. One wore clean nightgowns. One loved one’s baby. One drank cocoa by the fire—or the gas range—come the evening, in the wintertime” (Brooks 104). Cocoa, to Maud, signifies her very humanity. To Maud, cocoa is what requires her to stand up against being treated sub-humanely due to her race and is the reason why she preserves her humanity by quitting.

Acts of service are important to Maud Martha’s way of showing affection, as hot cocoa is frequently prepared for herself and for her family in a display of love to others, which can also be seen as an attempt for love to be reciprocated. In “Mother Comes to Call” Maud discusses her own insecurities by pointing towards her sister Helen as being “charming” and “pretty” traits she does not find within herself, when her mother consoles

her by saying, “You’ve always been wonderful, dear. . . .I always say you make the best cocoa in the family” (Brooks 108). Although this may seem like a bitter attempt at consoling Maud, it conveys much more than what is audibly stated by her mother. This compliment serves as a signifier to Maud that she is worthy and good at something, even if it is as trivial as making cocoa. Even more importantly, it establishes to Maud that she is loved by her Mother for her own qualities, even if she lacks qualities that her sister Helen possesses. This revelation creates a moment of self-acceptance for Maud, thus marking a pivotal victory against her insecurities.

Despite the prejudices that Maud has faced, from both her family and society, she has not allowed them to dominate her thinking, but has found a way to minimize their hold on her, to release her from any pent-up animosity. In the essay titled “Creative Multivalence: Social Engagement beyond Naturalism in Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha*,” scholar Megan K. Ahern argues that Maud has had to:

...acknowledge the larger influence of light-skin privilege in society, possibly rendering her family’s bias less personal in her view. These thoughts, perhaps, allow Maud Martha to reconcile her feelings of love and loyalty to her family with her experience of betrayal, and may also allow the reader to understand how, despite this widespread and long-lasting unjust treatment, Maud Martha is able subsequently to preserve as much equanimity as she does throughout her life. (322)

Maud is able to understand the privilege that light skin carries, that she

does not benefit from, but is actively punished for not having. She does this in order to accept how society is and to allow herself the ability to move forward. It further allows her to replace any hatred that she may bear for love, through empathizing with those who have not empathized with her. This presents a shift in her ideology, which allows her to love others despite their lack of love.

Maud has an observable shift within her ideology throughout the novel, which allows her to combat her negative self-perceptions. Indicating her growth is the chapter titled “On Thirty-fourth Street.” Maud says, “On the whole, she felt, life was more comedy than tragedy. . . . Sooner or later one could find something to laugh at in almost every situation” (Brooks 105). This perspective indicates growth within Maud because she has the ability to laugh at tragedy, which gives her power over the uncontrollable and unalterable past. Megan Ahern echoes these sentiments, saying, “Moreover, Maud Martha’s understanding, her ability to contemplate intellectually and empathetically the individuals and society around her, allows her some measure of mental freedom— or at least independence— some measure of self-determination despite it all” (321). Maud learns to laugh at mishaps and allows herself to brush them off as they come. She learns that life is not a constant and serene photograph but rather an album of storms and sunsets, but either way, they will not last forever.

Maud comes to realize that the love she has always sought out was from within. Within the last chapter titled, “Back From the Wars!” Maud looks at the lastingness of the dandelion, or the “commonest flower” (114),

which she has likened to herself. Despite the flower's intricacy or specialness, she realizes that it is still a flower, and despite all of the man-made wars and horrors, the dandelion remains. The dandelion serves as a metaphor for her, in which she learns to love and appreciate herself as she does the dandelion. This revelation allows Maud to feel as if she is both "ready for anything" and "not afraid of anything" (Brooks 113), indicating that she has broken free from her largest insecurity surrounding self-love.

The effects of living in a postcolonial society where Maud is seen as "inferior" include her seeing herself through the eyes of the dominant social class, which has created an intense tug of war within her mind, hindering her beliefs surrounding love, which she is eventually able to win through making sense of her experiences and of the world around her. The story of *Maud Martha* embodies the constant struggle that comes with challenging negative self-perceptions and is an extraordinary battle of learning to love oneself. The novel invokes the idea that humans remain because of their humanity, not in spite of it.

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The Silence of Postcolonial Identity in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*

by Logan Scott

Language. Words. Speech. All are central to one's identity. But what if you lost them all? How would you cope? Korean American writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha experienced such a loss when she was exiled from her home country in 1963 following a military coup in South Korea. She lost access to her Korean identity; she was forced to speak another language. Her roots were torn apart, and she would spend the rest of her life attempting to reconstruct a sense of belonging. In her 1982 postcolonial memoir *Dictee*, Cha recalls her life experiences as a political exile through an avant-garde, fragmented writing style; this mirrors the inner turmoil she faced over her fractured identity. Her shaky identity forced her into a silence that she must break to tell her story and give a voice to all political exiles around the globe. Regardless of her struggles with self-expression, Cha emerges victorious with *Dictee*, a powerful work of multimedia that rejects literary conventions. *Dictee*'s use of fragmented narration, poetry, photography, and historical allusions allows Cha to transcend the boundaries of identity and explore her existence as a postcolonial woman.

Cha is a premier postcolonial artist due to her experience suffering through multiple eras of colonialism in Korean history: the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953), both of which had lasting impacts on Cha's national identity. *Dictee* primarily high-

lights Cha's Korean identity as it relates to language, the loss of which has left Cha in a limbo of identity. During the Japanese occupation, the Korean language was banned, and the Japanese language was forced upon all Koreans. Cha writes, "The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours" (Cha 45). The Koreans' mother tongue had been banned under threat of violence from Japanese forces. In the chapter "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*" from her book *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe argues that the subjugation of the Korean language under Japanese rule contributed to the "delegitimizing of Korean history, language, and experience" (Lowe 138). In Cha's life, this delegitimization of her Korean identity was worsened through a forced exile to the United States, where her native tongue was further suppressed through the forced acquisition of English and French.

During Cha's immigration to the United States, she felt her identity was stripped away. Her Koreanness was stolen, only to be given a facade of American identity. Encountering U.S. customs, Cha declares, "Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals" (Cha 56). Her nationality and language are displaced; she is an outsider in the States, and her native Korean tongue is, once again, colonized. While Cha may have found a temporary escape from the Korean War, her identity crisis only worsens, for her "language, history, national origin, race, and gender are at odds with the formation offered by the promise of [U.S.] citizenship" (Lowe

144). No matter how hard she tries to assimilate, her mere existence prevents her from being accepted in America. Thus, in 1979, Cha returned to Korea to reclaim her identity; this venture proved fruitless as she was no longer treated as an authentic Korean, writing, “They say you look other than you say. As if you didn’t know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt” (Cha 57). There is no longer any semblance of “home” for Cha. She belongs nowhere.

Cha’s status as a political exile, belonging in neither Korea nor the United States, leaves her feeling powerless. She will no longer be fully Korean, and she will never be accepted as a true American. Her identity crisis is deeply traumatic and manifests in silence, which Cha describes in vivid detail: “Bite the tongue. Between the teeth. Swallow / deep. Deeper. Swallow. Again, even more. / Until there would be no more organ” (Cha 71). This disturbing imagery perfectly visualizes how “it is often the physical body that bears the traces of colonial disfiguring and mutilation” (Lowe 139). The pain of political exile permanently scars Cha spiritually. On top of the physical pain she experienced, Cha is left physically incapable of telling her story, showcasing how the pains of colonialism shatter the very foundation of one’s identity, especially concerning language.

Circumventing her forced silence, Cha employs various alternative methods to narrate her tragic story: intertextual references to Greek mythology, uncaptioned photographs that evoke her feelings of suffering, and stories of other Korean female martyrs. When she cannot tell her story, she turns elsewhere to find the power she lacks. When she cannot speak, Cha

inserts multimedia elements, such as a still from 1928's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, to help tell her story (119). Such stills evoke the tragedies of other female martyrs with whom Cha shares her pain.

Elsewhere, Cha narrates the tragedy of Yu Guan Soon, a student revolutionary who was martyred for protesting the Japanese occupation. Her death was “One martyrdom. For the history of one nation. Of one people” (Cha 37). Cha’s allusion to other female sufferings is an effective storytelling aid, but it has also been the subject of much criticism; the nonlinearity of these choices decreases the text’s approachability. Such unconventional methods of storytelling have historically been a barrier to entry for general audiences encountering *Dictee*; however, literary critic Abeer Al-Sarrani maintains that “the cinematic techniques...can be visually analyzed as part of a postcolonial-feminist montage about the history of Korean women under Japanese colonization” (6). Cha utilizes these figures to situate herself within a long line of women who have suffered under colonialism, thus making a powerful statement on colonialism’s cyclical nature. Those who have suffered before Cha inspire her to endure and break free of her colonial identity.

Dictee’s avant-garde nature, with its plethora of fragmented sentences and uncaptioned images, is its most notable yet controversial feature. While these elements certainly decrease the text’s readability, they increase the audience’s psychological identification with the suffering described in the book. The text’s unconventional writing style leaves audiences feeling “alienated, lost, confused, and sometimes helpless,

mimicking some incidents of the colonial experiences of some Korean women” (Al-Sarrani 3). Readers’ discomfort while reading *Dictee* mimics the inner turmoil that Cha and other political exiles experience when they are displaced and left unable to obtain a sense of normalcy. In narrating her experiences, Cha increases the visibility of political exiles, breaking the historical silence that Cha captures through a series of poetic phrases: “Disguise. Cache. Mask. Veil. / Obscure. Cloud. Shade. Eclipse. Covert.” (Cha 132). With their suffering brought to light, audiences can empathize with political exiles, vicariously experiencing their unimaginable pain.

Dictee powerfully showcases Cha’s intense struggle to reclaim her identity, a struggle she would never overcome as she was tragically murdered shortly after the book’s publication in 1982. *Dictee*’s outstanding use of multimedia, along with its portrayal of uniquely Asian American experiences, left it a legacy as a foundational work in Asian American studies. Cha’s narration of multiple stories in *Dictee* allows her to “transgress the boundaries of race, temporality, and linguistic differences to construct a uniquely powerful autobiography” that defies categorization (Jeong 427). *Dictee* is an unsolvable puzzle. No matter how many ways scholars tackle Cha’s seminal work, audiences may never truly grasp the full extent of the pain Cha conveys through multimedia expression in her work. *Dictee*’s unorthodox style, rife with cryptic narration, poetry, historical allusions, and still photography, has left it open to interpretation since its publication, making the book a staple of classrooms everywhere as audiences glimpse into postcolonial suffering and the struggles of self-expression while re-

claiming one’s identity.

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Beyond Realism: Rewriting the Refugee Narrative in *Exit West*

by Jocelyn Martinez

In the novel, *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid follows the journey of Saeed and Nadia, two young adults forced to flee their unnamed, war-torn city as violence closes in around their home. At first, it starts as a realistic depiction of life under political instability while portraying familiar settings and situations. However, soon it shifts into speculative fiction as Hamid introduces magical elements, most notably the black doors and vignettes. Through these magical black doors that collapse time and scattered vignettes of other displaced migrants, Hamid bridges the gap between readers and refugees, making the experience of forced migration imaginable for those who have never lived it. Additionally, Hamid's *Exit West* offers a speculative framework that reshapes readers' understanding of refugee narratives by drawing on the genres of children's stories and fairy tales. In doing so, Hamid demonstrates that the genre of speculative fiction can accomplish what real refugee narratives often cannot—it can imagine futures of possibility rather than endings of despair. This approach ultimately rewrites migration from a distant tragedy into an intimate, universal experience, one we all share through change and loss, demanding that displacement be met not with fear or resistance but with acceptance that harmony is possible.

Hamid bridges the gap between readers and refugees by combining realism and speculative fiction, making the disorientation that refugees

experience during displacement feel comprehensible. The novel opens in a recognizable, almost familiar world, detailing things like university classes and cafés. Hamid writes, “It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class . . . for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying”

(4). Here, Hamid pairs what seems like just ordinary routines with sudden violence to establish the destabilizing reality of life in a war zone. Within this unnamed and unstable city, individuals are forced to go on with their everyday lives while simultaneously being surrounded by catastrophic events that gradually become part of everyday life. But soon, without any warning or explanation, Hamid introduces magical doors that are able to take an individual across the world, destabilizing that very realism. He explains rumors regarding these doors “that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away,” and while most people dismiss these rumors as “non-sense [or] the superstitions of the feeble-minded,” Nadia and Saeed find themselves looking at their own doors differently: “every morning, when she woke, Nadia looked over at her front door, and at the doors to her bathroom, her closet, her terrace . . . Saeed did much the same” (Hamid 73). By doing so, Hamid forces readers to adopt the same mindset as migrants, like Saeed and Nadia, who have no choice but to cling to hope and view every door as a potential escape. It is their sole motivation to keep going in their disastrous world. This shared universal experience allows readers to gain the refugee’s perspective rather than simply observe it from a distance. Scholar Ewa Kowal notes, “*Exit West* is much simpler in form

and has the feel of a fable . . . and can be interpreted as the author's chosen approach to addressing the difficult topic of the refugee crisis" (30). As Kowal mentioned, the novel does more than address a complex topic. Through this approach, Hamid suggests that displacement is not unique to refugees, removing the divide between "us" and "them." By combining real-world details with speculative fairy-tale elements, Hamid's novel makes the refugee experience of forced migration feel like something that could happen to anyone in a world that is both recognizable and strange, successfully instilling empathy in readers.

Rather than focusing solely on Saeed and Nadia, Hamid interrupts their story with short vignettes of migrants from around the world crossing these magical black doors. These migrant stories unfold in places such as Britain and Tokyo, coming together to create a collective narrative that makes displacement feel global and interconnected instead of individual. Researcher Kelsey Madison Dietrich notes that by using these speculative elements, such as vignettes, Hamid can "carefully articulate the challenges, ethical issues, emotional strife, and trauma that people experience on the other side of the magical door when they have entered a new location" (11). As Dietrich highlights, the vignettes rewrite the refugee narrative by illustrating the migrant experience beyond the physical journey, showing what follows their arrival through these magical doors. They critique how migrants are often negatively perceived while also revealing the real difficulties of starting over in unfamiliar places. For instance, the novel suddenly travels to San Diego, where "[an] old man asked the officer whether

it was Mexicans that had been coming through, or was it Muslims . . . [he] wondered where he should go, and thinking about it, realized he couldn't come up with a single place" (Hamid 49-51). Through this vignette, Hamid exposes xenophobia through the old man's reaction to migrant arrivals. He views every single individual as a threat, grouping all migrants together. When the officer does not clarify anything, his fear becomes so overwhelming that he contemplates leaving, but he finds that there is no real escape. Ironically, this shows the old man becoming exactly what he fears, highlighting that anyone can become a migrant. In addition, the vignettes universalize the migrant experience, depicting the emotional and physical toll of displacement. Hamid describes a man struggling to emerge "out of this darkness . . . [wiggling] with great effort, his hands gripping either side of the doorway as though pulling himself up against gravity . . . With a final push he was through, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal" (9). Here, the migrant is not portrayed as a threat but as a vulnerable, afraid individual seeking a better future, as many others do when they decide to cross the doors. Through this vivid imagery, the vignette portrays migration as a painful rebirth. Displacement strips away every ounce of familiarity and forces migrants to start over in unfamiliar places as if they are being born again. This emphasizes that migration is not rare or exceptional; it is a shared reality of modern life that crosses all physical borders.

Now, some critics have debated whether *Exit West*'s universalizing approach fosters an empathetic understanding between migrants and

natives or instead oversimplifies the refugee experience. Critic Yogita Goyal argues that *Exit West*'s universalizing approach "risks banalizing the experience of migration in the way that Said had warned against, turning a particular experience into a metaphor for the human condition, undifferentiated by place or power" (251). To Goyal, Hamid's approach is very problematic. She claims that by portraying migration as a universal experience, Hamid ignores the forces that produce displacement in the first place. This approach fails to hold nations accountable for their roles in global conflict and allows readers in powerful countries like the United States and Russia to believe they understand a displacement they have never truly experienced. However, scholars like Gabriella Pishotti argue that the speculative elements actually serve a very different purpose. In her article, she notes, "[t]hese novels utilize the tropes of fairy tales in order to make the unfamiliar experiences of refugees comprehensible while accounting for the incomprehensibility of the violence and suffering experienced" (Pishotti 60). Contrary to Goyal's claim of oversimplification, Pishotti emphasizes that the speculative framework allows readers to better understand the emotional reality of displacement. This very universalization makes the unfamiliar feel comprehensible without erasing its trauma. Hamid's narrative supports this as seen in the novel, when he portrays the excruciating emotional reality of displacement in ways that go beyond simple universal human experience, creating empathy for his readers. When Nadia promises Saeed's father to care for Saeed as they flee, the novel reveals a devastating truth about forced migration: "when we migrate, we murder from our

lives those we leave behind” (Hamid 98). When refugees leave, they do not simply abandon their homes but also their families. It is not a universal metaphor but a way in which Hamid uses the speculative framework to make readers feel the unbearable weight migrants endure. By adopting a speculative approach, Hamid does not erase the trauma of migrants, but instead creates a universal framework that makes the unimaginable reality of refugee experiences understandable to those who have never directly experienced it. Rather than creating a narrative that makes all displacement read as identical, the novel allows readers to access experiences that would otherwise remain unimaginable.

By ending the novel fifty years in the future, Hamid rewrites migration not as a crisis to solve but as a normalized reality. Moreover, he draws on elements of children’s stories and fairy tales to offer a hopeful ending that challenges the idea that refugee stories can never have a true happy ending. Decades after they separated, Saeed and Nadia reunite in their home city. The city that was once destroyed by conflict has become peaceful. Nadia describes it as “not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar” (Hamid 229). The world does not end as many believe when refugees arrive, despite what many fear. It keeps going. Both Saeed and Nadia, who initially started with nothing, eventually build separate, stable lives. They are no longer victims of displacement but changed individuals shaped by new experiences. As Saeed and Nadia sit together at a café, they watch “young people who had no idea how bad things once were, except what they studied in history, which was perhaps

as it should be” (Hamid 230). These observations are quietly hopeful, as these young people represent a future in which migration is no longer defined by trauma but normalized as a part of life. The world has changed. This future generation, as Nadia observes, studies migration, which means society moves forward without erasing the past or staying trapped by it. The refugee narrative is no longer a tragedy. Hamid’s choice to end on a hopeful note is entirely deliberate and political. In discussing his approach to fiction, Hamid explains how he tries to “imagine a future [he’d] like to live in and then write books and do things that . . . make it more likely that that future will come to exist” (“Fresh Air”). With this fairy tale structure that ends in possibility, Hamid refuses to follow the common, despairing conclusions that dominate refugee narratives. Hamid’s speculative approach, therefore, becomes an act of hope, demonstrating that migrants can build new lives and giving readers a vision of coexistence worth creating.

Throughout his novel *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid uses speculative fiction to blend genres like realism and the children’s fairy tale to successfully rewrite the refugee narrative. Some critics claim that this universalizing approach oversimplifies the refugee experience. However, by universalizing displacement with speculative elements, Hamid brings this reality closer to readers, helping them understand a pain they might never otherwise know, without erasing its trauma. The magical, black doors that distort space and the scattered vignettes from different perspectives successfully blur the lines between realism and fiction. Migration shifts from

an unknown, distant circumstance into an imaginable reality—one that demands compassion rather than fear. By creating a hopeful ending rather than a typical tragic one that haunts the refugee narrative, Hamid offers migrants a reminder that they can live normal lives again, much like Saeed and Nadia. Ultimately, Hamid highlights that how we tell refugee stories matters just as much as the stories themselves, offering readers a vision of a better future where borders are no longer limitations and coexistence becomes reality.

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3

People, Worlds, and Words



People, Worlds, and Words

This section is rather unique. Each of these three essays address aspects of contemporary culture and the environment, including research and commentaries on art, ecocriticism, and the effects of efficiency and the internet on modern and near-future society. This section opens with an essay by Fermin Ortiz, who analyzes Chicana art in Boyle Heights and addresses the dissonance that occurred when Mexican American culture and people were removed from the area, but murals created by Chicana artists were preserved. Next, Taylor Redstone uses ecocritical theory, feminist theory, and archetypal criticism to address how a comparison of the titular river in *Not a River* and the contemporary earth reveals a tale of trauma and resilience. Last, an ultra-mechanized future is imagined by Rudy Mosqueda, who ruminates on the effects hyper-framing, corporate feudalism, neo-mechanization, and hyper-efficiency might have on humanity's freedom and future, especially regarding a future that takes us off the earth. These fascinating essays present unique commentaries on our present and future, and they are meaningful contributions to this volume of *Calliope*.

— Darci Ross-Smith, Lead Copyeditor

Visibility and the Erasure of Chicano Art in Boyle Heights¹

by Fermin Ortiz

There is an obvious duality within contemporary Chicano murals in Boyle Heights, especially those produced by Sonia Romero and Sergio Robleto. On one hand, brown bodies are monumentalized as representations of cultural pride and resistance to gentrification. On the other hand, the people whose stories and struggles are being represented are displaced from their homes due to gentrification. Many of the murals, specifically in Boyle Heights, have been ignored, covered up, or packaged as “cultural” experiences for new residents. As someone born into a first-generation Mexican American family where both of my parents immigrated from Jalisco, Mexico this is not a hypothetical situation. It is immediate. Simply being visible does not mean you will stay. Being represented does not mean you will be protected. Murals are not just art; they are statements of existence and claims of territory. While they say “we are here,” they have become powerless against the force of gentrification in Los Angeles.

For decades, Boyle Heights has served as a cultural center for Mexican and Chicano communities of working-class backgrounds. The murals found in Boyle Heights do not serve as mere decorations but rather as public memory, political expression, and territorial occupation. According to JV Decemvirale’s “Dibujando El Camino,” the Chicano-Mexican public art tradition is rooted in community collaboration and

political activism. Decemvirale explains that this tradition developed as artists worked collectively to produce works that “create visual narratives that reflect collective histories and social realities” (Decemvirale). This tradition is built on the understanding that art cannot exist independently of social justice. Therefore, public art in this vein is not neutral but, rather, it is a response to exclusion, a rejection of invisibility, and an assertion of territorial ownership. Painting large-scale images of brown bodies serves to disrupt the dominant narrative regarding who belongs in the city.

Sonia Romero continues to express herself through murals in this tradition while addressing the changing environment of Los Angeles today. In the article “*LA Muralists Sonia Romero And Kristy Sandoval Paint The Future,*” Los Angeles journalist and poet Mike Sonksen documents Romero’s work and her connection to community history. Sonksen explains that Romero’s murals celebrate everyday people and community labor, noting that her artwork “honors the past while imagining the future of the neighborhood” (Sonksen). Romero’s murals often depict brown women and families with dignity, complexity, and cultural authenticity. The brown women and families in Romero’s murals do not exist as background texture. Rather, they are central, empowered, and expansive. Romero’s murals celebrate working-class resilience and the importance of family and community. Therefore, Romero’s murals reinforce that Chicano presence is fundamental to the city of Los Angeles.

However, the celebration of brown life coexists with the economic conditions that threaten the very existence of the communities Romero

represents. As developers begin to develop properties in neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights and as higher-income residents move into the neighborhood, murals run the risk of serving as nothing more than aesthetic signals of “authenticity” that developers can use to market the neighborhood. What were once declarations of resistance become marketing strategies. Cultural pride becomes ambiance. The visual representation of brown bodies becomes part of a visual economy that is used to benefit new residents rather than existing residents of the neighborhood.

The whitewashing of Sergio Robleto’s anti-gentrification mural in February 2025 illustrates the contradiction of this relationship explicitly. As reported by journalist Javier Cabral in *L.A. TACO*, Robleto’s mural directly criticized displacement and speculative development in Boyle Heights. However, the mural was once again whitewashed in February 2025. Cabral reports that Robleto himself acknowledged the inevitability of the situation, stating, “It is no surprise they did this” (Cabral). The whitewashing of a mural that protests displacement clearly indicates that the intent to remove the declaration of resistance is intentional, and it occurs in direct response to the pressure of development.

This process of whitewashing demonstrates the limitations of visibility. Although brown bodies may be monumentalized, they are still susceptible to displacement. Although murals can create pride, they cannot prevent the effects of market forces. In many cases, visibility can accelerate desire for a location. Once a neighborhood has been celebrated

for its cultural diversity and vibrancy, it becomes a target for real estate investors seeking to capitalize on the cultural identity of the neighborhood. The visual language of resistance is selectively preserved or eliminated based on whether the visual language fits into the narrative of urban renewal. Murals that support a sanitized multiculturalism may endure, whereas murals that openly challenge the structure of power may be more likely to be destroyed or removed.

Decemvirale's description of the Self-Help Graphics project shows how Chicano public art has historically relied on the community and its infrastructure for support (Decemvirale). The long-term existence of murals is dependent on the talent to preserve the social networks that protect them. Those networks may be weakened if a community is displaced. Therefore, when those networks are weakened due to displacement, the art itself becomes more vulnerable. As such, erasure is not only an attempt to destroy images; it is also an attempt to sever the continuum of community history.

However, the irony of the situation is much clearer when murals are protected as "cultural heritage" and the people who create the culture are forced to vacate the area. In other words, brown bodies become symbols of the community character while actual brown residents are forced to leave. The art continues to exist. The people do not. This is the spatial contradiction at the core of gentrification. Art that was originally used as a tool of resistance now runs the risk of being co-opted into the same systems it originally opposed.

On the other hand, dismissing murals as having no impact would misrepresent the power of murals. Murals continue to have importance today because they disrupt the silence that exists regarding the history and experiences of Chicano people. Murals serve as a form of documentation for the stories that have never been documented by mainstream historians. Murals provide young Chicanos with visual affirmation of their identity and their sense of belonging. As Sonksen notes, artists like Romero intentionally portray hopeful visions of the future and refuse narratives of despair, emphasizing that the murals “honor the past while imagining the future of the neighborhood” (Sonksen). Even though many members of Chicano community’s experience displacement, murals are able to facilitate intergenerational communication among community members. Additionally, murals serve as a constant reminder to all viewers that Chicano people have always had a presence in cities, and that their presence is not temporary or coincidental.

First generation Mexican Americans find the reminder provided by murals to be deeply personal. Many of our parents traveled across international borders so that we could live in places where there was not one single structure designed specifically for us. Seeing large numbers of brown bodies spread throughout the urban landscape as part of public art projects is a way to reclaim space that was historically unavailable to our families and communities. It is a visual declaration of the fact that we are not visitors in this city. We are authors of this city.

However, declaration of authorship of a place requires continuous

attention to the fact that the authorship is constantly threatened. The continued destruction of Robleto's mural by whitewash illustrates that simply having visibility will not ensure that you remain visible without some effort to defend it (Cabral). Erasure is not merely symbolic. Erasure is administrative. Erasure is economic. Erasure is physical. Walls are painted over. Buildings are torn down. Rents increase. If the infrastructure that protects murals — rent control, community land trusts, cultural preservation policies — is absent, murals are at risk of becoming monuments to loss rather than mechanisms for promoting change.

Therefore, the paradox of visibility is not an argument against representation. Rather, it is a call to make the representation deeper. Murals should be viewed not as a final product, but as a node within larger movements for spatial justice. Murals represent claims to belonging visually. However, they require policy, community organization and inter-generational solidarity to preserve what they signify.

Contemporary Chicano murals in Boyle Heights also express the paradox in the center of contemporary Chicano muralism in Boyle Heights. This essay argues that contemporary Chicano murals expose a contradictory relationship in gentrified areas: brown bodies may be celebrated through their depiction in visual art, but the communities those brown bodies represent will continue to face the threat of displacement and erasure. On one hand, Romero's murals illustrate how the use of public art can serve as an affirmation of cultural pride and community memory by putting brown bodies at a monumental scale in public space;

as Los Angeles journalist and poet Mike Sonksen states in “LA Muralists Sonia Romero and Kristy Sandoval Paint The Future,” Romero’s work “celebrates the past while it imagines the future of the neighborhood” (Sonksen). On the other hand, the repeated destruction or whitewashing of Robleto’s anti-gentrification mural demonstrates how fragile that visibility can become when the artist uses his/her art to challenge redevelopment. Journalist Javier Cabral reported that Robleto himself had acknowledged the predictable nature of its removal, saying, “It is no surprise they did this” (Cabral). The physical destruction of a mural protesting the displacement of the communities whose history is represented in that mural, illustrates how public space is contested when artists attempt to utilize their artistic expression to challenge economic power structures. Art historians of Chicano public art agree that Chicano-Mexican public art has historically been used as much more than mere decoration; art historian JV Decemvirale states that the Chicano-Mexican public art tradition was created as a method for communities to create “visual narratives which reflect collective histories and social realities” (Decemvirale). Murals function as cultural archives documenting the presence, struggles and sense of belonging of communities in the area. Within gentrifying neighborhoods however, the very same murals that document the presence, struggles and sense of belonging of communities in the area can be converted into aesthetic representations of authenticity that draw in new residents to the area, displacing the original communities that developed the culture represented by those murals. This is particularly true for

first generation Mexican American individuals such as me, with parents born in Jalisco, Mexico; these murals are not only decorative, but visual representations of our claim to the space and history of the neighborhoods where we were raised. They insist that the communities that formed the area cannot be easily painted over.

Notes

¹The author acknowledges portions of this paper were reviewed using AI for the purpose of identifying and correcting grammatical errors.

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The River Has Eyes: Elemental Sentience, the Sublime, and
Archetypalism through an EcoGothic Gaze
by Taylor Redstone

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach where critics contemplate the impact of humans on the natural environment. When read through a Gothic lens, environmental degradation becomes not only an ecological crisis but also a site of dread, haunting, and moral reckoning. Scholars like Rob Nixon have revitalized the approach by identifying concepts such as the Anthropocene and slow violence. While there has been a growing concern for the planet, the continued violation of nature has contributed to a deeper urgency for the environment which ecocriticism seeks to capture. The Gothic genre observes the dark, the uncanny, and the haunted. It examines atmospheric dread and doom. It does not shield its face from rot, but stares at it longer and deeper. Gothic texts distill this rot. These stories attempt to speak for the dead and the dying. They are often comprised of plagues, curses, and haunted houses. An ecoGothic analysis merges the two approaches to examine the external and internal decay of the ultimate haunted house. If Earth is a dying body, and humans are part of this body, we can view humans as a virus, attacking the body's tissue and vital organs. Plagued and poisoned, our planet is septic. The infection is imminent, metastatic, and fatal. Justin Edwards et al. speak on the Gothic nature of ecocriticism in *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene*. They argue that, "Among speculative genres, ... gothic's

profound interest in ‘transgression, excess and monstrosity’ makes it a supremely suitable chronicler of the violence of climate change and of the human being’s tentacular connection to all uncanny, damaged life on this planet” (Edwards et al. xi).

A combined ecoGothic analysis of *Not a River* by Selva Almada reveals how ecological collapse, patriarchal violence, and colonial extractivism converge within the Gothic landscape of the novel. The novel weaves together themes of environmental violation and toxic masculinity with primal archetypes of ghosts, fire, and water to offer an evaluation of human impact on nature. Within this framework, water and fire are portrayed as conscious, sentient forces—living entities that possess their own agency and memory. By treating these elements as active participants rather than mere settings, the narrative engages with the archetypes of the Anthropocene, framing the ‘conscious’ agency of fire and water as a manifestation of the ecoGothic sublime. In this context, the natural world is no longer a passive resource but a terrifying, sentient force whose overwhelming power evokes a sense of awe and dread. Besides examining elemental sentience in Selva Almada’s *Not a River*, this analysis identifies the ‘eyes’ of the river as a witness to the intersection of environmental exploitation and patriarchal violence. The argument is contextualized through Rob Nixon’s concepts of slow violence and the Anthropocene, Northrop Frye’s archetypal criticism, and Longinus’s concept of the sublime.

Gothic novels often feature a haunted, moody environment, filled

with damsels in distress, prophetic dreams, psychological torment, and perhaps most essentially, the supernatural. Selva Almada's novel contains all these elements. Almada sets the narrative in the Argentine Littoral (*El Litoral*) to identify the cultural trauma of Argentine history, which has left both its natural resources and its people depleted. The events in *Not a River* are set off by a violent act of transgression against a stingray by several men. Unbeknownst to the visiting group, they have infringed upon is a conscious river that will end up triggering trauma from their troubled past.

The story opens with three characters on a fishing boat: two men, Enero and El Negro, and a younger boy, Tilo. They are inebriated and their aggression and audacity are made apparent. As the stingray approaches, "Enero leans over the side. Sees it draw closer. A stain beneath the surface of the river. He takes aim and fires. Twice. Three times. The blood rides, gushing, washes away. He sits up. Puts back his gun" (Almada 4). This disturbing and wanton act does not end there. They have not hunted the creature for food; rather, they have shot the two-hundred-pound animal for pleasure. Their drunken contempt does not end here, and it has not started here either. These men are visitors, ignorant of the river's sacredness and its rules, have been here before. They lost Eusebio, Tilo's father, on the same river. Perhaps this is the reason for their drunken stupor: they are taking their guilt and regret out on the river in the only way some men know how—through force and violence. The nonlinear narrative intertwines past drownings on in the river. The ghosts of two young girls, Mariela and Lucy—as well as seven others who died when a truck flipped after

a night of drinking and dancing—inhabit the river. The river does not simply contain their memory; it absorbs them, turning the current into a quiet archive of the dead. In this way the river becomes less a landscape than a haunted vessel, carrying the voices and bodies of the drowned through its current.

Drunken contempt becomes a catalyst for the novel's central events, a dynamic that can be further understood through Nixon's concepts of the Anthropocene and slow violence. The Gothic novel often contains a tyrannical male force; in an ecoGothic novel like *Not a River*, these oppressive patriarchal forces are exerted on both women and nature. This aligns with Nixon's assertion that colonialism and capitalism, inherently patriarchal systems, are root causes of slow violence. Edwards et al. discuss a similar concept, noting, "The same thinking that objectifies nonhuman animals intertwines with the objectification of human animals and a contempt for ecological concerns. What I am suggesting here is an extension to the central argument ... that ... violence against animals is structurally related to other forms of violence, specifically violence against women" (Edwards et al. 155). This concept is illustrated directly in *Not a River* as both women in the culture and the stingray are mistreated, neglected, assaulted, and harmed. Not only do they shoot the ray, but "On reaching the camp, they unload the ray and run a rope through the slits behind its eyes and hang it from a tree. The three bullet holes merge with its mottled back" (Almada 5). The image of the ray suspended from the tree, its body marked by three bullet wounds, transforms the animal into

a grotesque spectacle of domination, revealing how the men's violence toward the natural world mirrors the logic of patriarchal and colonial power. The men wake up the next day to the locals' disapproval of their act, especially the three bullet holes, telling them that one shot would have been enough. An islander, Aguire, warns them, "You want to watch that ... getting carried away" (7). The locals possess a knowledge of this land that the visitors lack.

This instance of cruelty beckons a comment on coloniality, further contextualizing the discussion of the Anthropocene. The massacre of the ray reflects the mindset of colonial extractivism, in which colonial or neo-colonial powers intrude on a place and bleed it of its natural resources and wealth, permanently damaging local ecology and culture. A chronic and unhealing wound is left on the land and its people. This pattern of domination reflects the broader dynamics of environmental exploitation described by Rob Nixon. Nixon describes this concept, and how human activity, such as globalization, colonization, and neoliberal capitalism, exploits both the environment and the people within it. In an excerpt from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* found in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Nixon breaks down his concept of slow violence, modified from structural violence, describing how this destruction is unseen, and like the river, as it is "dispersed across time and space" (2356). Slow violence affects the vulnerable without resources, especially those existing in postcolonial conditions experiencing poverty, poor physical and mental health, loss of language and culture, and systemic racism.

These conditions also lead to increased crime and violence, the marginalization of girls and women, and increased substance use and abuse.

The trauma of the past looms upon the present, and the people of these places without remedy seek sedation and escapism, which characters in the story seek out in different ways, many through alcohol use. Enero and El Negro are often drinking to suppress memories of losing Eusebio in the past. The novel is liquid-like, meandering in and out of the past. Alcohol and water play a role in the three major events in the story. They are twin fluidities, interconnected to dissolve boundaries—between past and present, the living and the dead, and human and environment. Like water and the river, alcohol and its mind-altering effect on reality contribute to the novel's liquidness.

When Enero, El Negro, and Tilo first meet the girls, their nature is not immediately revealed. The girls possess a spectral essence, implied by the author's Gothic language, which blends natural and supernatural elements, evoking dread and mystery. The text says "no one knows where the girls appear from, but suddenly there they are. First comes the smell of green grass given off by their long, newly washed hair, still dripping at the tips" (Almada 36). The girls mysteriously appear; their hair wet from the river and smells of grass, showing they are connected to the environment in which they perished. The river holds their spirits—a portal—which referring back to Nixon is "dispersed across time and space" (2356). Nixon's explanation of slow violence adds a layer of depth to the supernatural element of the river, which moves between the past and present, and acts as

a veil between the living and the dead. He states that “Attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs” (Nixon 2360). The explanation of climate catastrophe may apply to the river which bears witness to repeated tragedies, like the deaths of Eusebio, the girls, the other passengers, and the stingray. When the girls depart, they are described as leaving “intertwined, perfectly in step” (38). They are linked in motion as they were in death.

Before the audience learns what happens to the girls, the novel flows briefly back to their mother, Siomara. She is a victim of trauma and toxic masculinity in both childhood and adulthood. She was betrayed by the girls’ father in adulthood and experienced sexual abuse from her father in childhood, who was “always liquored up,” another example of drunken toxic masculinity (42). The story tells of Siomara’s relationship with the flame; “She’s always liked making fires. As a girl, if ... Lighting fires was her way of getting rid of the anger, pushing it out of her chest” (42). She externalizes her inner rage, igniting the flames to purge her anger and gain self-protection. Like the river, this fire is sentient, providing her company and comfort. The text notes, “Sometimes she thinks the fire talks to her. Not like a person does, not with words. But there’s something in the crackle, the soft sound of the flames, as if she could almost hear the air burning away, yes, something, right there, that speaks to her alone” (44). Identi-

fyng the fire's sentience is essential to understanding the sentience of the river; both elements are not only sentient, but perhaps even feminine, as nature may resonate and sympathize with abuse on women's bodies. The description of her relationship with fire suggests the feminine spirit of the flames she summons. She hears it. "Even if it doesn't use human words, Siomara knows it's calling her. Saying: come on, you know you want to. Just like all the men she fell for, just like the father of her daughters, just like so many others. ... Come on, you know you want to. ... One day, she knows, she will answer the fire's call" (44). This moment is ominous and a very Gothic quality to the fire's sentience.

The mother's rage and protectiveness create tension between her and her two daughters. It is later explained that Mariela and Lucy, after a disagreement with their mother, sneak out of their home. They end up at a club on the mainland, drinking and dancing the night away. By five AM, the girls pile into a truck with seven others. Their death is described as quickly and as suddenly as the accident happens; the girls falling asleep in life and waking up in death. The novel describes how "They chatted about the dance for a bit and then the girls nodded off. They opened their eyes when the truck was flipping all the way over in the air and plunging head-first into the ditch. Deep mud and nothing else, just a few inches of water" (64). While it is not explicitly stated if alcohol was the direct cause of the accident, it is heavily implied and remains related effect during other moments of the novel. If not the direct cause, carelessness and impulsivity undoubtedly contribute to the accident.

Following the accident, a passage not only explains how the river embraces the girls' spirits, in the way fire embraces Siomara, but also suggests that the fire's call to her was an omen about the accident. The novel states, "The three boys' mothers took over the room with their weeping. They hadn't been ready: women with sons are never ready for tragedy" (65). Perhaps this was the fire's call, aware of fragility of women at the hands of men, seeking to warn Siomara of what was to come. The mentions that "Siomara didn't shed a single tear, not at the vigil that went on all night nor in the funeral procession along the river nor at the cemetery where the bodies were left forever" (65). She had been made ready by her trauma and her intuitive flame; she knew she would have to answer this call. The passage also explains why the river and the girls' spirits embrace one another.

Compared to the fire's call, Enero's prophetic dream about the drowner from childhood is a more explicit of an omen and puts an ecological take on the prophetic dream trope in the Gothic novel. One dream describes the dragger pulling him under. The novel describes as "[Enero] opened his eyes in the dirty water and there the guy was, clinging to him, tugging at his legs, dragging him down to the bottom. He tried to break free. But the drowner's saggy skin went on wrapping around him, covering him like a cocoon" (14). He seeks guidance about the prophetic dream from Eusebio's godfather, a healer, who tells him that "dreams are blank" and that he will have them the rest of his life (18). One can apply the Gothic trope of the prophetic dream to ecoGothic analysis, with cli-

mate disasters being an omen and prophecy for further climate collapse and environmental destruction, a sort of ecological fatalism emerging from Gothic fatalism.

The river acts as a marshy, muddy tomb for the bodies who have died in it, a watery limbo for their spirits absorbed by the liminality of the water and nature. The river becomes a haunted vessel of memory, preserving the traces of violence long after the events themselves have passed. A passage from Edwards et al. states that ecoGothic genre adds a layer of richness to the understanding of the novel's river. They explain, "The gothic tropes of haunting and the uncanny are significant for any reflections on contemporary ecology: 'in the Anthropocene,' ... hauntings and similar manifestations become emissaries or transition points between the human sense of time and the geological sense of time. Global warming is an example of a 'hyper object' that haunts us every day through repetitions of cause and effect; it cannot always be seen, but it is always there in a liminal and uncanny presence; the ecological uncanny can also be embraced to change the cultural practices that contribute to environmental crises" (Edwards et al. xiii). This description of the genre helps to explain the river, which functions as an emissary and a transition point between life and death, even removed from it in a sacred way in which nature and its natural elements are conscious. Personifying nature in ecoGothic texts brings consciousness to the environment and, with it, a deeper urgency to protect the planet.

Emerging from an analysis of the sentience of natural elements

like the river and fire, fire and water may also be examined as archetypes, particularly Northrop Frye's framework of Archetypalism in his essay *The Archetypes of Literature*. The river and the archetype of water as a great destroyer, a source of both life and death, connects to a passage on Archetypalism and how it ties to ritual in Frye's essay. Frye explains that "A ritual being a temporal sequence of acts in which the conscious meaning or significance is latent: it can be seen by an observer but is largely concealed from the participants themselves" (1257). While the three events in the story takes place years apart, there is a ritual of death in this river. The ghosts are connected by the same archetype which destroyed them, reborn by this great destroyer in death, a Gothic trope. The dichotomy of the great creator and destroyer could be applied to the understanding of the Anthropocene and how human activity has violated the planet. The same Earth who provides life and resources can, and has, destroy life with climate disasters. Frye explains that "Rhythm, or recurrent movement, is deeply founded on the natural cycle, and everything in nature that we think of as having some analogy with works of art, like the flower or the bird's song, grows out of a profound synchronization between an organism and the rhythms of its environment" (1257). This passage also relates to *Not a River*, and pairs with the ecoGothic analysis. Fire could also be seen as a great destroyer archetype, showing the relationship between water and fire in this novel, both purifying and sacred.

While there is fluidity in the narrative structure of the novel, the novel also possesses archetypal fluidity. Siomara could be viewed as a

damsel in distress. Moreso, she reflects the Gothic trope of the madwoman, using fire as an agent of control and power, a twist on the trope. There is also archetypal fluidity with the young ghost girls, victims of an unfortunate accident, who provide guidance and care for the three men. Their toxic masculinity is distilled by the girls, another subversion of the damaged feminine, who end up being resourceful heroines, an approach some contemporary Gothic texts seek to achieve.

Alcohol brings on the final confrontation in the novel; the drunken locals seek revenge over the ray. The tension rises as “The drinkers put down their cups. Everyone looks at him. They chucked it in the river! Says Aguirre. ... We need to teach them a lesson. Says Aguirre” (Almada 50). The ghost girls assist the three men, who are eventually attacked by the locals, urging them to leave. The novel states, “Lucy and Mariela help them into the boat. Tilo looks like a sick puppy. Enero’s a wreck. El Negro, more or less in one piece, pushes the boat ... Now get out of here! Says Mariela. Get out of here, since you can. She says” (82). The girls then receive a sense of reconciliation. It is next described that they return home to their mother, and “they kiss her and she smiles” (88). They are able to go to sleep at last, their spirits at peace.

Both Archetypes and Gothic literature, especially ecoGothic literature, are deeply connected to the sublime. Longinus speaks on sublimity and emotion, which relates to the events in the novel and to the archetypes of fire and water. It also relates to the supernatural, as ghosts are inherently sublime in nature. In an excerpt from the Greek text *On Sublimity*,

Longinus states, “Something like this happens in painting: when light and shadow are juxtaposed in colors on the same plane, the light seems more prominent to the eye, and both stands out and actually appears much nearer. Similarly, in literature, emotional and sublime features seem closer to the mind’s eye, both because of a certain natural kinship and because of their brilliance. Consequently, they always show up above the figures and overshadow and eclipse their artifice” (155). EcoGothic texts, as well as ecoGothic analysis, employ this concept. It sees beauty in darkness and decay, and richness in ruin, and is deeply emotional. Relating Longinus’s passage to *Not a River*, there are many instances of the sublime, like its dream-like quality when discussing ghost girls as well as the novel’s atmospheric descriptions. Edwards et al. connect ecoGothic analysis to the sublime, stating that, “One way of thinking about gothic and Anthropocene is with reference to binaristic narratives that pit the human animal against the environment: haunted wildernesses, threatening jungles, dark forests, black lagoons, the gothic sublime” (Edwards et al. 153). This quotation mentions ‘threatening jungles and dark forests’ which actually take place in the novel and are another instance of nature and its elemental sentience, separate from the river and Siomara’s fire.

Not a River transcends the boundaries to become a profound meditation on human insignificance within a sentient ecology, a deeply ecoGothic concept. By viewing the landscape through an ecoGothic lens, Almada elevates the river from a geographical feature to a watchful, archetypal force that maintains its own moral and elemental equilibrium.

The sublimity of the narrative lies in this very realization that the river is not a resource to be conquered, but an entity that observes, remembers, and eventually reclaims. Like the river bearing witness to tragedy and trauma in the novel, the Earth bears witness to the Anthropocene, and the slow violence it has initiated. In *Not a River*, the ecoGothic gaze transforms the landscape into a site of elemental sentience which resists colonial intrusion through elemental retaliation.

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The Titan Protocol: Social Media, Neo-Mechanization, and Orbital
Territory Governance
by Rudy Mosqueda

Imagine the first permanent human settlement beyond Earth. Not as science fiction imagines it, luminous, egalitarian, a clean break from the past, but as an honest projection of present trajectories. A station whose communications infrastructure is owned by a single corporation. Whose governance reflects a corporate charter more than any democratic covenant. Whose inhabitants are sorted by platform allegiances and ideological loyalties carried from Earth. Whose security is enforced by autonomous systems making life-and-death decisions at machine speed, beyond the reach of any court or conscience. This is not dystopia for its own sake. It is the logical endpoint of decisions being made right now, quietly and efficiently, without spectacle.

Social media platforms have become the first laboratories of this future. X, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Truth Social, and Bluesky are no longer merely places to share content. They are digital territories, fiefdoms, where identity is constructed, tribes are formed and expelled, data is extracted as rent, and the architecture of belief is continuously engineered. The mechanisms driving this are what this paper sets out to name and trace: hyper-framing, the perpetual mutation of meaning that distorts perception and mechanizes social bonds; corporate feudalism, the fragmentation of power toward mega-corporations that govern through infra-

structure; and neo-mechanization, the automation of conflict that detaches warfare from human accountability while enforcing each digital enclosure.

These are not parallel phenomena. They are sequential layers of a single trajectory. Hyper-framing engineers the cognitive terrain. Corporate feudalism consolidates the economic and political architecture. Neo-mechanization provides the enforcement layer. Underlying all three is the boring-but-ruthless efficiency timeline, the governing logic of compounding marginal gains that ensures this proceeds without a villain, without a rupture, without an obvious moment to resist. The thesis is direct: if these patterns continue unchallenged, the first human societies beyond Earth will not be built on expanded freedom. They will be the most efficient version of what already exists here.

Section 1: Hyper-Framing - Engineering Belief at Scale

Before any enclosure can be built, the territory of perception must be claimed. Hyper-framing is how that claim is made. All social media platforms function as a kind of town square, a public pedestal for expression, assembly, and discourse. What travels across this ecosystem is not merely information. It is reality, continuously repackaged, rebranded, and remade in the image of its audience. Hyper-framing is the continuous and perpetual emergence and mutation of memes, messages, and meaning across platforms, second by second, user to user. Framing theory explains how media organize reality into interpretive schemas that shape percep-

tion (Entman 51). Hyper-framing extends this into something qualitatively different: algorithmic curation and user mutation combine to produce a condition where meaning is never stable, always in the process of becoming something else (Meraz and Papacharissi 138).

The meme is the atomic unit of this process, a frame frozen in time yet capable of traveling across contexts, carrying memory and meaning with it. A meme resonates because it locates an underlying truth that communities recognize as shared, a perspective previously thought to be only individually experienced. From this recognition, subcultures form. René Girard's theory of mimetic desire adds critical depth: memes are not merely carriers of ideas but vectors of imitation and desire, spreading rivalries and collective identities as readily as perspectives (Girard 143). What gets replicated most successfully is not what is truest, but what most effectively triggers desire or fear in the communities it passes through. Anonymity accelerates this further. Online, identities are fluid and multiple. The message can be distorted, manipulated, and construed to fit any narrative, and cancel culture is one visible result, socialite mobs executing what might be called mental crucifixion through screenshots, tags, and mentions.

The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices, to be found only in the minds of men.

– Rod Serling, *The Twilight Zone*, “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street”

What Serling described as a warning, the attention economy has operationalized as infrastructure. Generative AI now accelerates this replication toward hyperreality convergence, a condition in which synthetic simulations precede and supplant lived experience, eroding the epistemic anchor needed to distinguish authentic experience from engineered simulation (Baudrillard 1). Adam Curtis’s concept of hypernormalisation completes the picture: societies adapt by accepting fabricated normalities to cope with complexity, normalizing distortion as inevitable (Curtis). Users locked into platform orthodoxies come to experience those orthodoxies as unquestionable truths, not because they have been coerced, but because the architecture of the platform has made alternative framings invisible. This is techno-ideological absolutism in its formative stage.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence provides the enforcement mechanism. When algorithms and moderation repeatedly amplify one side, everyone holding a minority view begins to feel isolated and eventually silences themselves or leaves (Gearhart and Zhang 2008). This is not merely polarization. It is migration. Conservatives felt censored on

pre-2022 Twitter and made a digital exodus to Truth Social; progressives, feeling drowned out after Musk's acquisition, migrated to Bluesky or Mastodon. Each migration creates a new tribe, a new digital territory. Seth Godin would recognize the pattern: a new tribe has decided it needs its own space (Godin). What hyper-framing ultimately produces is not simply distortion. It mechanizes social bonds, reducing the full complexity of human relationship to legible, extractable data, and it primes populations for feudal lock-in by making loyalty to a platform indistinguishable from loyalty to a community, an identity, a worldview. Corporate feudalism is what builds the walls.

Section 2: Corporate Feudalism - Infrastructure as Sovereignty

Once a tribe has been formed, sorted, and psychologically primed by hyper-framing, the second layer of the architecture takes hold: the conversion of attention and identity into durable power structures. This is corporate feudalism, a direct extension and refinement of what Varoufakis calls technofeudalism. Varoufakis argues that digital platforms have replaced markets with fiefdoms, extracting cloud rent from users who have no viable alternative but to participate (Varoufakis 23). The progression is familiar. A platform attracts users by offering belonging and amplification. Users generate content and data. The platform monetizes that data while returning algorithmic engagement as the currency of continued participation. Campbell et al. call this digital convergence, everything collapsing

into one addictive feedback loop (Campbell et al. 238). Sara Baase warned two decades ago that this relationship turns citizens into harvested resources, and that harvest, your data, attention, and political energy, is the fuel that powers the fief (Baase).

But Varoufakis's framework does not fully capture three developments that distinguish the current moment. Corporate feudalism properly describes the fragmentation of power toward mega-corporations that function as quasi-sovereigns, governing populations through infrastructure control in platform states where the distinction between commerce and governance has collapsed. Loyalty networks supersede national identities. Mergers and acquisitions resemble strategic marriages consolidating domains. Techno-ideological absolutism describes the sacralization of technology as unquestionable progress, with platform leaders adopting quasi-prophetic rhetoric that polarizes users around AI governance as moral crusade, safety orthodoxy versus accelerationism. Dissent is framed not as reasonable disagreement but as existential threat. Hyperreality convergence describes the condition in which AI functions as filter, generator and co-author of belief systems simultaneously, shifting power from land to narrative to cognition. Whoever controls the AI controls the epistemology of the platform, and therefore the political and economic behavior of its population (Durand 112).

The platform stack makes these dynamics concrete. Elon Musk's constellation is the most complete example: X functions as the public square and primary framing mechanism; Grok functions as the embedded

epistemological authority; Tesla provides the industrial base; SpaceX provides the projection of hard power into orbit (Saura Garcia). Jeff Bezos operates an equivalent model with logistics at its core: Amazon marketplace feeds Prime Video, feeds Rivian, feeds Blue Origin's orbital infrastructure (Taghizade and Ahmadov 1). These are not merely diversified conglomerates. They are proto-sovereigns, entities, that control communication, production, transportation, and increasingly, space access. Anduril Industries and Palantir complete the picture on the defense side. They do not run social platforms, but they could not exist without the rivers of data those platforms produce. Anduril's Lattice OS and autonomous weapons systems, alongside Palantir's predictive analytics, convert social media data into targeting intelligence. A drone operator in Nevada can end a life on the other side of the planet with the emotional distance of deleting a tweet. Social media, in the hands of these contractors, is no longer a megaphone or a mirror. It is a javelin, forged through data, launched with algorithmic guidance, designed to enforce the borders of each fiefdom.

The critical insight is what these proto sovereigns are already building. They are not merely economic actors competing in a market. They are constructing the vessels, systems, and governance architectures that will carry the first human societies beyond Earth. The question is no longer whether humans go to space. It is which humans, under whose terms, governed by what architecture, and whether the enclosure being built on Earth will be the template for the one that awaits in orbit.

Section 3: Neo-Mechanization - Enforcing the Enclosure

Every feudal order requires an enforcement layer. In the digital fiefdom, that layer is neo-mechanization: the automation of conflict that detaches warfare from human accountability, recalibrates the cost of life into abstract metrics and extends the logic of the enclosure from Earth into orbit. The trajectory is not difficult to trace. From the industrial slaughter of World War I's trenches to the drone strikes of the twenty-first century, the increasing mechanization of warfare has consistently created psychological and ethical distance from the human cost of conflict. Wayne Chappelle and colleagues documented the moral injury experienced by drone operators, the guilt, PTSD symptoms, and burnout that emerge from remote intimacy: the ability to observe a target in intimate detail from thousands of miles away, to watch them go about their life, and then to end it (Chappelle et al. 626). The deeper problem is not what this does to operators. It is what it normalizes at the societal level. Lethal autonomous weapons systems extend this logic to its conclusion. The International Committee of the Red Cross has documented the accountability gaps and threats to human dignity that emerge when machines make life-and-death decisions without meaningful human oversight (International Committee of Red Cross). The principles of proportionality and discrimination, core tenets of just war theory, require human judgment now of decision. Autonomous systems, by design, remove that judgment.

Techno-ideological absolutism operates here with force. Auton-

onomous weapons are not debated as moral choices. They are presented as technical necessities, as the inevitable response to adversaries who will deploy them regardless. Dissent is framed as naivety or strategic vulnerability. The boring-but-ruthless efficiency timeline ensures that each marginal improvement in autonomous lethality is adopted immediately, not because anyone has decided that machines should make life-and-death decisions, but because each individual improvement is defensible on its own terms. The Outer Space Treaty of 1967 prohibits weapons of mass destruction in orbit but leaves significant gaps for conventional and autonomous systems (United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs). This is not an oversight. It is an invitation.

All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we can attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Space warfare will accelerate the detachment that drone warfare has already normalized, and with a new dimension of permanence. In Earth-bound conflict, the consequences of violence eventually become visible. In orbital or deep-space conflict, destruction is invisible and instantaneous. The vacuum of the cosmos is indifferent to human agony,

and indifference at that scale risks producing governance that reflects it. The natural rights tradition provides the essential counter-tension. Rooted in Enlightenment philosophy and codified in the founding principles of Western civilization, this tradition holds that the rights to life, liberty, and self-defense are inherent and inalienable, prior to and above any institutional authority. But sovereignty requires a subject capable of exercising it. When machines make life-and-death decisions at machine speed, sovereignty does not merely face challenge. It faces dissolution. Neo-mechanization is not only about warfare. It is the enforcement of enclosure, the hard power layer that makes the feudal architecture sustainable and that scales detachment into the capacity to govern without accountability.

Section 4: The Boring-but-Ruthless Efficiency Timeline

Science fiction gave us two broad archetypes for the future: dazzling cyberpunk transcendence, or grim dystopian collapse. We got neither. What we got is the third, quieter branch, and it is more consequential for being quieter. The boring-but-ruthless efficiency timeline is governed by a single principle: not what is spectacular, not what is humanly fulfilling, but what drops friction, adds basis points of yield, gains percentage points of energy density, and shaves milliseconds of latency, everywhere, simultaneously, without pause. Science was not asked to make us gods or save our souls. It was asked to make the machine of capital turn a little faster, and it obeyed with such austere, relentless precision that the gods themselves

now feel obsolete.

The diagnostic signatures are everywhere. The transistor-to-token pipeline won, silicon converted into general-purpose compute at efficiency curves that continue to compound, while other technological visions were quietly defunded. Biology has yielded actuarial applications: GLP-1 medications, mRNA therapies, optimization of the body as instrument rather than subject. Energy follows Moore's Law analogs via solar efficiency doublings and lithium density improvements. The human being is increasingly instrumented and partially bypassed through wearables, AI copilots, and noise-cancelling environments, a low-grade cyborg condition achieved without implants, through a thousand marginal convenience decisions. Space exemplifies the logic. SpaceX's trajectory toward a projected mid-2026 IPO, targeting approximately \$1.5 trillion valuation driven by Starlink's projected \$18.7 billion 2026 revenue, is not a story about human destiny among the stars. It is a story about achieving launch costs of approximately \$200 per kilogram to orbit to broadcast connectivity packets for same-day global delivery. The goal is cheaper orbits, not transcendence. The destination is logistics infrastructure. Warfare mirrors the pattern with equal precision. Anduril Industries, valued at \$30.5 billion following its 2025 funding round with revenues approaching \$1 billion in 2024, scales hyperscale autonomous systems across an expanding portfolio of defense contracts (Roof). Palmer Luckey, Anduril's founder, has stated his goal is for America to transition from being the world police to being the world gun store (Alfonsi). Fifteen-thousand-dollar loitering munitions, autono-

mous trench robots, and Starlink terminals in infantry platoons complete the picture of an industry that has replaced ambition with optimization.

The critical insight about this timeline is not that it is sinister. It is that it does not require sinister intent. Nobody decided to build orbital enclosures. The architecture emerges from ten thousand individual decisions, each defensible on its own terms, each optimizing for marginal efficiency, each compounding with all the others into a structural trajectory that no single actor controls and no single intervention can reverse. This is what makes it so difficult to resist, not malice, but momentum. On Earth, the efficiency timeline widens gaps in skill, access, and political agency. Off world, these gaps risk becoming permanent. Centralized bandwidth lords, autonomous deterrence systems, and corporate charter governance, each individually justified by operational necessity, could together constitute an orbital nobility whose power derives not from violence but from indispensability. You cannot leave the platform if the platform is the only means of communication. You cannot resist the governance structure if the governance structure controls the life support.

Section 5: Orbital Enclosures - The Destination

We may have been born on Earth, but we are not destined to die here. Our origins bind us to this planet. Our future, if the trajectories mapped in this paper continue unchallenged, may be written somewhere between the stars, but not in the way that either optimists or pessimists

have imagined. Not as liberation or apocalypse, but as enclosure. Before the architecture of that enclosure can be resisted, it must be named. An orbital enclosure is not a metaphor. It is a concrete governance structure with identifiable features: communications, infrastructure owned by a single corporate entity; high-latency dependencies that make real-time democratic deliberation impossible across planetary distances; autonomous deterrence systems enforcing territorial claims in contested expanse beyond Earth's orbital jurisdiction; corporate charter governance deriving authority not from the consent of the governed but from the indispensability of services provided; and populations sorted, in advance, by the platform allegiances and ideological loyalties that hyper-framing and corporate feudalism produced on Earth. The Outer Space Treaty left this expanse largely ungoverned with respect to conventional and autonomous weapons, and in that open ground, those who move first establish the terms for everyone who follows.

The four trajectories in this paper converge on the orbital enclosure with compounding force. Hyper-framing produces populations cognitively primed for feudal loyalty, whose capacity for independent political agency has been continuously eroded by algorithmic curation and hyperreality convergence. Corporate feudalism provides the economic and governance architecture, proto-sovereigns already building the vessels and life-support systems that will define the conditions of off-world habitation. Neo-mechanization provides the enforcement layer, autonomous systems operating in high-latency environments beyond meaningful human oversight. The

boring-but-ruthless efficiency timeline ensures that all of this proceeds without spectacle, through ten thousand marginal decisions that individually seem reasonable and collectively constitute a civilizational architecture. The widening disparities are the clearest indicator: advanced nations and mega-corporations with planetary leverage possess cosmic mobility, the capacity to extend their power into orbit on their own terms, while developing nations and individuals without platform infrastructure face a permanent subordination that off world does not merely persist but crystallizes.

Two futures remain possible, and the choice between them is still being made. The first is the orbital enclosure: feudal hierarchies replicated and entrenched at cosmic scale, the efficiency timeline compounding into permanent noble and permanent serf classes, distinct in their political agency despite their shared technological sophistication. The second is the radical exit-based society: decentralized governance enabled by open-source infrastructure, data sovereignty frameworks that return cognitive and political agency to individuals and communities, and epistemic tools that interrupt hyperreality convergence and restore the capacity for independent judgment. The first future is being built now, by default. The second requires deliberate interruption of trajectories that carry significant momentum. The window in which that interruption is possible is narrowing. Not because of conspiracy, but because of the ordinary logic of compounding: the longer an architecture is load bearing, the more costly its modification becomes.

Return to the opening image: the first permanent human settlement beyond Earth, designed not by visionaries but by default, through the compounding of decisions made here and now, in the algorithms, boardrooms, and defense contracts of the present moment. The architecture of that settlement is already visible. It is visible in the platform stacks of Musk and Bezos, in the Lattice OS of Anduril, in the predictive systems of Palantir, in the AI ecosystems that filter the informational environment of billions of people every day. It is visible in the spiral of silence migrations that fragment political communities into sealed digital territories. It is visible in the drone operators experiencing moral injury from remote intimacy with killing. It is visible in the marginal efficiency gains that compound, quietly and without announcement, into the structural conditions of a neo-feudal civilization.

Hyper-framing, corporate feudalism, and neo-mechanization are sequential layers, each handing its logic to the next, until the enclosure is a load bearing. The boring-but-ruthless efficiency timeline is the reason it happens without drama, without a moment to name, without an obvious adversary to resist.

The stakes are the question of who “we” refers to when we say that humanity will go to the stars, and on whose terms, governed by what architecture, with what degree of political agency. Understanding these trajectories critically, naming their mechanisms, tracing their compounding, identifying the specific points where deliberate intervention could alter the architecture before it becomes permanent, is not an academic exercise. It is

a precondition for the possibility of a different future. Resistance remains possible. Decentralized protocols, data sovereignty frameworks, ethical AI governance, and epistemic tools to counter hyperreality convergence are not utopian alternatives. They are specific, available interventions. The machines being forged today will be the vessels that carry humanity's will to new worlds. The question is whose they will carry, and whether anyone beyond the lords of the digital fiefdom will have had any say in the answer.

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4

Knowledge, Reality, and RAM



Knowledge, Reality, and RAM

This final section of *Calliope* 19 contains four essays analyzing literature from psychological and philosophical lenses. The first essay, written by Dallas Hensley, analyzes the use of the uncanny in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” emphasizing writing conventions making use of a theory that would not be published for another eighty years. Darci Ross-Smith explores the use of drugs to achieve artificial transcendence in “Ligeia” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” contrasting this with Emerson’s definition of apotheosis. Jolie Medeiros examines the titular characters’ personalities and philosophies in “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” through Gnosticism, analyzing the conflict between the characters as a result of their different beliefs. Finally, *White Noise* is analyzed by Afia Mursheeda, who assesses the use of media and technology in the novel to distort reality and strip opinions, choices, perspectives, and critical thinking from users of said technology. These final essays are an instructive view into the minds of humanity: a display of the critical research CSUB students are producing to better understand both the world and its inhabitants.

— Darci Ross-Smith, Lead Copyeditor

The Uncanny House Has Fallen

by Dallas Hensley

Authors, artists, producers, directors, and many other creative types have been generating art in the horror genre for what feels like forever. Still, one artist in particular, Edgar Allan Poe, is one of the most renowned American authors to do so. His works have the ability to leave viewers feeling uneasy and frightened. His tale “The Fall of the House of Usher” is arguably one of the most defining pieces of unsettling literature in the genre and is just one of many that he produced during his career. What is it about this story that leaves the audience uneasy and full of dread? He makes everything, from the setting to the characters, sources of the uncanny. Poe had discovered how to use the uncanny as a catalyst to evoke these feelings decades before psychologist Sigmund Freud isolated, studied, and tried to define the uncanny and understand how it functions. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe shows his presemantic understanding of the uncanny through his presentation of the structural features—the setting, Roderick Usher, and the auditory elements—alongside the interplay of abstract psychological mechanisms, which predates Freud’s semantic explanation of the phenomenon.

Freud became fascinated with the uncanny after encountering it frequently in literature and in life, which led to him exploring it in depth in his famous essay titled “The Uncanny.” He wanted to understand its nature and “under what conditions the familiar can become uncanny and

frightening...” (Freud 124–25). He had come to realize that many of the events and objects that evoke this feeling or fall into the categorization were not alien or even abstract, but common and regularly encountered. Grappling with the uncanny is a strange endeavor due to its nature as both an object or situation and as a description of the emotions evoked by said item, place, or scenario. Many, if not most, films within the horror genre use and rely on the uncanny to set the tone and elicit an emotional reaction from their audiences. Artists turn regularly encountered objects like dolls, puppets, drawings, masks, and even tires and smiles into sources of danger and horror. This is one piece of the uncanny that is commonly encountered within popular media, which shows that Freud’s diagnosis—that the uncanny often stems from something familiar when it is placed within the right sequence of events—is true. Another element of the uncanny that Freud addresses is “the unknown.” He had come to realize that the familiar is only part of the equation because another major source of the uncanny is “intellectual uncertainty,” and part of his reasoning behind this assertion is that “the better oriented [someone] is in the world... the less likely that objects” would be perceived as uncanny (Freud 125). It is not just a question of uncertainty, but of possibility, however unlikely. This is most likely why he also isolates “silence, solitude, and darkness,” because they are “factors [that] point to the part played by danger in the genesis of the uncanny” (Freud 127). Darkness is not an unfamiliar phenomenon, but its ability to shroud, conceal, and isolate those perceiving it from gaining a proper view lets their imagination take over. Scenarios, no matter how implausible,

begin to flood the observer's mind, and the same darkness that can signify rest in an ideal setting begins to have an aura of danger, which is the catalyst for people's fear of it. Freud takes this one step further, though, and equates darkness to repression. He also believes that individuals repress parts of themselves, storing these pieces within the unconscious, so when "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and had come to the open," it evokes the feeling of the uncanny (Freud 132, 148). The multifaceted nature of the uncanny is part of what makes this novel concept so difficult to grasp. It does not have one singular definition or method; instead, it is the source of one feeling. Bernstein argues that "Freud's failure to define the uncanny... tells us something about the uncanny itself" and continues by inserting his idea that "the uncanny puts in question the possibility of definition itself" (1111–1112). An individual can have many direct encounters with it and be able to identify it when observed, but to understand and find the right words to provide a description that is all-encompassing and formulaic is difficult due to its polymorphous and ambivalent nature. Through exposure to and immersion in the uncanny in all of its various forms, a more reliable association between the observer and the concept can be constructed. For Poe, constant encounter, mixed with a desire to understand and replicate, gave him an understanding that would be shown but not articulated until Freud transferred the idea from the pre-semantic to the semantic.

Observing the setting in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is crucial for understanding just how well Poe understood the uncanny long

before it was formally studied and explained by Freud. He had figured out how to make an environment that could otherwise be a pleasant and rainy place into a “dull, dark, and soundless day” where “the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens” (Poe 231). By labeling the clouds as “oppressive,” he gave them adversarial and tyrannical characteristics, which guide the reader to interpret them as negative, and in turn, the uncanny takes form. Instead of bringing life and rain, or protection from the sun, the clouds become objects of worry and heavily influence the emotions of the observer. The narrator’s interpretation of the environment also enhances the “melancholy” tone when he comments on how the house filled him with “a sense of insufferable gloom” that “pervaded [his] spirit” (Poe 231). Before even entering the premises, the narrator is starting to dread the journey at hand. By this point, the insidious foundation of the house has been laid, and Poe has just begun to welcome the reader to the gloomy world within “The House of Usher.”

By surrounding the house with ambiguity and blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, Poe makes it an animated source of the uncanny. Generally, a house is a symbol of refuge, connection, and safety; it is the structure that provides shelter, a barrier between those within and the harsh elements outside, and a place for fellowship and familial bonding. Instead, Poe gives Usher’s house a sinister character and transfigures it into a living organism that has an unnatural air to it. Robinson comments on this and observes that “His opening description of the house includes repeated references to its ‘vacant and eye-like windows’” (70).

The noticeable aging and deterioration make the house feel more organic than artificial, and the penetrating aura that leaves the narrator full of dread seeps out of the pages and into the audience's psyche.

During Freud's analysis of the uncanny, he noted that "an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred," which is exactly what Poe's description of the house does. The reader is left questioning whether or not there are supernatural forces acting on or within the house. The ambiguity highlights the discomfort that stems from uncertainty and does not provide any definite answers to the questions that arise. Strangely, the personification of the house also brings it closer to the realm of the familiar because, in a way, its human characteristics give it life. Colin Martindale imagines that the house is not a person, but instead "a psyche in the process of disintegration" (9–10). If it is not a sentient being but the representation of a broken psyche, then why does it feel so menacing and full of malevolence? Perhaps it is simply the category that humans place the unknown in. When places and objects are not fully understood, then it becomes harder to dismiss them as nonthreatening and find solace that could be obtained by knowing that they are not a source of potential danger.

Poe's description of the positioning of both the house and surrounding elements in the realm of distortion allows the uncanny to permeate the structure of the house itself. He had figured out and even states explicitly that "...there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us; still, the analysis of this power

lies among considerations beyond our depth” (Poe). Poe is claiming that the uncanny is outside of our understanding, which may be true to some degree, but by seeing how it is intentionally utilized in his work, it seems that he had a strong presemantic understanding of how it could function within a story. Take the House of Usher, for instance; it is not a simple dwelling place, but a house in shambles with hints of sentience, accompanied by weather conditions that set a backdrop and enhance all of its negative attributes. The interplay of all of these meticulously arranged elements is what makes Poe’s presentation so genius and effective. Another piece of the puzzle is that the narrator is not strictly an observer of the house; he is a prospective guest, and the “melancholy House of Usher” is his destination (Poe). If he was just a passerby viewing the same house in the distance, it would likely still have a similar aura, but the stress it evokes would be lessened because it would be more isolated from his person. If he was well acquainted with the house and knew all of its twists and turns, and the purpose and history behind them, it would likely ease some of the tension he feels. This helps to enforce the familiarity element of Freud’s interpretation, but Roderick lives there and supposedly has his whole life and still is filled with “nervous agitation.” On the other hand, many would go out of their way to explore a similar structure and be attracted to all of its decayed pieces, which begs the question of why the unknown is not always a source of the uncanny. Bernstein’s interpretation of the uncanny as “the world always falling away from itself into its opposite, yet affirming itself in doing so” helps to explain why there are so many contradictions

within its categorization and manifestation, because the uncanny “‘is’ and ‘is not’” (1115). Often the unknown is uncanny, and other times it is not; the same goes for the multitude of objects and situations that evoke the sensation.

Roderick’s illness is wrapped in ambiguity, and Poe left him with a plethora of symptoms and no explicit cause. He gives the reader some context when he writes, “...the Usher race... had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch...” (Poe 233). This clarifies that Roderick is not the only one in the Usher family who has languished with the affliction, but if anything, it just places the reader in the realm of uncertainty yet again. The disease is painted as hereditary but equated to a supernatural curse that has somehow infected the house. Having affected generations of the family evokes a sense of doom and leaves Roderick and his sister facing the inescapable. It is as if fate has determined events before they unfold. Roderick “suffer[s] much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light” (Poe). He is tormented by many things that are typically the source of pleasure and satiation. To make things worse, he is also a “hypochondriac,” and his heightened sensibilities leave him vulnerable and in a constant state of unease (Poe 238). Afraid of death but knowing that the disease is supposedly inescapable makes his situation all the more dreary and depressing; it is as if he is the uncanny embodied.

Roderick’s mind is as unstable and tattered as his body. His actions

are unpredictable, and his mannerisms are absurd. Often, he "...poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom" (Poe 236). He perceives the objects around him as unfamiliar or "unhomely," as Freud would put it. Roderick's illness creates "hyperesthesia that manifests in monomaniacal overconcentration" and makes "even the most familiar and mundane of objects... uncanny" (McGhee 56–58). This could be to blame for his restless irritability and constant unease. He is like an individual who is scared of the dark but trapped in it. His imagination takes control and directs his thoughts toward the dark recesses of his mind. The only glimpses of solace he finds are short moments shared with the narrator, but those are fleeting. Robinson believes that his "peculiar physical conformation" mirrors the instability of the house (70–71). The relationship between Roderick and the house seems parasitic; each is leeching off the other and draining energy and vitality until neither has anything left to give and their foundations collapse.

Outside of Roderick, the house, and the setting, Poe also utilizes sound to build an uncanny atmosphere in the tale. One instance of this revolves around Roderick's sickness, which has been discussed a bit, but one aspect of his "morbid condition" that has not been touched on yet is its effects on his "auditory nerve, which rendered all music intolerable... with the exception of certain stringed instruments" (Poe 237). It is not just physical objects that evoke anxiety; sounds also play a major role in leaving Roderick utterly helpless to stimulatory overload. Part of this could be blamed on his isolation and alienation, which makes the category of the

unknown much more vast compared to that of an individual who interacts more with the outside world. This claim is somewhat substantiated when considering his affinity for “stringed instruments.” Roderick “confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastical character of his performances” (Poe 238). His familiarity, stemming from frequent interaction with his guitar, could be the reason he is able to enjoy playing and listening to its sounds. His imagination is often running wild and out of control, but with his guitar, he is back in control and able to have agency over the sounds it produces and the songs he creates. This turns the unfamiliar back into the familiar, thus counteracting the uncanny effects that other noises have on him. Towards the end of Poe’s dreary tale, the narrator and Roderick both find themselves frightened at the noises that they hear echoing throughout the house. They cannot pin it down to a single source, and the uncertainty, mixed with images that they conjure in their minds, fills them with anxiety. Fred Botting believes that sounds in “The House of Usher” lead to “misreading, perceptual confusion, shock and horror” (2–3). The foreshadowing of Madeline’s return is achieved with sound, and the broad sensory appeal engulfs the reader in the world of the uncanny.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is a beautiful display of Poe’s presemantic understanding of the uncanny: the way that he weaves together the structural features, such as the setting, Roderick Usher, and the auditory elements, with the abstract psychological mechanisms, blurs the lines between the familiar and unfamiliar. Freud’s contributions to the

analysis and articulation of this phenomenon in semantic form, paired with Poe's utilization of it in his stories, are an enriching combination for diving deeper into the human psyche. Even those who shy away from darker media have interacted with the uncanny at some point in their lives, whether that be feeling anxiety in the dark, imagining that an object may be animate, or looking at a once familiar item and it seeming alien. The uncanny manifests in a variety of ways, and uncertainty is the only thing we can remain certain of.

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Neighboring Dimensions: The Use of Substances in Poe and Hawthorne to
Achieve Quasi-Emersonian Apotheosis
by Darci Ross-Smith

Ralph Waldo Emerson rather haughtily makes distinctions between the Poet he hopes to see in the world and a common bard: Poets can achieve a clear understanding of the primal soul of Nature, while “bards love wine, mead, narcotics, coffee, tea, opium, the fumes of sandal-wood and tobacco, or whatever other species of animal exhilaration” in an attempt to achieve an experience beyond the self (“The Poet” 263). This animal exhilaration, he argues, cannot truly replace the human experience of transcendence. Some artists may be able to use substances to inspire creation, but “the epic poet, he who shall sing of the gods, and their descent unto men, must drink water out of a wooden bowl” (“The Poet” 263). Dark Romantic authors take advantage of this technique in their narratives; this genre cannot achieve transcendence, but Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne use opium and poison to allow their characters to witness a quasi-apotheosis that reveals knowledge of a different kind: knowledge of death and what lies beyond.

Emerson’s Poet, through imagination, achieves a higher understanding of Nature and the soul, transcending to new dimensions of knowledge and being. He states, “the imagination intoxicates the poet,” providing a sense of “emancipation and exhilaration” (“The Poet” 264). A deep connection to Nature is necessary to achieve a higher understanding

of both it and the soul. Emerson encourages spending time in the woods, grounding oneself in Nature, and experiencing sunlight, dirt, and wind; when done consistently and intensely, the Poet returns “to reason and faith... all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (“Nature” 183). This expansion of the mind allows the Poet to achieve new thought and experience, connecting their soul to the souls of others, to Nature, and to God. Through this new and improved perception, Emerson imagines that the Poet “stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform... and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature” (“The Poet” 260-261). The Poet is a representative of the Nature that they have grown connected with and communicates for it to humanity, but the Poet is also a representative of humanity: “He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (“The Poet” 255).

The experience of this ascendance is fascinating, and the language Emerson uses is similar to language a substance user might use to describe a drug trip. He describes this transcendence and achievement of higher understanding: “And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live,-- opaque, though they seem transparent,-- and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations. That will reconcile me to life, and renovate nature” (“The Poet” 257). Elements of this passage are reminiscent of a psychedelic trip.

Floating and ascending are common physical sensations, and vivid imagery and intense sensory experiences are often noted during trips. Emerson describes this experience as better than his birthday, similar to the euphoric joy expected on a good trip (“The Poet” 257). Spiritual insight and ego dissolution are also common experiences on trips, and are consistent with Emerson’s vanishing egotism, part and particle of God, and deep connection to Nature and other souls (“Nature” 183). The Poet must speak “somewhat wildly, or, ‘with the flower of the mind;’” Emerson argues, “not with the intellect, used as an organ, but... [taking] its direction from its celestial life... not with intellect alone, but with the intellect inebriated by nectar” (“The Poet” 263). Interestingly, as much as this is reminiscent of a drug trip, going so far as to claim that the Poet is under the influence of Nature and imagination, Emerson argues against the use of drugs to achieve this state. Acknowledging the fact that many artists use drugs to enable themselves to enter an elevated state, he writes, “All men avail themselves of such means as they can, to add this extraordinary power to their normal powers... which are several courses of finer *quasi*-mechanical substitutes for the true nectar, which is the ravishment of the intellect by coming nearer to the fact” (“The Poet” 263). This attempted, only partially and temporarily effective apotheosis helps these artists attain “freedom, as it was an emancipation not into the heavens, but into the freedom of baser places” (“The Poet” 263). It is an internal or even downward journey to knowledge, as opposed to the ascendancy to higher degrees of knowledge and connection that true apotheosis is.

This quasi-apotheosis, revealing darker and baser information, is revealed through the use of opiates in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "Ligeia." Emerson mentions many stimulants he believes should not be used by the Poet, but he specifically denounces opium; it is one of the substances a mere bard may use, but "the spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine" ("The Poet" 263). Poe, an opioid user himself, often wrote protagonists that used opium, notably the narrator of "Ligeia." Poe's narrator explains to the reader that his first wife and only love, the beautiful and accomplished Ligeia, died before the narrative began. After mourning her, he remarried to a woman named Rowena, who was in nearly every way Ligeia's opposite. During this time, notably, he also began to self-medicate with opioids (Poe 624). After a bout of illness, Rowena also dies, and over the course of a night, Ligeia takes over her body. Interpretations of "Ligeia" vary: some critics believe the return of Ligeia is nothing more than a hallucination on the part of the narrator, while others believe Ligeia truly returns and inhabits Rowena's dying body. Regardless, the narrator is "wild with the excitement of an immoderate dose of opium," affecting what he sees and what the reader interprets (Poe 626). Poe's narrator watches Rowena's and Ligeia's souls connect and interact in ways he previously was not able to and witnesses Ligeia's connection to a realm beyond death; he cannot experience any of this himself, as the opium only allows him to be a spectator.

Opium, psychologically, can create conditions similar to aspects

of Emersonian transcendence, but a drug user still cannot achieve the level of the Poet. Emerson necessitates, “the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (“The Poet” 255). The Poet achieves this through an intimate connection with Nature; however, some researchers have posited that through substance use, “the artist appears as a collective person and goes beyond his/her personal experiences,” effectively representing more than just the self (Iszaj and Demetrovics 1613). Opium is a depressant that can repress certain drives, create a feeling of isolation or estrangement, and, most importantly, create a feeling of unstable or mixed identities (Iszaj and Demetrovics 1614). Poe’s narrator, becoming “a bounden slave in the trammels of opium,” adopts an apathy and lack of strong emotion indicative of extended use of opium, experiencing ego dissolution and apathy, allowing him to be more vulnerable to the conclusion of the story, in which he witnesses Ligeia’s return from death and inhabitation of Rowena’s body (Poe 624). While he is able to witness the collectivity of their souls, he is not able to join it himself: even with the effects of the opium, Emerson’s transcendence escapes him.

Ligeia and Rowena in one body is a strange manifestation of their souls, but under the influence of opioids, Poe’s narrator sees symbols of their souls in other ways. Emerson claims that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact,” and the room in which Rowena and the narrator live is a fascinating representation of the spiritual war she will face (“The Poet” 190). After the death of Ligeia, the narrator and Rowe-

na move into a new house, where he builds a bridal chamber for the two of them. The room is decorated in black and gold, the hair colors of both Ligeia and Rowena, respectively. Rowena's blonde hair is seen in a golden censer, gold candelabras, and gold curtains that cover most of the walls and furniture. Ligeia's dark hair and eyes are immortalized in the high ceiling, bridal couch, bed, and sculptural decor. Interestingly, the golden drapery is covered in black designs: "This material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with Arabesque figures, of about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black" (Poe 625). Rowena is represented in the decor: removable objects in the space that are of little importance to the room itself. Ligeia, on the other hand, is seen in the ceiling and the bed, integral components of the bedroom, and in the design on the curtains, already subtly intertwined with Rowena. During her illness, in moments when Rowena falls unconscious, Ligeia seems to appear in her body, interwoven with Rowena's features, reminiscent of the tapestry. Eventually, the curtains themselves are torn down: Rowena dies, and Ligeia remains. At this instant, when Ligeia revives in what was once Rowena's body, the narrator no longer sees a semblance of Ligeia in Rowena's body, but Ligeia herself. He describes, "can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes of the lady—of the lady Ligeia!" (Poe 628). Ligeia's eyes suggest Emerson's transparent eyeball and wild voice speaking to Nature, but her eye is not clear. She has accessed a plane beyond life, but she has not ascended. She may see beyond, into death, but

her voice is silent, and thus she cannot communicate what she sees with the narrator, preventing him from achieving, even in his influenced state, transcendence. Through the opium hallucination of Rowena's transformation and the revivification of Ligeia, the narrator cannot glimpse beyond himself, only able to observe others peering "into regions inconceivable until after death" (McGhee 56). The barrier Poe explores between humanity and this "something else" is the body itself; it "is in fact our point of passage into the... transcendence of death" (McGhee 68). This darker, mere glimpse of further knowledge is not true transcendence: it does not reveal the connection of all to one or bring the narrator closer to a God. It is simply an extension beyond, revealing a knowledge of the realm of death, separate from the traditional Emersonian ascendance.

Hawthorne takes this idea one step further, using poison in his short story, "Rappaccini's Daughter." The narrator of "Ligeia" stumbles upon this quasi-apotheosis through recreational opioid usage; however, Hawthorne's "Rappaccini" comes much closer to intertwining a human with Nature using a different substance. The short story follows young Giovanni Guasconti as he moves to Padua, where he learns of Dr. Rappaccini and his mysterious garden. Upon closer examination, he discovers that the garden is entirely composed of poisonous plants so potent that Rappaccini must wear gloves and a mask before drawing near any of his twisted fauna. However, his daughter, Beatrice, does not need protection from the garden. She was raised among the plants and has both adapted to and adopted their poison. She can embrace even the most dangerous plants

in the garden, but it does not come without consequence: her breath causes Guasconti to feel faint, and she refuses for much of the story to let him touch her, as she has been inundated with the poison herself.

Rappaccini attempts to create a connection between humanity and Nature through his daughter and garden, sacrificing Beatrice's physical and emotional health to discover Nature through her. Rappaccini's goal is seemingly inspired by Emerson's proposal: "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable" ("Nature" 184). Rappaccini attempts to create a Poet through the connection of his deadly daughter and the plants he cultivated. The result is that Beatrice has a close relationship to Nature, allowing for interpretation as a traditional Transcendentalist: "For her, every natural element has a soul and a spirit which make it as animate as a human being" (Mnassar 19). Beatrice is introduced through her relationship with inaccessible plant life; when Rappaccini cannot get close to a particularly dangerous plant, he calls her in to care for it, and she greets it, saying, "Yes, my sister, my splendor, it shall be Beatrice's task to nurse and serve thee; and thou shalt reward her with thy kisses and perfumed breath, which to her is as the breath of life!" (Hawthorne 408-409). Her connection to the flora is deep: "she considers them as her sisters and addresses them as if they were humans" (Mnassar 19). Beatrice has a "girlish womanhood" about her, a result, no doubt, of her isolation and lack of interaction with humans outside of the garden (Hawthorne 417). Reminiscent of the effects of opioids, the isolation the poison necessitates also causes mis-develop-

ment of the ego and a regression to childhood, referencing Emerson's idea that "few adult persons can see nature... The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child" ("Nature" 183). Beatrice's experience, in opposition to Ligeia's descent, is closer to transcendence, but it still "relies on a degeneration of body and mind rather than an affirmation of life" (McGhee 68). The poison may sustain Beatrice, and the removal of it may kill her, but in the end, Beatrice, who has come close to a deeper understanding of Nature, dies. Rappaccini's Poet, his attempt to create a connection with Nature, dies with his daughter, who rejects her role as this connecting spirit in her final moments: "I would fain have been loved, not feared" (Hawthorne 425). To be loved by humans, at the expense of her connection with Nature, is what she desires.

Poe's narrator managed to witness the interconnection of souls and a communication with something beyond through opiate hallucinations, and Rappaccini intentionally attempted something similar—through Beatrice he created a person he hoped could see the souls of the flora around her, communicating more explicitly with beings beyond human—to Emerson's universal soul of all humans, and the connection of this with Nature that Emerson calls Spirit ("The Poet" 190). Beatrice was an attempt to join death and life inextricably to discover more about it: Rappaccini saw death that came as a result of his poison as the closest to attaining "the ultimate experience, bringing with it the ultimate truths" (McGhee 61). Beatrice is an unsuccessful experiment, and Rappaccini only catches glimpses of the knowledge he desires through his daughter's interactions with his garden

plants, never experiencing it for himself or truly understanding her experiences. Like Ligeia, Beatrice cannot truly transcend, nor can she adequately communicate her experiences: both are failed Poets that the characters of their respective stories can only witness but never understand.

Emerson claims that the Poet can only transcend through apotheosis, but Poe and Hawthorne use substances to imitate the discovery of their own, resulting not in higher, ascended knowledge, but in a knowledge that expands outward or even down. This expansion may not produce higher knowledge, but it still grants the visionary “passage out into free space, and they help him to escape the custody of that body in which he is pent up, and of that jail-yard of individual relations in which he is enclosed” (“The Poet” 263). Instead of becoming part of God or translating the voice of Nature for humanity, these characters glimpse death and what is beyond. Tragically, these characters are “punished for that advantage they won, by dissipation and deterioration. But never can any advantage be taken of nature by a trick” (“The Poet” 263). Poe’s narrator will doubt his sanity forever, Ligeia is forced back into the world of the living without autonomy, Beatrice dies without experiencing true human connection, and Rappaccini can never touch the flowers in his garden or embrace his daughter again.

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“That Hard Law of Life:” Gnostic Conflict in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

by Jolie Medeiros

It is safe to say everyone has experienced conflict between reason and bodily desire or impulse. This conflict comes in many forms. For example, one might suffer a stomachache, having eaten more than they knew they should. Or, one might wake up with a hangover, having had five drinks while knowing they should have stopped at two. This disconnect between what one knows *ought* to be done and what one *actually* does can become the source of a great deal of suffering. It is this gulf between expectation and behavior, as well as effort and satisfaction, that Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll* refers to as “that hard law of life, which lies at the root of religion and is one of the most plentiful springs of distress.”¹ This “law” is one of the issues that religion, broadly construed, seeks to answer.² One possible answer comes from Gnosticism, a group of ancient Christian heresies. “Gnosticism” comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, referring to secret knowledge or enlightenment that is only available to a chosen few.³ For the purposes of this paper, the basic relevant form of Gnosticism holds that the physical world is evil, while the human spirit is good. Thus, the source of life’s suffering is that the good spirit is trapped in an evil body, and salvation means being freed from the body.⁴ The aforementioned conflict between reason and bodily desire and Gnosticism are major factors in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Jekyll himself holds Gnostic beliefs and practices, which drive much of

his behavior, and with it, his story. I will support this claim in the following ways. First, I will examine Jekyll's engagement with *gnosis*, secret knowledge. Then, I will investigate his shame surrounding his "pleasures" and show how this plays into his Gnostic attitude. Further, I will show that Jekyll associates Hyde with evil and, by association, with the body. Afterward, I will show how Jekyll tries to dissociate himself from the body. Lastly, I will show how Jekyll/Hyde's Gnostic inner conflict ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Before examining Jekyll's Gnostic beliefs further, it is important to define Gnosticism clearly. Writing in *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*, Roger Olson explains that "Gnosticism is a generic label given to a wide variety of" Christian heresies.⁵ Its name "comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means 'knowledge' or 'wisdom,'" and refers to secret knowledge of spiritual truth, only available to the enlightened.⁶ Under Gnosticism, salvation does not come from the redemption of body and soul, but from obtaining *gnosis*.⁷ This *gnosis* includes the knowledge that the material world is fundamentally evil, often identified as having been created not by the benevolent God but by "an evil or demented lesser god (a 'demiurge')." ⁸ In contrast, the spirit is not only good, but divine. Taken together, the evil of matter and the goodness of the spirit mean that the fall of man, and the resulting tendency to sin are coterminous with embodiment.⁹ Thus, the body is evil and the source of sin; it is an "inherently limiting ... drag on the good soul or spirit of the human person."¹⁰ Accordingly, salvation means escaping "from

the bondage of material existence” and into the realm of pure spirit.¹¹ I will be considering the mental/intellectual realm as immaterial and as functionally identical to the spiritual realm. This is an oversimplification, but one that will not cost too much nuance. Given this, the dichotomy in *Jekyll and Hyde* is between mind/soul and body. So, to show that Jekyll holds Gnostic beliefs, he must fulfill three aspects: a) belief in *gnosis*, b) belief that the body/material world is evil, and c) belief that the spirit is good and must be saved by release or dissociation from the body.

Jekyll discovers his own *gnosis* through obscure spiritual research, as he describes: “it chanced that ... my scientific studies, which led wholly towards the mystic and the transcendental, reacted and shed a strong light on this consciousness of the perennial war among my members.”¹² From this “mystic” research, he discovers the truth that “man is not truly one, but truly two.”¹³ In other words, the layman’s normal sense of a unified identity is false. Furthermore, this state of being “truly two” is the explanation for Jekyll’s inner conflict. According to his discoveries, he feels internally separated and divided because he is not composed of one nature with the capacity for both good and evil, but of warring good and evil natures. In his *gnosis*, Jekyll ostensibly discovers his means of salvation: “Certain agents I found to have the power to shake and pluck back that fleshly vestment, even as a wind might toss the curtains of a pavilion.”¹⁴ By calling the body a “vestment,” Jekyll suggests that the real person is not located in the body but is rather only clothed by it. In other words, the body is not integral to the person; only the spirit is integral to the person,

and the body is merely an external feature. This stratification of soul from body is characteristic of Gnostic thought. Further, Jekyll's words imply that rending this "fleshly vestment" will free his "good self" from his "evil side." This is a Gnostic implication, suggesting that, with the rupture of soul from body, the soul will be saved from evil.

Additionally, Jekyll's shame over his pleasures suggests an implicit belief in the body or sensory pleasures as evil. Jekyll begins his "Statement of the Case" by providing a brief biography, in which he says that "the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition."¹⁵ He continues, explaining, "Many a man would have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of; but from the high views that I had set before me, I regarded and hid them with an almost morbid sense of shame." He emphasizes, repeatedly, that his faults are not that bad, but he is nevertheless excessively ashamed of them. He never names his pleasures. On the meta-level of the story, this works well. Stevenson's choice not to name Jekyll's pleasures makes Jekyll's story more broadly applicable and focuses the reader on Jekyll's downfall, which is more important. However, in-character, Jekyll's refusal to name his pleasures reads as a further expression of shame. He never explains why, precisely, he feels so ashamed of his pleasures. He is so ashamed that, as shown above, he pursues actually separating these two parts of himself, attempting to make them into distinct beings. Rather than separating himself, he succeeds instead in creating a persona through which he can shamelessly indulge his pleasures—namely, Hyde, his evil self.¹⁶

Further, Hyde is Jekyll's outlet for his shameful behaviors; accordingly, examining Hyde's manifestation will reveal much about Jekyll's shame, namely that Jekyll identifies Hyde's evil with embodiment. Hyde is sensual: from the first moments Jekyll becomes him, he says, "I was conscious of a heady recklessness, a current of disordered sensual images running like a millrace in my fancy."¹⁷ He is also powerfully vital, full of "the raging energies of life."¹⁸ Hyde is characterized as more instinctual and animal than he is rational, with his reason primarily employed to secure his material desires. By nature, he is antithetical to the upright, intellectual, ascetic society that Utterson and Jekyll occupy.¹⁹ Utterson describes Hyde as "troglodytic," evoking a "hitherto unknown disgust, loathing, and fear."²⁰ He is described as clever but sub-human; he is likened to a caveman or an ape, something pre-civilized and untamed. Besides his evil, little else about Hyde is emphasized as much as his embodiment and sensuality. Because Jekyll then identifies Hyde with evil, these descriptions suggest Jekyll's antipathy toward the body.

Jekyll sees Hyde as something separate and other than himself, and later on makes every effort to distance himself from Hyde; this emphasis on Hyde as separate, combined with Hyde's association with the body, suggests Jekyll sees the body as something separate from himself and even as a fetter on him. Even before Jekyll makes Hyde, he thinks of the side of himself that indulges his pleasures as his "extraneous evil."²¹ He describes the two sides of himself as "incongruous faggots ... bound together."²² Even as Jekyll says that he is "radically both" his indulgent and intellec-

tual sides, the language he uses emphasizes the separation between Jekyll and Hyde.²³ This is even clearer later in the final chapter, fittingly titled “Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case.” After murdering Carew as Hyde, Jekyll says that he “thought of Hyde, for all his energy of life, as of something not only hellish but inorganic,” and as “the slime of the pit” and “amorphous dust.”²⁴ At this point, Jekyll refuses even to grant Hyde’s animality, which naturally entails some kind of animacy and therefore some vague sense of a soul. Instead, he characterizes Hyde as inanimate. There is little Jekyll could have done to more clearly define Hyde as purely material than to identify him as inanimate. This identification also stratifies Jekyll from Hyde—Jekyll is a living person, imperfect yet trying for good. In contrast, Hyde is nothing but base matter, fundamentally incapable of nobler pursuits. Even if this stratification is primarily Jekyll’s way of distancing himself from his guilt, the images he uses to create that distance speak to his attitude. When he separates himself from Hyde, he does so by emphasizing Hyde’s physicality, sometimes in contrast to his own desire for spiritual and intellectual (i.e., largely disembodied) good. This radical separation of spirit and person from the body is characteristic of Gnosticism.

Jekyll/Hyde’s radical sense of self-division reaches its climax and logical conclusion in suicide. Shortly before Jekyll’s terminal transformation into Hyde, he declares: “[T]his is my true hour of death, and what is to follow concerns another than myself. Here then, as I lay down the pen and proceed to seal up my confession, I bring the life of that unhap-

py Henry Jekyll to an end.”²⁵ He again distinguishes himself from Hyde, even as they will soon die, inextricably linked together. Jekyll’s death is more symbolic than literal; it is a reflection of his psychological state, not the reality of the situation. Irving S. Saposnik, writing in his article “The Anatomy of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*,” states: “By seeing Hyde as another being rather than as part of himself, he [Jekyll] is forced to deny the most significant result of his experiment and indeed of his entire story, the inescapable conclusion that man must dwell in uncomfortable but necessary harmony with his multiple selves.”²⁶ Although Jekyll insists upon the distinction between himself and Hyde, to the point of separating their deaths, he cannot ultimately separate himself into multiple parts or beings. Instead, he perpetuates his inner conflict, as Saposnik continues from the passage above: “The final suicide is thus fittingly a dual effort: though the hand that administers the poison is Edward Hyde’s, it is Henry Jekyll who forces the action. Never before have they been so much one as when Hyde insures the realization of Jekyll’s death-wish.”²⁷ In a bitter irony, Jekyll gets his Gnostic wish, forcibly separating soul from body. This is no triumph—only the logical conclusion of his self-loathing. Jekyll/Hyde’s suicide is “self-murder” made literal: Jekyll’s hatred for Hyde and all he represents is so powerful that he kills Hyde and, therefore, himself.

Thus, I have shown that Jekyll is a Gnostic, and that his beliefs ultimately lead him to self-destruction. He is unable to live with the existence of both good and evil within himself, so he identifies his evil traits with his body and treats them as something he can escape from by his own

power. His attempts to free himself from his “evil side” only succeed in creating an alter-ego, Hyde, who then becomes the outlet for his shameful pleasures. Jekyll continually tries to distinguish himself from Hyde, identifying Hyde increasingly with merely physical (and even inanimate) things. Rather than resolving his inner conflict, these behaviors intensify it, until he metaphorically tears himself apart via suicide—achieving separation of soul from body, as he desired, but at the cost of death.

Notes

¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, “Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case” (“Statement”), para. 1.

² cf. Pope Paul IV, “Nostra Aetate,” sec. 1, para. 3, and to a lesser extent, sec. 2, para. 2.

³ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, Part I, Chapter 1, para. 2.

⁴ James White, “James White Explains Gnosticism, Docetism, And Marcionism,” *YouTube*, 2:20-52. This is not a scholarly source, but White’s description of Gnosticism is brief and accessible.

⁵ Olson, *Christian Theology*, Part I, Chapter 1, para. 2.

⁶ Olson, Part I, Chapter 1, para. 2.

⁷ Olson, Part I, Chapter 1, “Gnosticism,” para. 3.

⁸ Olson, Part I, Chapter 1, “Gnostic Theology,” para. 2. Parenthesis original.

⁹ Olson, “Gnostic Theology,” para. 5.

¹⁰ Olson, Part I, Chapter 1, “Gnosticism,” para. 3.

¹¹ Olson, *Christian Theology*, Part I, Chapter 1, “Gnosticism,” para. 3.

¹² Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 1. A reference to Rom. 7:23. For more context, especially as relevant to Jekyll’s affective inner conflict, see vv. 15-24. St. Paul is not a Gnostic, but in my opinion the inner conflict he expresses is one source of Gnostic reasoning about the relationship between mind/soul and body. Jekyll likely references the KJV here, but

the wording for these verses is not significantly different for the versions I checked (KJV and RSVCE).

¹³ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 1.

¹⁴ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 2.

¹⁵ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 1.

¹⁶ cf. Zorse, “What People Get Wrong about Dr Jekyll & Mr. Hyde,” *YouTube*, particularly 6:19-10:03. This video helped pinpoint and clarify my understanding of Jekyll’s basic unity. Additionally, I would say that whether or not Hyde is evil is not as important as the fact that Jekyll *believes* he is. Jekyll’s beliefs are the primary issue here.

¹⁷ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 4.

¹⁸ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 26.

¹⁹ cf. Irving S. Saposnik, “The Anatomy of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*,” p. 719: “[A]n air of fierce austerity pervades the story, a peculiarly masculine breed of asceticism which, like the London fog, colors the entire surface. It is as if the atmospheric color were itself a symbol of normative rigidity. The men of the story are representative Victorian types, exemplars of a harsh life best seen in the somber context of their professional and social conduct.”

²⁰ Stevenson, “Search for Mr. Hyde,” para. 37. I count line breaks for dialogue as new paragraphs.

²¹ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 1.

²² Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 1.

²³ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 1.

²⁴ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 26.

²⁵ Stevenson, “Statement,” para. 28.

²⁶ Saposnik, p. 724.

²⁷ Saposnik, p. 724.

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Mediascape in Transcending Reality and Creating a “Zero- Perspective”

Community in *White Noise* by Don DeLillo

by Afia Mursheeda

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents a technologically advanced world shaped by the pervasive influence of electronic and print media, algorithms, and computerized systems. Within this environment, DeLillo depicts a community that is extremely inclined to accept mediated representations of reality—often illusory—over reality itself. The novel constructs what may be described as a techno-semiotic regime, where the excessive presence of technology produces a “false reality” and forces individuals to reshape their perception of the real. From the formation of self-identity to everyday perception, interaction, and human experience becomes deeply mediated. In this fictional world, images, signs, and streams of information dominate human experience, resulting in a profound erosion of meaning. The characters inhabit a media-saturated society in which news broadcasts, commercials, advertisements, magazines, and even product packaging function as systems of coded communication that dictate their understanding of reality. Their habitual repetition of brand names and commercial slogans, along with an uncritical acceptance of media narratives, renders their grasp of reality unstable and disorienting. Considering these dynamics, this paper argues that mediascapes and technological structures in *White Noise* actively transcend and distort reality. Furthermore, it examines how media contributes to the formation of a perspec-

tive-less community, wherein individuals are deprived of authentic, critical engagement with the world around them.

This novel centers on Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies, and his wife Babette, who together manage a blended family of four children. Key figures include Murray Jay Siskind, Jack's colleague who theorizes media and popular culture, and Willie Mink, who is connected to the experimental drug "Dylar", secretly taken by Babette to cope with her fear of death. During an environmental disaster known as the Toxic Airborne Event, Jack starts recognizing his deep-seated fear of death. This technology and media obsessed postmodern Gladney family represents the consumerist and capitalist nature of American society. The overall environment of *White Noise* represents a technologically and media-entangled society that privileges the "false reality" constructed by mainstream media over personal, lived experience. This condition is exemplified in a conversation between Jack Gladney and his son Heinrich, who questions the reliability of human senses and destabilizes epistemological certainty by privileging technological data. Heinrich refuses to trust his own perception of rain, instead insisting on verification through radio broadcast, thereby illustrating a growing dependence on mediated information over immediate reality (DeLillo 16).

Jack's frustration over his son getting overpowered by the media reflects DeLillo's frustration over the contemporary American society getting overpowered by mediascapes itself. While commenting on such media dependency, Wilcox describes the condition as a "black hole of simula-

tion,” in which the real is replaced by the exchange of signs (Wilcox 346). Brief notices and symbols that convey certain messages to people without linguistic details can be called signs. Warning notices sealed on food packaging can be read as sign as they deliver certain messages to people. Such signs exist to deliver crucial messages regarding reality but it becomes a threat when their presence and claims are unquestioned and prioritized more than reality, knowledge, and common senses. DeLillo’s tech savvy world replaces reality by signs and symbols. For example, we see Denise forbids Babette to chew gums after seeing the “cancer caution label,” Steffie suggests “boiling water” just because “the radio said so” (DeLillo 21). These food labels (signs) are posted there to create awareness; however, such reliability becomes a threat when their claims are unquestionable and firmer than reality. When these claims are blindly trusted without cross-checking, they start shaping human behavior, habit, preferences and perception about the reality. Such behavior can be seen as signs and media saturated consciousness where human brain is confined within the “black hole of simulation.”

Image and signs can hold immense power to conceal reality and create false reality. Baudrillard projects and warns about image masking basic reality and detaching human experiences and perceptions from reality. In one chapter, Murray and Jack pass by an overly crowded barn where people crowded to take a picture with a barn sign that claims the barn to be America’s most photographed barn. Signifying the influence of the barn sign Murray says, “We have read the sign, seen the people snapping the

pictures [and thus] we can't get out of this aura [as] we are a part of this aura now, Jack" (DeLillo 13). When images overshadow reality and create false reality or "hyper reality," that is called simulacra. Baudrillard coined this term. Annjeanette Wiese, in her paper mentions how simulacra replace "real experiences", destabilizing their legitimate knowledge of the characters. Talking about the threats of consumerism and mass media she states that the characters here are shaping their identity based on the received information and were getting disassociated from anything with authenticity; events were becoming rehearsals (Wiese 5). Her claim means that human experiences fail to add meaning; whereas, media projection adds meaning to everything. Not having media coverage eliminates true value of something among people. This statement takes us to a specific moment in the novel where one man feels frustrated as no news channel covers the toxic air borne incident initially. To him, their evacuation and all the ongoing misery "loses" its value by not getting media coverage (DeLillo 74) His perception shows that media's not covering the incident makes the incident a lie and insignificant. Ultimately, what he says is that his experience of the horror holds no truth to himself without the media saying that its "true/real". Warning about similar situations, Jean Baudrillard mentions, digital images have become a medium in present day which has imposed itself between the "realities" and "imaginings"; enwrapping news and images, same thing happening every day and images are becoming more real than the reality itself (Baudrillard 194-195). Having said that random person's reaction justifies the claim of this paper that media transcends the

“reality” in peoples’ life in *White Noise*.

Apart from constructing a false reality, an excessive dependence on media and simulacra also manipulates human consciousness. Wilcox, drawing on Jean Baudrillard, notes that an overabundance of information ultimately devours communication and “creates total entropy” (quoted in Wilcox 347). Here, entropy can be understood as a suffocating, claustrophobic condition from which nothing can escape. A close reading of *White Noise* reveals that individuals are trapped within this closed system of entropy. Their conversations fail to convey substantive meaning and instead appear superficial and fragmented—as if they are speaking without truly communicating. This breakdown of communication is further emphasized through their compulsive retreat into media consumption. Family members increasingly isolate themselves, becoming absorbed in television. While watching TV, they even move their lips, “attempting to match the words [they are] spoken” (DeLillo 42), suggesting a passive imitation rather than active engagement. Television becomes so central to their lives that Babette introduces “TV time” to bring the family together, ironically overlooking how this very dependence contributes to their emotional and communicative distance (DeLillo 14). The novel further illustrates this deterioration through moments where individuals seem more attuned to technological signals than to human speech—listening to disembodied radio waves that echo like sounds in a “hollow geosynchronous orbit” (DeLillo 118). Similarly, Jack’s meticulous attention to the mechanics of how a voice sounds over the telephone, rather than to the content of

the conversation itself, underscores the lack of genuine human connection. Connecting, these instances point to a profound communication gap among the family members. In line with Baudrillard's theory, media emerges as a driving force behind this entropic condition. Fragmented reality, superficial exchanges, and the dominance of mediated signals transform the world of *White Noise* into a "free-floating" realm of simulacra, increasingly detached from any stable or meaningful foundation (Wilcox 357). Such fragmentation, lack of communication, denial of own experiences gradually produce lack of perception power and perspectives. Susan S. Martins, while talking about such media saturated society mentions that language might not always belong to the speaker. What she means here is that language, words or perspective might get influenced by some superior energy i.e. government. She further claims that DeLillo's depiction of the technology in the novel shows direct connection with the "mind controlling" of the characters (Martins 90). When language and perspective gets manipulated, one cannot think independently anymore.

Robert M. Entman, in his article "How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach," examines the role of media in shaping political opinion in American society. While addressing this, he mentions that there are established scholarships around the world regarding influence of media, which never denies the significance of media in shaping public opinion. Even within so-called "minimal effects" frameworks, digital media continues to play a significant role in shaping how the public identifies and interprets social problems. In other words,

even when media does not actively introduce new propaganda, individuals rely on it for expert interpretation, data, and validation of existing crises (Entman 347). Within this framework, the influence of media on the community in *White Noise* becomes particularly evident. The novel demonstrates that media not only informs but actively shapes opinion and judgment, ultimately producing a community that lacks independent perspective and critical agency. One striking example of this phenomenon is the recurrence of “déjà vu” during the toxic airborne event. Initially, the media does not immediately cover the incident; however, once it does, its reports are filled with speculative and often unfounded claims about health effects. Paradoxically, as these symptoms are broadcast, individuals begin to internalize and reproduce them. Many characters start experiencing sensations—such as déjà vu—only after hearing about them through media channels. Babette herself observes this unsettling pattern, noting that such experiences occur “only when they are broadcast” (DeLillo 62). This moment sharply illustrates how media does not merely report reality but actively constructs it, shaping both perception and bodily experience. These helpless people, during this crisis moment, having no authentic knowledge about what was happening with them relies on the media blindly. Thus, media psychologically affects them, and these people start feeling the symptoms broadcasted by the media justifying Entman’s claim that media can shape the attitude of the audiences as well (351). The depiction of these people’s activity shows that they are almost animated by the media where their real sense of feeling is also controlled and manipu-

lated, turning them into a “perspectiveless” community.

Believing information without interrogating its truth ultimately produces a loss of perspective. The crowd gathering around the “most photographed barn in America” in *White Noise* exemplifies this condition. Like the others, Jack and Murray remain uncertain about the authenticity of the claim, yet they still participate in the spectacle—arriving with cameras simply to remain relevant and to participate in this mediated experience. Their actions reveal a profound lack of independent judgment, as they accept the value of the site not through direct perception but through its prior circulation in media discourse. This phenomenon aligns with the argument proposed by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.” They argue that while media may not explicitly dictate what people should think, it powerfully determines what they think about (McCombs and Shaw 177). In *White Noise*, individuals are constantly surrounded by television and radio, which continuously frame their attention and shape their perceptions of reality. As a result, the characters emerge as passive recipients of mediated messages, their consciousness subtly conditioned by the constant flow of information. This condition is captured poignantly in Babette’s remark that she keeps “listening to the radio, except it just went off” (DeLillo 116). The statement carries deeper implications: although the device is silent, its influence persists. The broadcasted words continue to echo in the mind, blurring the boundary between external transmission and internal thought.

The erosion of reading as a habitual practice further accelerates

the transformation of individuals into passive receivers. In *White Noise*, the book is no longer the primary source of knowledge; instead, digital media dominates, continuously producing narratives that shape perception and render the community increasingly non-analytical. Whether it concerns warnings about boiling water or other everyday matters, individuals repeatedly defer to media authority, treating it as a kind of unquestionable, almost sacred source of truth. This dynamic resonates with the argument put forward by William A. Gamson et.al. in the essay “Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality.” The essay claims that individuals navigate the world through media-generated images, which function as interpretive lenses for constructing social meaning (Gamson et al. 374). Media, in this sense, operates as a “consciousness industry,” shaping not only public opinion but also the very frameworks through which reality is understood. DeLillo reinforces this idea through Jack’s observation that the “media [is] the primal force in the American home, sealed off, timeless, self-contained and self-referring” (28). Here, media is presented not merely as a technological presence but as an autonomous system—one that produces and circulates its own reality, detached from external reference points. Within this context, the notion of the “death of consciousness” signifies the gradual erosion of individual perspective. Subjective interpretation is displaced by pre-packaged, mediated narratives, leaving little room for independent thought. The constant presence of television in the domestic sphere reinforces a condition in which perception is no longer internally generated but externally imposed. As a result, personal

agency diminishes, giving way to a homogenized community governed by the logic of media.

In an article “How Media Exposure, Media Trust, and Media Bias Perception Influence Public Evaluation of COVID-19 Pandemic in International Metropolises,” Ruixia Han, Jian Xu, and David Pan scrutinize the influence of media over people during Covid 19 pandemic. In the article they discuss how media misrepresentation (‘infodemic’) affects people’s judgment over many issues. The article shows how during the pandemic, hyperactive mass media generates limitless news with/without logical ground and their fear spreading notion influenced public perception and attitude formation. Mental health is negatively impacted by the media and people follow whatever regulation media shares. Media even can be blamed for giving people long term trauma by spreading misinformation. DeLillo’s *Toxic Airborne* event somehow is an uncanny representation of our experiences during Covid 19 pandemic. The way media misguided people during the pandemic; DeLillo’s world encounters similar situation. Starting from feeling physical to psychological disturbances declared by the media to losing self confidence, everything happens to them. Gamson et al. quotes Baudrillard in their paper saying that media represents hyper reality utilizing their photo opportunity. Views consumed by these images take this hyper reality as authentic (388). Overall, this process destroys their critical analyzing skill, turning them unreflective and passive.

The overall world depicted in *White Noise* functions as a warning from Don DeLillo about the rise of the “passive audience” and an inten-

sifying obsession with media. With the rapid modernization of society, the novel suggests that the world is moving toward an uncertain crisis of digital domination. Before society transforms into a symbolic “zombie” generation—reminiscent of the hollow figures in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot—it becomes crucial to distinguish between lived reality and the illusions constructed by media. The dangers produced by consumerism, capitalism, and a media-saturated environment cannot be overlooked. Their consequences are clearly visible in the Gladney family as well as in the broader community they inhabit. The novel, therefore, can be read as a cautionary call for readers to recognize, interrogate, and resist this form of digital encroachment. Jack’s observation that television seems to follow him from room to room suggests that media is no longer confined to a single domestic space but has become ambient and inescapable. While DeLillo portrays television as the dominant force of his time, its contemporary equivalent can be found in the smartphone—an even more intimate and constant presence. In this sense, DeLillo’s vision appears strikingly prophetic, anticipating the crises of a society increasingly mediated by screens. Yet the greater danger lies not merely in technological saturation, but in the gradual erosion of the ability to distinguish between reality and media-constructed illusion. The community in *White Noise* inhabits precisely this condition of confusion, where events gain legitimacy only through their mediation, and fear is amplified through repetition and spectacle. In this regard, their situation is not far removed from our own. When individuals lose the capacity to interpret reality independently and

instead depend on mediated narratives to define truth, critical perspective begins to dissolve. Such dependence approaches a form of intellectual “blindness”—one that pervades DeLillo’s characters and subtly reflects the condition of contemporary society.

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Note from the Archive

The Historical Research Center would like to thank the *Calliope* Editorial Team and Dr. David Barrera for their efforts in archiving the past and present publications. The importance of archives and history is that we preserve, analyze, and contribute to our society's understanding. The *Calliope* team did that and more. The Editorial Team reflected on preserving historical and institutional memory, noticed various changes in their publication over time, and emphasized the conversations as they imagined what this semester's publication would become. May this semester's publication mark as a steppingstone of your careers, while preserving our institution's progress in supporting research, visual arts, and fostering a vibrant creative community.

“*Calliope* serves as a historical record of artistic expression, intellectual thought, and evolving campus identity. Archiving these works ensures future generations can access and study the creative contributions that have shaped the university's literary and artistic legacy.”

- Christopher Livingston, Director, Historical Research Center

Donato Cruz

Processing Archivist

Historical Research Center

Walter W. Stiern Library

Note from the Department Chair

Much has changed since the first issue of *Calliope* rolled off the presses more than thirty years ago. In 1993, the internet was in its infancy, no one had yet heard of Facebook or YouTube or TikTok, and smartphones and tablets were still two decades away. CSUB, which had only gained university status five years before, had less than 5000 students and the Department of English was still known as the Department of English and Communications. The look and feel of *Calliope* has also changed quite a bit during this time. The covers have become more colorful, the fonts sharper, and the paper glossier.

But some things have not changed. *Calliope* continues to highlight, as founding editor Dr. Glenda Hudson wrote in the introduction to that first volume, “the best work in literary history and criticism by undergraduates and graduates at CSUB.” And one thing for sure hasn’t changed – how proud the faculty of the Department of English are of the incredible and excellent work that has gone into producing the newest edition of *Calliope* – a journal written, compiled, edited, and designed, from start to finish, by the best students anyone could ask for. I look forward to seeing what the next thirty-two years brings!

Dr. Emerson Case

Professor/Chair of English

March 2025

Note from the Department Administrative Support

The College of Arts and Humanities is continually inspired by the creativity and dedication of our students, and the *Calliope* and *Orpheus* display in the Humanities Office Building is a wonderful reflection of that. I always enjoy walking past the display and seeing the work of our student writers and artists showcased so beautifully. It also brings meaningful visibility to these publications and programs. It's something we're truly proud of! Not just because of how it looks, but because it reflects the vibrant, creative community that defines our college.

Rebecca St. Croix Martinez

Social Media Specialist & Administrative Support Coordinator

College of Arts and Humanities



Special thanks to Rebecca St. Croix Martinez, Arts and Humanities Administrative Supportaa Coordinator, for all her encouragement and assistance during the process of creating our window display that showcases both *Orpheus* and *Calliope*.

Special thanks to Melanie Ascione, CSUB Print Shop Lead Reprographics Specialist, for her assistance in making this publication a tangible literary journal.

Special thanks to c.s.m., for everything else.



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