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Explorations in selfhood

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Introduction to Volume IX: "Explorations of Selfhood"

This edition of *Emergence* offers a collection of writings by the 2022-2023 cohort of Arnhold Undergraduate Research Fellows in the Department of English at UC Santa Barbara. Each of these undergraduate writers have spent this academic year reading, writing, reflecting on their research topics, their formal approaches, and the relationship between their own identities and their work. Titled "Explorations of Selfhood," these works each engage the complexities of individuality, community, and selfhood in their respective literary periods, creative genres, and cultural traditions.

The Arnhold Undergraduate Research Fellows Program is part of an initiative to foster undergraduate research, both critical and creative, within UCSB's Department of English, which sits on the traditional and unceded lands and waters of the Chumash people. Made possible by a generous donation from John and Jody Arnhold, as well as the mentorship of graduate student teachers and faculty, this program offers an opportunity for students in years three and four to pursue a research-based project according to their unique interests and passions. A goal of the Arnhold Program is to provide the structure, mentorship support, and community setting for students to push their academic and creative interest beyond the structure of grade-based coursework and instead cultivate a research practice that is shaped by their own perspectives, goals, and interests. Each of the writers featured here offer examples of the kinds of intellectually stimulating critical and creative work that make this program such a valuable part of the undergraduate experience in the English Department.

Importantly, many of this year's Arnhold Fellows have grown the seeds of their projects in English department courses, drawing on the support, mentorship, and expertise of faculty and graduate student teachers alike. They have also cultivated their ideas and methodologies through collaboration, working with one another in a group setting across two quarters to create projects that are at once intellectually invigorating and creatively self-reflective.

Each of the works included here bear the mark of thoughtful, engaged writers seeking to make sense of the world through their own situated perspectives. As the Arnhold Graduate Mentor for the 2022-2023 academic year, I am grateful to each of these writers for sharing their words with me, for encouraging me to expand my own thinking, and for reminding me of the joy that comes with putting thought to paper.

Jamiee Cook
Jamiee Cook
Arnhold Graduate Mentor, 2022-2023

Section 1: Literary Criticism
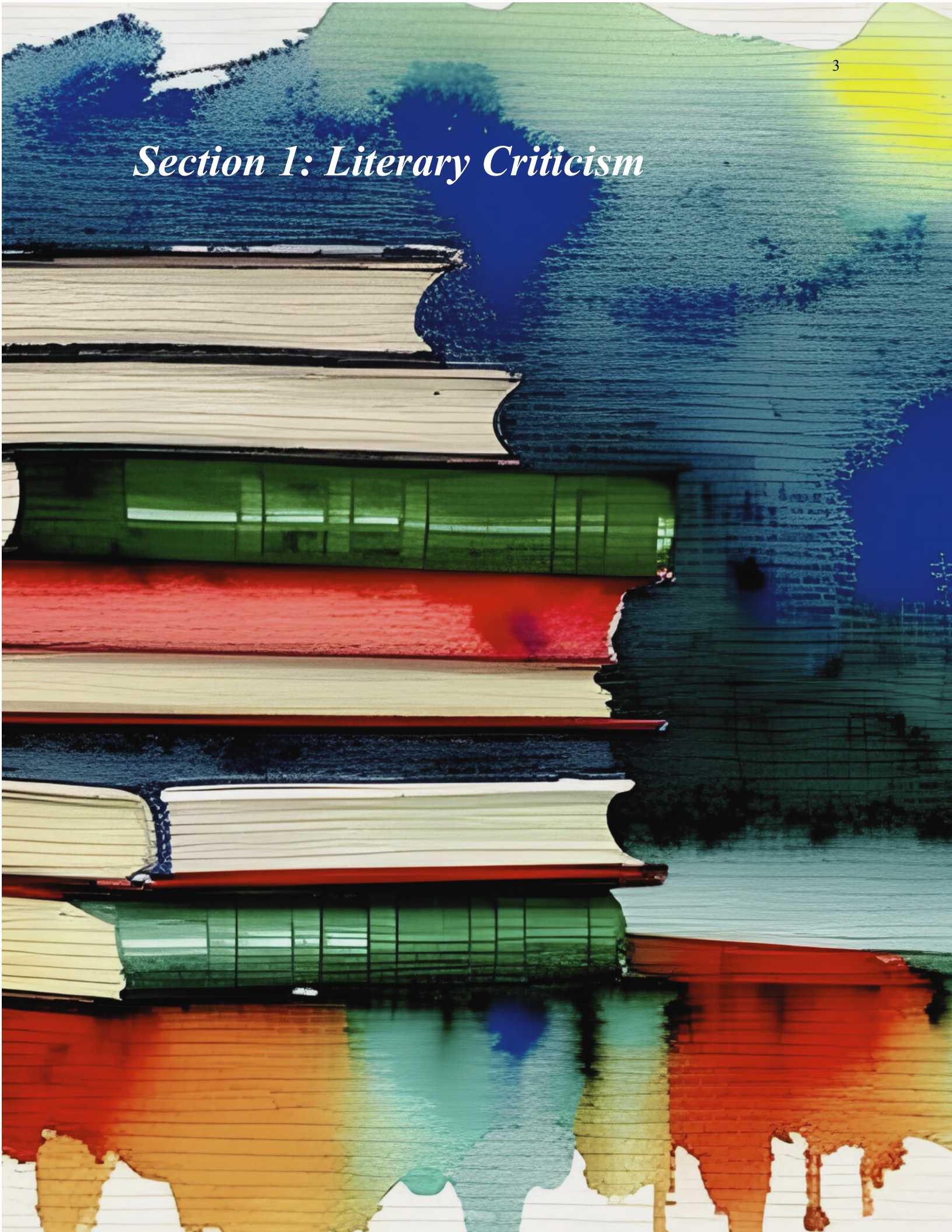
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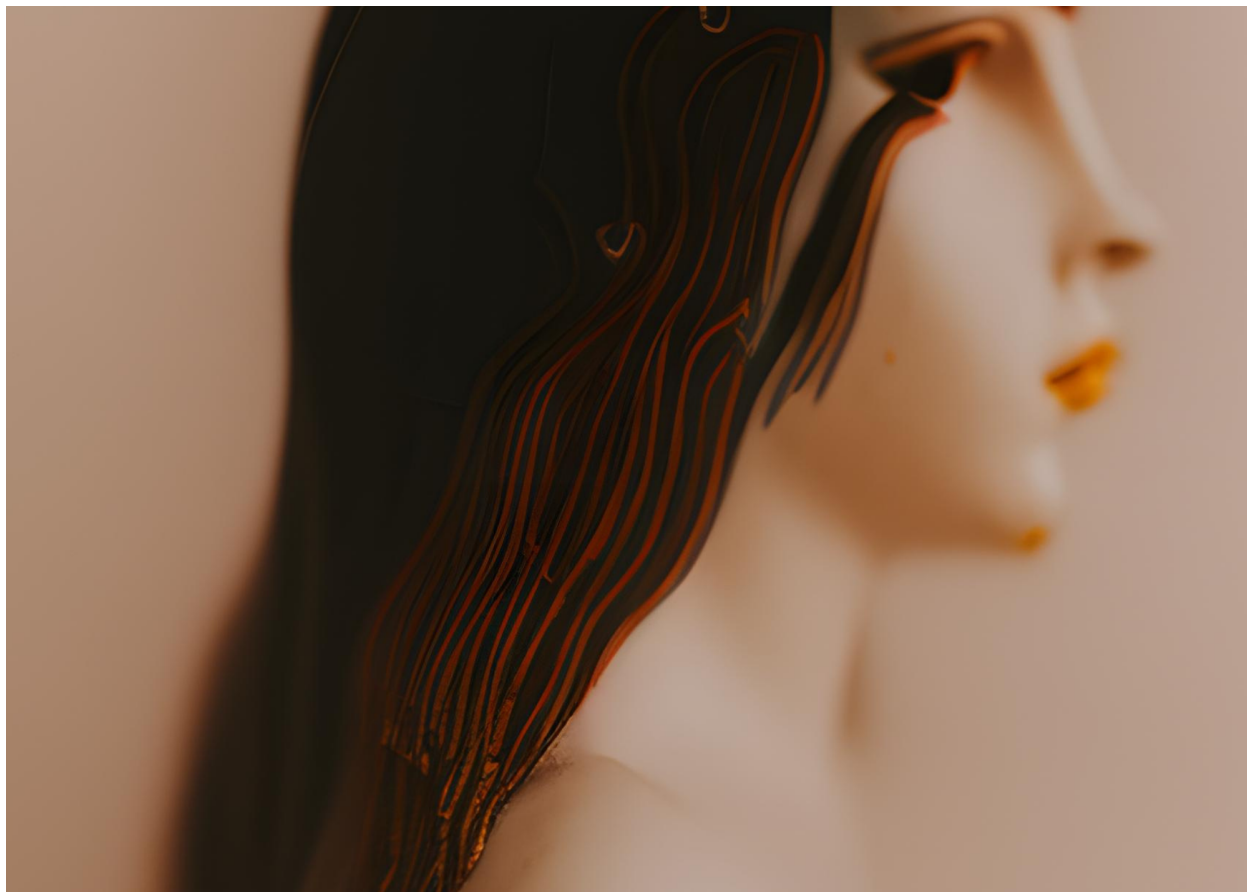

In 1988, Judith Butler reconceptualized gender and even identity as a whole with their essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," claiming that gender is not innate but learned and performed. Although not the first text to question the notion of fixed identity, Butler's essay highlights the possibilities of fluid, unstable, and even paradoxical identities that involve performances that create "compelling illusion[s]." Instead of focusing solely on the psychological perception and conceptualization of an inherent self, they emphasize the role of physical embodiment in determining who a person is, saying, "The body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation" (Butler 521). This emphasis on physicality suggests that, through the changing and reshaping of a person's body and face through costume and makeup, a person alters their performance and therefore their identity. Dr. Aoife Monks claims in her book *The Actor in Costume* that costume is "not simply reflective of the inner states of characters, or a decoration of the actor's appearance, but is rather constitutive of the actor's inner and outer body" (33).

Although Monks is discussing on-stage actors, her claim applies to people off-stage as well; although performativity does not involve a person trying to disguise their "true" self to enact a character, it does involve the assertion of a persona through specific acts and physical embodiments. The only difference between on-stage and off-stage performance is that one involves playing a character and the other involves playing oneself.

Twentieth-century British literature, especially novels published around the time of Butler's essay, often reflects and epitomizes the performance, performativity, and physical reshaping that Butler and Monks discuss. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, a bildungsroman exploring the development of Karim–a half-Indian, half-British teenager–highlights the complexities of being biracial and simultaneously existing within and outside two ethnic categories. In his adolescent development, costume, makeup, accents, and aesthetics help Karim reshape and take control of his identity and discover who he wants to be. Similarly, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*–published just two years before Butler's essay–features a heroine, Fevvers, who does not even fit into a category of *species*, as she is half-human, half-bird. Yet, this hybridity and the mystery surrounding her existence propel her to fame as a circus act and grant her the freedom to perform whatever identity she chooses. Like Fevvers, who embraces not just her biological hybridity but also a dually masculine and feminine gender identity, Gerty from the "Nausicaa" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* uses makeup and costume to embrace a Catholic, girlish femininity but also one of seductress. Like Fevvers, Gerty uses her physical embodiment to overcome the challenges of a patriarchal society, seizing sexual control over the protagonist of *Ulysses* and reversing the concept of the male gaze. In colonial, patriarchal societies that cast Karim, Fevvers, and Gerty as outsiders, performativity allows them to deliberately create and perform their identities and claim social freedom and power.

Hybrid Identities

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Nights at the Circus*, and "Nausicaa," the protagonists rely on their paradoxical, multiple identities to flourish professionally, romantically, and personally. Not being tied to singular, fixed labels grants these characters the freedom to seamlessly weave between different personas, such as when Karim performs Britishness at school and Indianness at home and in the theater. Embracing hybrid identities also allows these characters to reverse dominating colonial or patriarchal narratives. For example, Karim exploits his British culture just as much as he does his Indian one, and in *Nights at the Circus* and "Nausicaa," Fevvers and Gerty exploit the male gaze, performing different types of femininity and gender to seize control over male onlookers. Although having a multiplicity of personas means that these characters lack a stable identity, this fluidity empowers and frees them from the constraints of their social environments.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim embraces and even *needs* multiple identities to exist; without the freedom to embrace his hybrid, biracial identity, Karim feels caged-in and restless, constantly longing to flee to London, where his hybrid identity can flourish in an urban culture

that lacks the conformity of the South London suburbs. When Karim introduces himself at the beginning of the novel, he says, "I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories[...]Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored" (Kureishi 1). Although Karim calls himself an "Englishman," his inability to fit cleanly into an ethnic category makes him "restless," and he can only cure this "bored[ome]" by discovering a sense of self revolving around a hybrid, fluid rather than singular, fixed identity. Karim is neither "here" nor "there," and neither is his identity; it simultaneously exists within and outside the ethnic categories of Indian and British. Perhaps this is why, as scholar Radek Glabazna notes, "to sort out his chaotic life and create a more stable sense of self, Karim must embark on an acting career that is engaged with a multiplicity of fluid, imaginary selves" (Glabazna 70). Indeed, Karim finds professional success and personal fulfillment through embracing his biracial identity, such as when he plays Mowgli in a theater production of *The Jungle Book*. Although Karim finds this role demeaning, he recognizes that his "Indianness"--however inauthentic–places him in the center of attention and thus grants him power as the most essential actor in the play. He says, "although I hated inequality, it didn't mean I wanted to be treated like everyone else[...]So despite the yellow scarf strangling my balls, the brown make-up, and even the accent, I relished being the pivot of the production" (Kureishi 149-50). Karim recognizes that conformity strips actors–and even non-actors–of their professional and social power, and Karim embraces his "Indianness" to boost his acting career. Although Karim initially refuses to wear the "yellow scarf" and "brown make-up," he eventually embraces these objects of minstrelsy and uses them to be "the pivot of the production." Karim's performance of minstrelsy and wearing brown makeup to appropriate his own ethnicity suggests that race is not inherent but performed–at times with the help of costume and make-up. Being biracial and performing race means that Karim has the freedom to seamlessly transition between being an "Englishman" and an Indian person, and rather than his Indian culture being a source of shame in a country of colonialism, it becomes a marketable advantage. For Karim, empowerment comes from not denying his biracial ethnicity but embracing it, even when doing so means appropriating his cultures.

Like Karim, Fevvers' identity–both in real life and on-stage–revolves around and is empowered by multiplicity; but while Karim's hybridity stems from his biracial identity, Fevvers' revolves around her biologically being a half-bird, half-human person and blurring the boundaries of femininity and masculinity. Although *Nights at the Circus* establishes Fevvers as a woman, she embodies stereotypes of both men and women; she is loud, large, and unapologetic, yet she bats her eyelashes at Walser and wears feminine costumes and makeup. While androgyny might involve a person not fitting cleanly into the categories of feminine or masculine, Fevvers simultaneously fits into both. This paradox appears when the narrator says, "[Fevvers] let a ripping fart ring round the room. She peered across her shoulder, again, to see how he took *that*. Under the screen of her bonhomerie – bonnefemmerie? – he noted she was wary" (Carter 11). Here, Fevvers' unapologetic flatulence defies conventions of feminine propriety, yet, her

wariness when she "peer[s]" at Walser from beneath her "screen" suggests a hint of self-reproach for her display of "unfeminine" or uncouth behavior. At the same time, the question of whether her screen is a "bonhomerie" or "bonnefemmerie"--two words that are gendered and lack proper definitions–also emphasizes not just Fevvers' gender ambiguity but also her unstable, undefined, and curated identity. This deliberate ambiguity and curation shows how, although Fevvers is the one being interviewed and interrogated by Walser, who is trying to decide if she is truly a bird-woman, she appears in control of the situation, showing how performance helps to reverse traditional patriarchal narratives of male domination. Although Fevvers is a performer, much of her off-stage personality appears performed, and, as Monk notes in *The Actor in Costume*, the intersections of performance and performativity reveal "the ability of performance not just to imitate, but also to invent and perpetuate further ways of doing the body" (Monk 97). The way Fevvers interacts with her body and performs femininity on-stage but appears unfeminine off-stage shows how she is actively inventing "ways of doing the body." The paradoxical performance of Fevvers' corporeality helps launch her to fame, as her ambiguous identity–the question of whether she is bird or human, woman or non-woman, fact or fiction–allows others to project meaning onto her. For example, she takes on the stage names of "the Cockney Venus," "Helen of the High Wire," "l'Ange Anglaise," "Angel of Death," "Winged Victory," and "Cupid." Although these names all show how audiences project specific images or metaphors onto Fevvers, they also reflect how unstable and undefined Fevvers' identity is, and the mystery of Fevvers' multiplicity of identity empowers her and catapults her success as an *aerialiste*.

In the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*, Gerty empowers herself and seizes control over others by taking on multiple identities; the narrator compares her to the Biblical Mary and describes her as pure and perfect, yet she uses clothing and makeup to deliberately curate her appearance to satisfy both the male gaze and her own. For example, the name "Nausicaa"--which refers to a Greek princess from Homer's *The Odyssey*–paints Gerty as pure and regal, and the image of her posing on the seaside rocks resembles Da Vinci's *Madonna on the Rocks*. The narrator also says, "The waxen pallor of [Gerty's] face was almost spiritual in its ivorylike purity" and calls her "Greekly perfect" (Joyce). Gerty appears as a natural beauty who embodies classical, perhaps even Catholic, feminine aesthetic ideals. However, towards the end of the story, the narrator describes Gerty so that she takes on not just a Catholic sense of femininity but also one of seductress. When Gerty and Bloom watch the fireworks–an event described with sexual language–the narrator says, "her face was suffused with a divine, an entrancing blush from straining back and he could see her other things too, nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin, better than those other pettiwidth, the green, four and eleven, on account of being white and she let him" (Joyce). Here, the narrator juxtaposes the sexual image of Gerty "straining back" and revealing her "knickers" with the description of her as "divine." The concern with Gerty's clothing emphasizes how Gerty deliberately crafts a hybrid identity through garments; she reveals her "knickers," a private, provocative garment, but they are white–a color of purity. Also, the narrator's emphasis on the color of Gerty's underwear shows how even the minutest details of external appearance can alter the performance and reception of a person's

identity, as the white underwear are "better than those other pettiwidth." The garmented body acts as "an agent and a space of performance and self-transformation," and Gerty's choice of clothing allows her to perform a hybrid identity of Catholic purity and voyeuristic seduction and transform herself into whomever she wants (Kollnitz 80). Clothing–and the multiplicity of identities they can express–empower Gerty and allow her to take sexual control of Bloom; stripped of power in a patriarchal society that objectifies women and dictates their behavior, Gerty seizes control over herself and those around her by deliberately fashioning herself into whomever she wants to be.

Authentic and Curated Identities

Just as embracing multiple personas allows Karim, Fevvers, and Gerty to embrace different sides of their personalities and freely navigate otherwise confining racist and patriarchal social structures, the act of curating the body through visual aesthetics means that these characters can become anyone they want–regardless of their innate biological traits. Karim can perform different versions of himself to suit different audiences, Fevvers can perform different personas to mystify audiences and propel herself to fame, and Gerty can transform into an entirely different person, one without the strife that her socioeconomic standing and physical disability–her "lame" leg–inflict on her.

The Buddha of Suburbia suggests that people do not inherit their identities–nor even their race–but rather fabricate themselves with the help of clothing, makeup, and visual aesthetics tied to the body. At the beginning of the novel, Karim takes "several months to get ready" to attend Eva's social gathering, and when he arrives, she says to him, "Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It's such a contribution! It's so you!" (Kureishi 9). The observation "It's so you!" suggests that Karim might at times *not* be himself; in this moment, Karim is performing himself more and is more Indian or exotic than at other times. Karim's visual aesthetics–and Eva's response to them–question what defines authentic race and physicality. The tone of Eva's dialogue makes her sound like she is describing an outfit rather than an individual; the words "exotic," "original," and "It's such a contribution!" make Karim appear to be as much of an accessory or tool of identity fabrication as his clothing. As with Gerty and her use of undergarments to perform for Bloom, Karim uses clothing to perform himself and the exotic Indianness that Eva praises. The ability of the body to take on a multiplicity of authentic or inauthentic identities–especially through clothing–also appears when Charlie, one of Karim's classmates and love interests, performs punk to catapult his music career, despite coming from the same suburban background as Karim. For example, Karim says, "Charlie was magnificent in his venom, his manufactured rage, his anger, his defiance[...]It was a wonderful trick and disguise. The one flaw[...]was his milky and healthy white teeth, which, to me, betrayed everything else" (Kureishi 154). Here, Charlie is not faking his emotions but rather "manufactur[ing]" them; that is, he feels his emotions authentically, even if he consciously or unconsciously prompts himself to feel this rage for the sake of his punk persona. Charlie's "rage" and "defiance" are thus curated yet authentic. Just as Charlie costumes himself with punk

clothing–even a shirt with a swastika–he costumes himself through emotion. Yet, his physical body also hints at the part of his identity that he tries to disguise; although his embodiment reflects a curated punk image, his white teeth reveal his suburban beginnings. The juxtaposition of Charlie's impeccable teeth with the ruggedness of his new persona represent Charlie's internal struggle as he, like Karim, tries to leave the suburbs and his past self behind.

Just as *The Buddha of Suburbia* questions the importance of and undermines the authenticity of race, emotions, and aesthetics, Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* inhabits the space between real and unreal, natural and curated. While Charlie roots his stage persona and fabricated real-life personality in punk, Fevvers has no specific locus of identity; she exists as a paradox, as both "fact" and "fiction." This instability of identity propels her to fame, with the narrator saying, "Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger[...]'Do you think she's *real*?'" (Carter 8). The question here does not ask if Fevvers' *wings* are real or question the authenticity of any specific aspect of Fevvers' existence, instead asking if she as an entire being is authentic. From the blondeness of her hair to the grandeur of her actions, every aspect of Fevvers requires audiences to suspend their disbelief, as she destabilizes the notions of real and unreal. Even the speakers of the questions, people ranging from "duchess" and "costermonger," suggest that Fevvers does not belong to one class of people but to all; she exists beyond stratification. Fevvers' corporeality also reflects such questions of authenticity and categorization, especially when the narrator says, "she batted her eyelashes at Walser in the mirror. From the pale length of those eyelashes, a good three inches, he might have thought she had not taken her false ones off" (Carter 22). Here, Fevvers performs femininity for Walser by batting her eyelashes at him, but this action also emphasizes the ambiguity of her biological form, as Walser can barely distinguish her real lashes from her false ones. The extremity of Fevvers' body–including the drastic length of her eyelashes–further shows how, like Karim with his ethnicity, Fevvers' identification as a woman or even a human is dually authentic and inauthentic. As Dr. Aoife Monks notes in *The Actor in Costume*, "make-up[...]convinces us of its permanent state, even if we know that it can be removed" and hints at "the illusion of the performance and the assertion of the authentic body of the performer beneath the make-up" (81). As Monks asserts, makeup only reinforces the ambiguity of Fevvers' body; like her wings, which may or may not be part of her "authentic body," Fevvers' false eyelashes blur the line between performance and realness. In doing so, Fevvers achieves extraordinary fame and seizes control over the minds of others; unlike stereotypically flat feminine characters who merely act as the subject of the male gaze and male projection, Fevvers remains a mystery to Walser and the world. No one can ever truly know her, and no one can turn away from her. She captures the world's attention and does not let it go.

Like Fevvers, in "Nausicaa," Gerty's use of makeup blurs the line between her authentic and fabricated body and allows her to occupy a space in between the categories of real and fake; while the narrator describes her as epitomizing natural, classical beauty, Gerty's beauty is also the product of consumer culture and self-fashioning. For example, the narrator describes Gerty by saying the following:

"Gerty's [eyes] were of the bluest Irish blue, set off by lustrous lashes and dark expressive brows[...]It was Madame Vera Verity, directress of the Woman Beautiful page of the Princess novelette, who had first advised her to try eyebrowleine which gave that haunting expression to the eyes[...]Then there was blushing scientifically cured" (Joyce). Here, Gerty epitomizes Irish beauty, yet this natural beauty is emphasized by her "expressive brows" that she manipulates with "eyebrowleine"--a tool that she hears of from a magazine, an object of consumerism. Manipulation of Gerty's appearance allows her to evoke specific emotions in others, as she crafts a "haunting expression" that, indeed, captivates Bloom. Beauty aesthetics and even consumer culture allow women like Gerty–who is disadvantaged because of her gender, socioeconomic status, and physical disability–to seize control over others, especially men. Where Gerty lacks a mother figure, "Madame Vera Verity" passes on the knowledge of beauty and self-fashioning that mothers often teach to their daughters, and the application of makeup does not just act as a superficial pastime for young women but rather a form of knowledge, materialism, artistry, and even science, as blushing is "scientifically cured." As Monk claims, makeup fits in seamlessly with the real body and, although Gerty does not apply makeup directly to her eyes, the "eyebrowleine" she wears alters the intensity and emotional effect of her "Irish blue" eyes. Gerty embraces consumer culture to define and perform identity, and her "girlish treasure trove" epitomizes her natural-artificial hybrid femininity, as it contains her "tortoiseshell combs, her child of Mary badge, [and her] whiterose scent," along with a poem she "copied out of the newspaper[...]*Art thou real, my ideal?*" (Joyce). Here, the "child of Mary badge" represents Gerty's girlish purity while her "tortoiseshell combs" and "whiterose scent" represent a more artificial form femininity. Even the poem she keeps with these items comes from a newspaper–a form of writing filled with the language of advertisements and consumer culture. Like Fevvers' slogan "is she fact or is she fiction?" and Karim's cultural appropriation, this poem asks what is authentic and inauthentic, but, as Gerty's successful seduction of Bloom indicates, the distinction between fact and fiction does not matter. Regardless of Gerty's natural physical features, she can self-fashion herself to appear elegant and even wealthy and seize sexual control of Bloom, who would otherwise ignore her because of her impoverished background.

Selling Identity

Karim, Fevvers, and Gerty empower themselves by taking situations in which they are disadvantaged because of their race, gender, or biological oddities and turning these qualities into social–and even professional and romantic–selling points. When Karim must demean his Indian culture to achieve success, he simultaneously pokes fun at British culture and reverses the colonial gaze. Similarly, Fevvers takes her abnormal biological form–what most would consider freakish–and markets it as a mystery that makes her worthy of fame and attention. Gerty sells her femininity and seduces Bloom, but she does so for her own pleasure rather than Bloom's. She uses her physical beauty to manipulate Bloom and make him take part in her naive romantic fantasies, and, in doing so, Gerty overcomes the passivity typical of the romantic and visual

objects of the male gaze. Thus, these characters take qualities that would otherwise disadvantage them in their societies–such as their race, biological abnormalities, or gender–and use these traits to their advantage.

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim and Charlie sell their manufactured identities to attain success as performers, revealing how the curation of identity and even cultural appropriation can empower, especially for immigrants or those seeking to re-categorize themselves socially. While Karim and Charlie grew up in the South London suburbs, both of them try to escape the confines of this social classification; Karim wishes to be an actor who can take on a fluid, hybrid identity, and Charlie hopes to become a celebrity rather than live as a subject of suburban conformity. Karim sells his biracial ethnicity in his performance of Mowlgi in *The Jungle Book*, saying, "I sent up the [Indian] accent and made the audience laugh by suddenly relapsing into cockney at odd times…I liked being recognized in the pub afterwards" (Kureishi 164). For Karim, culture replaces experience as a marketable acting skill, and he appropriates elements of both Indian and British culture. Even here, a dual sense of authenticity and inauthenticity define's Karim's performance; although he is both English and Indian, he is still appropriating these cultures, and his appropriation is "partly a construct and product of colonialist discourse, and partly performance." To succeed as an actor, Karim must "sell essentialist stereotypes of cultural and ethnic identity" without clarifying whether these stereotypes are reflective of a colonial reality or merely performance (Glabazna 70). Similarly, Charlie appropriates his English culture to attain success in the U.S., with Karim saying, "here in America Charlie had acquired this cockney accent when[...]he'd cried after being mocked by the stinking gypsy kids for talking so posh[...]He was selling Englishness, and getting a lot of money for it" (Kureshi 247). Although the artificiality of Karim's and Charlie's on-stage and off-stage performances shows them taking advantage of, rather than correcting, racial stereotypes, doing so empowers them and suggests that they are fully in control; they are profiting off the very qualities that they were ridiculed for in the suburbs.

Just as Karim and Charlie sell themselves through performance and appropriation, Fevvers sells herself by taking the qualities that mark her as peculiar–especially her biological and gender hybridity–and marketing them. On the very first page of *Nights at the Circus*, the narrator introduces the reader to Fevvers by saying, "Fevvers, the most famous *aerialiste* of the day; her slogan, 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' And she didn't let you forget it for a minute" (Carter 1). The ambiguity of Fevvers' identity is a selling point that enables her to achieve professional success, despite the disadvantages of her gender in a patriarchal world, the freakishness of her biological form, and her humble socioeconomic beginnings as a ward in a brothel. Fevvers' hybrid identity makes her the most valuable act in Colonel Kearny's circus, and he even extends the portrayal of her hybridity to that of a bionic woman, telling newspapers that Fevvers is "not a woman at all but a cunningly constructed automaton" and "beam[ing] with pleasure at the consternation this ploy will provoke" (Carter 86). Fevvers and Kearney profit from even a fictitious multiplicity of identity, perpetuating Fevvers' already paradoxical

existence. Fevvers thus empowers herself by taking sources of potential shame and ridicule and turning them into marketable mysteries.

Like Fevvers, Gerty empowers herself by selling her partly-curated, partly-natural physical embodiment and hybrid femininity, allowing her to not just achieve the romantic success she desires but also seize control when she would otherwise be a passive object for visual consumption. For example, the narrator says the following:

> "His dark eyes fixed themselves on her again drinking in her every contour, literally worshiping at her shrine. If ever there was undisguised admiration in a man's passionate gaze it was there plain to be seen on that man's face. It is for you, Gertrude MacDowell, and you know it" (Joyce).

This passage again evokes the comparison of Gerty and the Biblical Mary, as she sits on the rocks with Bloom "literally worshiping at her shrine." Although the narration of "Nausicaa" leaves the reader wondering if such descriptions reflect Bloom's actual thoughts or are merely the interpretation of a third-person onlooker, the text suggests that Bloom's actual feelings towards Gerty do not matter; the authenticity of his emotion does not affect Gerty, only the *appearance* of his "undisguised admiration" bears significance. Although this passage mentions the male gaze, Bloom is also an object for Gerty to gaze at, functioning as a mirror through which she can admire her own physical embodiment. The passage does not mention Bloom's actual inward emotion but rather the appearance of his emotions that are "plain to be seen on that man's face." Although Gerty initially appears to be the objectified subject of Bloom's voyeurism, she is the one in control and also objectifies him; he lacks a clear identity and is just "that man." He functions as a vehicle through which she can gaze upon herself, as emphasized by the narrator's direct address to Gerty: "It is for you, Gertrude MacDowell, and you know it." Gerty sells herself to Bloom, but doing so grants her power over him. Later, when Gerty walks away and exposes her physical disability, Bloom tries to defend himself after "buying" the illusion of physical perfection that Gerty so convincingly sold to him. The narrator says, "See her as she is spoils all. Must have the stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music. The name too. amours of actresses" (Joyce). Bloom feels taken advantage of and conned, and he tries to defend himself by refuting Gerty's authenticity, claiming that she is an actress who must rely on makeup and costume to sell a specific image of herself to garner the attention of men. But Bloom's defensive accusations fall flat, because authenticity and inauthenticity do not matter for Gerty. As with Karim and Fevvers, the performance of identity is not confined to stages–or in this case, rocks on a seashore–but pervades every aspect and area of life. Where performance is associated with staged actions and selling theatrical personas, performativity is its real-life equivalent, with "the fashioned body [being] an entity existing in between performance and performativity" (Kollnitz 80). Gerty's ability to perform multiple types of femininity allows her to seize control where she would otherwise have none and to simultaneously reverse and take advantage of the male gaze.

Karim, Fevvers, and Gerty not only emphasize Butler's point that identity is performed but also show how the freedom of performance, multiplicity, and self-curation allows people to

overcome the boundaries of marginalization. Through switching between performances of Indianness and Britishness, Karim navigates and finds professional success in a world divided by racial categories and filled with anti-Indian racism. Similarly, Fevvers embraces the ambiguity of her biological form and gender, finding fame and enrapturing audiences despite her humble beginnings in a brothel and the extremities of her abnormal physicality. Like Fevvers, Gerty uses self-curation to mask her poverty and uses her hybrid femininity to control Bloom, reversing the roles of male voyeur and female object. Despite these characters being disadvantaged or marginalized–either for their race, gender, or socioeconomic status–they empower themselves by embracing the freedom of a fluid, performative sense of self. They show how performance does not end when they step off the stage; in fact, it is just the beginning.

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Insane Girl Literature: Modern Femininity in Post-Reagan, Post-9/11 Literature
by Min Seo Riu

From *Gone Girl*, dir. David Fincher, 2014

Over the past two decades, a wave of literature centered around unhinged, mentally ill female protagonists has consistently captured the attention of readers both domestically and globally. Deviating from traditional roles of modern femininity, these new female protagonists are undoubtedly not only a reflection of the tumultuous socioeconomic and political sphere, but also a reflection of the young women voraciously consuming them—a feminine twist to the byronic hero: cynical, attractive, morose, volatile, self-destructive and extremely clever. These novels are fronted by a female figure who is defined by her sense of malaise and discontent, two sensations that rose to prominence through the culmination of our post-Reagan socioeconomic world and the effects of 9/11 on the American mindset. The rise of conservatism from both the Reagan administration and the attacks on 9/11 reconfigured many aspects of American society, subsequently engendering a restrictive role on traditional femininity, socially and mentally. This conservatism along with the rise of consumerism—egged on by both the Reagan administration and post-9/11 capitalist exploitation of tragedy and memorialism—defined the last two decades of modern femininity in American literature. Gillian Flynn's "Gone Girl" and Otessa Moshfegh's "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" are strong examples of this representation of bored, insane women whose characters resonate with and cater to young American girls growing up in a restricting culture of overconsumption and conservatism. This genre that I call "Insane Girl

Literature" depends on its female characters' ability to successfully act on her socially unacceptable thoughts or desires, as well as her relatability to all young women in regards to their concerns with men, beauty, and ennui. The genre reflects the way its readers—young women—comprehend and express their understanding of femininity, human relationships, and literature, and the feminine desire to break apart from social norms.

Reaganomics, Consumerism, and Degrading Relationships

The American psyche has always been defined and dominated by the focus on the individual rather than the collective. Mentalities such as the American Dream support the emphasis on one's own needs and desires rather than the nation's. As the fledgling country rose to prominence and power during the 20th century—a century riddled with war and subsequent rapid economic boom—so came along with it a new blossom of industry and capitalism. Although many figures stood at the forefront of American dominance over global capitalism, none were as controversial as Ronald Reagan and his administration in the 1980s. Reagan's economic policies both domestically and internationally favored a free-market economy, encouraging a kind of hedonism that would only snowball from there on out. American sociologist Amitai Etzioni writes in his book "Aftershocks: Economic Crisis and Institutional Choice" about the crisis of consumerism in the 80s:

> "Self-restraint was further eroded under the influence of Reaganism and Thatcherism, which celebrated unfettered self-interest and weakened both government regulation as well as the importance of a self-regulating culture. In economic terms, the lack of self-restraint reflected in the modern willingness to max out our credit cards, whereas in the 1950s, debt was considered a sin. The lack of self-restraint is compounded by the fact that, over the past fifty years, the American public has held a strong yet schizophrenic ideology [towards the economy]" (Etizioni 156).

This increased sensation and desire to spend money—under the guise of improving the United States' domestic economy—created an unprecedented urgency to consume. Etzioni notes "Consumption turns into consumerism—that is, into obsession . . . [and] It is especially psychologically damaging when the labor required to pay for consumerism cuts into human relations that are sources of affection, by neglecting family and friends, and undermining non-material sources of self-esteem" (159). This particular sentiment—obsession, hedonism, and stunted affection—is especially important when evaluating the foundations of the modern affliction of boredom, malaise, and discontent in twenty-first century novels centered around femininity. The ever-encroaching invasiveness of consumerism and its pervasive effects is reflected in novels such as "Gone Girl" and "My Year of Rest and Relaxation," conveyed through the female characters' internal monologue. Both Amy Dunne and Moshfegh's narrator are women dissatisfied with their lives despite their social success. They express in their respective narration a sense of detachment, aloofness, and apathy: Dunne in her ability to mechanically frame her husband for her murder, Mosfegh's narrator in her utterly indifferent perspective on everything in life. Despite the female protagonists' position of economic

privilege, ennui and malaise manages to creep into every aspect of their lives, which predictably fosters a kind of cathartic repudiation of social norms.

The lack of self-control is not just confined to the American mentality around the economy, but also bleeds into the quotidian. This is evident in two aspects: Amy Dunne's unhinged plan to frame her husband for her falsified murder, and Moshfegh's narrator's desire to ignore her responsibilities and social life by sleeping through an entire year. In this abandonment of restraint and societal expectations—framed in both books as a not entirely negative desire—both Flynn and Moshfegh promote the idea of giving in to one's socially unacceptable desires. Culminated with the events of 9/11, Reagan's economic policy and conservatism fueled the already-fraught concept of girlhood and womanhood with an inherited feeling of boredom and disaffection—two sensations that foster the insanity portrayed in both novels, and is best exemplified by nonchalantly insane narration from both women. Amy says after returning to her traumatized, framed husband:

> "He won't sleep with me yet. He sleeps in the downstairs guest room with the door locked. But one day I will wear him down, I will catch him off guard, and he will lose the energy for the nightly battle, and he will get in bed with me. In the middle of the night, I'll . . . press myself against him. I'll hold myself to him like a climbing, voiling vine until I have invaded every part of him and made him mine" (Flynn 537).

Moshfegh writes in her novel, "Things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleepy—reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually . . . as a dream" (Moshfegh 4). In both cases, the two women convey a kind of detachment from their actions that can be traced to a lack of self-restraint and over-consumption post-Reaganism.

9/11 and Marketed Overconsumption

The events of 9/11's peculiar effect on the American economy further emphasized and intensified the already-inherited desire for consumerism since the Reagan administration in the 80s, ensuring that the next generations would never know a world that wasn't dominated by images of the American flag on T-shirts or the general dread of terrorism. In the wake of a national tragedy and the irreversible effects it would have on future immigration, the American capitalists saw a new shining possibility: a chance to profit and revive the staggering economy. Navigating through a post-9/11 world, the understanding was that, "once safe [from the events of 9/11], it's a duty to spend the way to recovery" (Stewart). The tragedy would ultimately lead to the understanding that "the way for Americans to move past the tragedy and overcome their fears was to spend money and spur the economy" (Stewart). Conflated with a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism as a consequence of the acts of terrorism, the United States became fixated on the consumption of patriotism in material goods. Ads appealed to the new enthusiasm for patriotism, quickly publishing slogans such as: "We will roll up our sleeves. We will move forward together. We will overcome. We will never forget" that encouraged "consumers to

believe that [General Electric was] on their side, supporting the country in a time of need" (Maboloc 37).

Not only did the events of 9/11 further encourage mass consumerism, it engendered in American society a strange amalgamation of fear that, mixing with consumerism and hedonism, would transform into a kind of apathetic lifestyle unique to the United States. To assuage fear, one was expected to turn to consumption of material goods. The consumption of material goods, in turn, became a way to distract from the powerlessness the public had in relation to the 9/11 terrorism attacks. As detailed in Morris Rosenberg's examination of apathy, he writes that the effects of the "feelings of futility . . . inhibit participation" (Rosenberg). Or, in other words, apathy in a society is a significant progression post-9/11. Apathy in the post-9/11 world is essential in the construction of Insane Girl Literature. The ubiquitous feeling of living in a world irrevocably changed, riddled with tragedy—and yet feeling mildly or severely apathetic—further solidifies the genre's characteristics while also creating a relatable foundation for the construction of a female protagonist.

Further, another consequence of the lack of self-restraint introduced from Reagan's economic policies and 9/11's enticement to consume material goods is how desire in the construction of American identity leads to transformation that is akin in its own way to a Bildungsroman narrative. Kenya Wolff writes in her paper, "When More is *Not* More: consumption and consumerism within the neoliberal early childhood assemblages":

> "We are always poised between two possibilities: a life that can speed up its rate of change in order to become fundamentally different, and a life so accustomed to its approach that it ceases to become or even to live (Colebrook, 2006). The process of *becoming* begins with a desire for movement. It is more directional than calculated (Massumi, 1992). In its most basic form, becoming is a tension between modes of desire, the desire to become and the desire to remain the same. Becoming can be an escape from something that it perceives to be a constraint (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) . . . In other words, a desire is often brought about because one is uncomfortable, anxious or unhappy with the current state of being. It is a system in crisis, searching for equilibrium or balance. But beyond simple change from one thing into another existing thing, becoming is about the desire for transformation . . . it is the creation of a completely new entity. The act of becoming utilizes difference rather than clinging to the same . . . Massumi (1992) conceptualized desire within capitalism as a 'straight- jacketing of desire (desire turned against itself)'" (Wolff 330).

As overconsumption drives our desires, the same desire creates a transformation and conflict within us. This is the fundamental in the narrative of womanhood—change, friction, crisis, anxiety, unhappiness, and constraint. Thus the economic narrative is directly tied to the female narrative in our society, and inevitably our literature. Novels such as *Gone Girl* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are an acknowledgment of this connection.

The Rise of Conservatism in a Post-Reagan, Post-9/11 Society

The rise of conservatism during both Reagan's presidency and the post-9/11 world has further shaped the way we consume, perceive, and relate to our literature. Reagan's conservative administration was not just fiscally conservative, but interpersonally so. Reagan's presidency focused on core American family values, emphasizing the image of the traditional, nuclear family from the 1950s. This all-American family was oriented around the father as a breadwinner and the mother as the housewife. Conservatism and right-wing Christianity "[establishes] the family as an institution instrumental to America's success" thereby defining womanhood through the woman's role as a "stay-at-home mother" (Dowland 607-608). This desire to remain faithful to the old, accustomed way of life was not confined to nor made extinct during Reagan's administration. In a rapidly changing world—particularly in relation to 9/11's effect on national security, anxieties of terrorist attacks, and lasting generational fear—conservatism's ties to tradition, the patriarch, and the familiar was a feasible and almost inevitable safety line for the American people to depend on. The fear of the unknown—the United States' history forever split between a pre- and post-9/11 world—inevitably fostered a desire for the safe: a society they could recognize and acknowledge as their own, all-American community. Thus, conservatism—not only politically or economically, but societally—ingrained itself in the American psyche, just as consumption and particularly overconsumption had.

The pervasiveness of this ideology is naturally reflected in our literature—both consumption and production—making an appearance in the way we recognize feminine roles. The rejection of these roles of traditional womanhood is evident in both novels. Flynn's portrayal of the murderous and vengeful Amy Dunne *Gone Girl* and Mosfegh's depiction of her narrator's blatantly unfeminine, unsympathetic character is a repudiation of the confines of the traditional woman.

Gone Girl

Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* centers around the investigation of Amy Dunne's disappearance, and her husband's role in her assumed death. The introduction of her character in the beginning of the novel portrays Amy as the amalgamation of the previously established societal effects of overconsumption and conservatism: A beautiful, intelligent woman—but first and foremost defined as her relation to Nick (3). Her repudiation of this restrictive role, as consequence of the socio-political and economic influence, becomes made increasingly clear in the latter half of the novel, in which the integration of her perspective rather than Nick's confirms to the reader that she framed him for her murder. Her narrative captures the claustrophobic confinement of being a woman, defined by the boundaries made for her by men. In her "Cool Girl" monologue, she says of her identity:

> "That night at the Brooklyn party, I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl.* Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her

mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding . . . Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl . . . And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be . . . [men want] Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain" (Flynn 299-301).

In her deconstruction of the Cool Girl role pressed upon women in her society, she inherently examines the effects of consumerism and conservatism. The Cool Girl, in all ways according to Amy, is trapped by the rigid, conservative desires of men—a faint echo of the sidelined stay-at-home mother in the nuclear family, but still similar in their subservience to men. The desire to fit into a desirable box in order to be consumed by men is another effect of our hyper-consumerist society. The bitterness and renunciation of the Cool Girl role is not just Amy's rejection of her husband, a perpetrator of this stock character, but the rejection of the society that produces it.

Despite her scathing criticism, Amy recognizes in herself that she is a product of the Cool Girl desire—one of those pathetic women who pretended to be something a man wants, rather than her own aspirations. She says, "I'd never really felt like a person, because I was always a product" (302). In the suggestion that no woman—not even herself—is spared from the notion of the Cool Girl, Flynn suggests that the feminine desire to adhere to men's desire is a product of insanity that all women possess. However, she is able to break away from this degrading role in her plot to frame Nick for her kidnapping and murder. Only through her viciously thorough plan to frame Nick is Amy able to fulfill her own desires, the implication being that giving in to your worst and most uninhibited impulses as a cathartic release will free you from the bars of your enclosure. The outcome of this impulse, which inevitably leads to Amy getting exactly what she wants—revenge, freedom, power over Nick—is undoubtedly a source of fascination and envy for the young women consuming Flynn's novel. This reflects a desire for young women to read narratives of feminine freedom—no matter how insane—which Moshfegh's novel also captures.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Although far more subdued than Gillian Flynn's female anti-hero Amy Dunne, Otessa Mosfegh constructs a voice who is as equally as intelligent, quick-witted, and unhinged as Flynn's counterpart in her novel, "My Year of Rest and Relaxation." Her intelligence is quickly established in both her uniquely scathing criticism and her explicit confirmation that she "graduated from Columbia" with a degree in Art History (Moshfegh 27). Though she is much younger in age than her murderous counterpart, Mosfegh's protagonist displays the same kind of unhinged and self-destructive thought processes as Amy Dunne does, and both women are united in their cool, detached narration that juxtaposes the severity of their strangeness. The twenty-six year old unnamed narrator embarks on a self-imposed journey to hibernate for a year, simply because of her waning interest in the world. She "looked like a model, had money [she] hadn't

earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so [she] was 'cultured'" (13). She is, in every sense, the byproduct of the post-Reagan, post-9/11 world: she cares little about the excessiveness of her finances and even less about fostering intimate relationships in her life. Despite the wealth and excessive beauty, the reader is encouraged to relate to her morbid desire for hibernation as well as her perspective on life as someone who also grew up in a hyper consumerist world. These emotions and sensations have always been there, introduced both through Reagan and the acts of terrorism in 2001. Yet to see a character on paper, perhaps as unlikable as she is strange, is the same breath of fresh air as Amy Dunne was for young American women.

Mosfegh's narrator accurately embodies the sense of apathy and consumer fatigue as established earlier by the post-Reagan era, and encouraged in our post-9/11 world. Her desire to sleep is concisely explained in her uniquely aloof voice:

"Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me . . . It started off very innocently: I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body" (17-18).

The acute misery and anxiety of living in her body—and by extension, living in her society—can be attributed as the main reason she wants to be put in a self-induced coma. The "prison of [her] mind and body" in particular suggests a connection between her problem with the world and her identity as a woman. Set one decade after the end of Reagan's administration but shortly before the attacks on the Twin Towers, Mosfegh's protagonist exhibits the traits of living in a world fueled by consumerism, which will only be exacerbated after the attacks in September. She also exhibits the trait of a woman who is displeased with the confines of her body in its current society. Thus, the general feeling of anxiety and malaise can be attached to both a world of overconsumption and conservative roles.

Moshfegh's narrator's journey to her self-induced coma can be seen as her way of breaking free and rejecting these confines. One of the many things she cites as the "constant barrage" of life is most evident in her relationship with her best friend, Reva (17). Reva is a figure who embodies the post-Reagan, post-9/11 role of a woman, whereas the narrator is the rejection of it. Reva "was a slave to vanity and status" and the narrator notes that she "found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for [her] to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, 'fitting in.'" (9). Yet, ironically, the narrator also notes that Reva's "desire to be classy had always been the de-classé thorn in her side . . . Nothing hurt Reva more than effortless beauty like [the narrator's]" (10). Here we see the dynamic and difference between Reva and the narrator. Reva is not just a product of conformity and consumerism, but a slave to it. Whereas the narrator might be a product of her society, but she actively rejects it in her mission to leave it behind through her hibernation. The freedom of finding a way to escape the insecurities and overconsumption that modern women, like Reva, are

plagued with is admirable and enviable. Thus, Moshfegh's novel promotes a new, unhinged female protagonist much like Flynn's.

Conclusion

The untraditional, unhinged voices of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Ottessa Mosfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* capture in their narratives a feminine desire to break out of molds and shed off the apathy of our indifferent lives. A direct repudiation of the traditional roles of womanhood in the form of all-American, nuclear families, both Amy Dunne and Moshfegh's narrator embody two identities: a woman created by her conservative, consumerist society; and a woman who would be despised by her conservative, consumerist society. The contradictions of both characters are an insight to womanhood and girlhood, identities that have and always will be complex or fractured. Both women are in a position of privilege economically and socially—defined, as typical to our society, by their status and wealth—as well as their physical adherence to the traditional woman: beautiful, intelligent, devoted (Amy to her husband, Mosfegh's narrator to her journey of hibernation). Yet, their ability to break from the confines of the societal norms around them creates the figure of an unhinged byronic hero—if not a role model, then a narrative of womanhood to envy. The popularity of this genre that caters to young women suggests in our own society the rapid acceptance of strange and unhinged impulses, to shed the death of affect and promote an embrace of nontraditional ideologies.

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Things, Bodies, and Binaries: A Radical Materialist Reconceptualization of Human Exceptionalism, Neocolonialism, and the Patriarchy
by Amar Deshpande

From *Sorry To Bother You*, dir. Boots Riley, 2018

Our modern societies are in dire need of an imaginative refabrication of our shared futures. Why have political revolutions in the Western historical canon failed to cultivate large-scale and transformative social change? The methods through which this future is envisioned must necessarily also be imaginative—perhaps the answer lies not within further historical analysis of the movements themselves, but instead in a materialist analysis of the media through which we as consumers construct our identities. Here I wield radical materialism[1] as an interrogation of a Subject and its Stuff, a relation that bears great relevance to cultural analysis of our Western consumer societies. I pair the short story *Turning* (Sexson, 1980) with the feature length film *Sorry to Bother You* (dir. Riley, 2018) as two surreal narrative texts that explicate the linkages between violent ideologies of the patriarchy, human exceptionalism, and Western supremacy. An explication that happens *not* through symbolisms but through the literal implications of things within a scene as signals. Objects point towards international hierarchies

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[1] Boscagli, Maurizia. *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

of neocolonialism which are then associated with the literal and figurative violence inflicted upon the masculine and feminine body. These violences are symbiotic cultivations of non-imaginative futures that necessarily leave no space for non-binary conceptions of self or planet. Object-centered analysis itself decenters the human, challenging doctrines of human exceptionalism with an emphasis on the international implications of commodity cultures and rampant consumerism. It is clear that transformative change can only occur through an interrogation not of the anthropocene, itself a term that creates a false distance between the human subject and the natural world, but of the *capitalocene*[2]. That is, the ways in which capitalism, not just as an economic framework but as a way of creating identity and organizing relations through the architecture of binary thought, necessitates the subjugation and decentering of the natural world. The linkages between the patriarchy, human exceptionalism, and neocolonialism, illustrated through the literal implications of objects within a scene, infers a sameness between these violences which moves beyond basic conceptions of identities and institutions as intersectional. Transformative change can only happen through a radical and imaginative understanding of these violent ideologies as the same—starting from the same place, the capitalist binary, and ending in the same place as well. Any dismantling of one *necessitates* a dismantling of the other at the exact same time.

Analysis of the fable within the short story *Turning* illustrates how these linkages are revealed through the things in a scene. Human and animal bodies become objects as objects are given life, complicating and blurring the hierarchical binary between the two. The body has become a commodity—or, as revealed in *Sorry to Bother You*, a tool—in our late-stage capitalist world where the worker is alienated not only from the means of production but also from themselves[3]. This divorce of being from the body parallels the multitude of ways in which real people, especially those of color or those that present as queer or feminine, are dehumanized and reduced into parts, a clear link between patriarchal values of body objectification and capitalist values of productivity and efficiency in the workplace. Patriarchal values are also prescribed onto the masculinized body, congealed here into the institution of marriage which is coded as inherently heteronormative and nuclear. The young main character, Robert, is visited by three old women on his birthday who come bearing gifts and a fantastical story about a king who stages a competition to find a woman to marry. The surreal elements in this fable reveal how the body is, not symbolically but literally, an object that exists in relation to other objects. Robert's conversations with the three women illustrate how institutions themselves become objects through which the young human subject is able to cultivate and shape an identity that mimics intergenerational consonance with familial and societal values.

The fable that Robert's visitors tell reveals how the body-as-object contains within it multiple layers of capitalist implication. In the story, a skinless king considers himself a

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[2] Moore, Jason W. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. PM, 2016.

[3] Marx, Karl. *Karl Marx's Writings on Alienation: Critiquing Capitalism*. Edited by Marcello Musto, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

riddle—any female suitor who could find him a skin would then become his wife. Sexson describes the king as looking like "ivory carvings and cream colored satin cushions all laced together with fine red and blue threads" (101). Expected muscle, blood, and bone are all replaced by materials with layers of colonial violence, both in the Western supremacist sense as well as in the human exceptionalist. That is, just as ivory and satin are imperial products traditionally imported from non-Western countries for their aesthetic and social value, they are also products that necessitate the death of the animals who produce them. The Animal then figuratively becomes the Global South, exploited and stripped of life by Western imperial powers in exchange for the promise of capital. Simultaneously, the Animal becomes the global working class, entirely alienated not only from the products that they create but also from their own sentient autonomy. Illusory transactional relationships, here consolidated into the innocuous interface of birthday gift-giving, obscures the real labor and death that goes into the creation of commodities and the materials from which they are made.

Now the connections between Western imperialism and human exceptionalism are made clear—humankind's relationship to the Animal is inextricably and perpetually linked with our imperial-colonial relationship to countries in the Global South. The fallacy of human exceptionalism *must* be analyzed and dismantled in our Western academic canon with the same fervor and rigor as colonialism and international classism because the relationship of the Worker to the Employer mimics the relationship of the Animal to the Human. The king has become a fantastical object which reveals the international implications of commodifying human and animal bodies as fuel for our Western object culture.

Even if Robert isn't aware of it yet, objects are integral to our constructions of personal and collective identity. The term *object culture*[4] refers to the ways in which our societies become materialized into and constituted by certain significant commodities. Our societies are created at the interface of the person and the object: the things that we surround ourselves with serve functional purposes as they simultaneously act as signals of modernity and civilization. Culture and society itself, especially in this age of perpetual advertisement and social media virality, becomes centered not just around the consumption of commodities but also the consumption of people, places, and experiences as objects themselves.

The blame lies not with Robert, however—rather than due to some sort of childlike drive to cultivate personality, I argue that Robert is commanded by our global hierarchies and object cultures to view all interfaces between worlds (human, object, more-than-human) as opportunities to establish and assert identity. As Bill Brown writes in "Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)," "human subjects depend on objects to establish their sense of identity" (192). Here, identity creation must necessarily be recognized as an intrinsic capitalist drive linked deeply with our media depictions of the masculinized subject as hero. The audience identifies with the main character, establishing an uncanny omnipotence as the audience member

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[4] In this context quoted from Bill Brown, "Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)." Critical Inquiry, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010, pp. 183–217 but originating from Simmel, Georg, and Kurt H. Wolff. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. The Free Press. London: Collier- Macmillan, 1967.

becomes somehow simultaneously distanced and undistanced from the narrative. Characters in stories become objects that the viewer either identifies with or desires,[5] which is not always unproductive as it allows the viewer to reflexively analyze their own life and society. Each interface between audience and media itself becomes an opportunity for teaching and learning rather than for genuine connection. This centering of the consumption of commodities, people, and media as passive and inert objects is linked closely with doctrines of human exceptionalism as capitalist success. Underestimation of the pervasive power of the Object and the inherently didactic nature of all stories is what perpetuates these linked ideologies of violence. As the object defines and commands, so has it already defined and commanded: hereby creating a recursive feedback loop that feigns an intergenerational consonance of social and moral values through a shared experience of consumption.

Commodification of the body implicates the individual consumer in the neocolonial violence that defines our international habitus. Brown puts forth the term "*metaobject*[6]" to describe " the work of art, say, that isn't satisfied with being just an object and seems to insist instead on taking other objects or object culture as its object of address" (192). The cinema narrative becomes an object through which the audience member constitutes their identity. The fable within *Turning* is simultaneously an object through which Robert's visitors nurture his identity creation. The true *metaobject* here, however, is not the narrative itself, but is instead the body that is made literally into an object. Bodies are commodified as things that exist only in relation to other things—we treat them only as items to refurbish, advertise, and sell in the marketplace of physical desirability[7]. This commodification is made visible in the king's body, the principal *metaobject*, linking hierarchies of colonialism with those of human exceptionalism as the animal workers signaled towards are abstracted into the products that they give their lives to create. The body as a *metaobject* suggests the ephemeral nature of hierarchies of social dominance, legitimizing the plausibility of collective transformative change in our modern era as the immutable and non-mortal Object is reconciled with the body's instinctual drive to transform and decay. This is a breach of the perceived distance between the individual consumer and the collective as global hierarchies of Western supremacy are inscribed onto the body itself. The body both signifies and becomes the thing through which our Western consumer culture is constituted. We must cultivate awareness of the agency that we have inside of our own bodies, even as they become commodities so that we can collectively recognize the truly mutable nature of our modern establishment.

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[5] Paraphrased from Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. 1989 which itself is a response to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of identification (in relation to parents for instance) and its link to sexual desire

[6] In Computer Science, a metaobject is a variable, data structure, or function that manipulates, describes, or executes objects (including itself). This is an example of *reflection* where an operating system has access to its own code and is able to alter itself as it runs.

[7] Tokumitsu, Miya. "Tell Me It's Going to Be OK: Self-Care and Social Retreat under Neoliberalism." The Baffler, no. 41, 2018, pp. 6–11. JSTOR. And read THE CRUNK FEMINIST COLLECTIVE. "Self-Care Is Crunk." *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 442–44. *JSTOR* for a radical reformulation of the concept.

Turning reifies ideologies of heteronormativity through the characterization of the institution of marriage as necessary and expected for the masculinized subject. Robert's visitors ask him what the moral of the fable is, and he answers that "'animals have good skins and that people would like tails'" (102), in part dismantling notions of human exceptionalism through a viewing of the human and more-than-human worlds as without boundary. However, Robert has already been coded by our Western object culture to view beings in terms of their use-values—he can only articulate this desire to break down the binary through a continued objectification of the animal body in terms of its parts. His dismantling is rooted in a capitalist ethos of desire where appreciation becomes synonymous with appropriation. Desire is never pure and is instead always a desire to possess, to own[8]. In this way, Robert himself becomes a *metaobject* that creates objects out of other beings by contextualizing them in relation to himself. It is through this failure to break down the commodifying boundaries between human and animal that the revolutionary linkage between human exceptionalism, neocolonialism, and, as will be further explored, patriarchal institutions is made visible.

His visitors are not satisfied with this moral and they ask him to try again. For his second attempt, he says that the king did not have skin so that "'he could look at himself before he got married to a princess'" (103). Male introspection before partnership is championed, ostensibly subverting traditional models of masculinity as emotionally-stunted, thereby cultivating a new generation of sensitive and kindhearted men. Counterintuitively, however, this lesson becomes associated with the patriarchy through the heteronormative institution of marriage. The languaging of partner as "princess" is significant as it further subjectifies the masculine through conflating the feminine body with the social role that it signals. The king becomes "him" but the "princess" is always still a princess, relegated syntactically to the final placement of the object, infinitely replaceable, a body without being defined only in terms of its use-value. In this way it becomes clear how male introspection exists not in service of any individual but only to perpetuate the institution of heteronormative marriage. That is, a man does not need to be self aware or sensitive enough to maintain a healthy relationship with his partner, only just enough to ensnare an unsuspecting woman in the first place.

The fable is defined through its pervasive heteronormativity. As Martin and Kazyak write in "Hetero-Romantic Love and Heterosexiness…," "heteronormativity works to define more than just normative sexuality, insofar as it also defines normative ways of life in general" (317). Heteronormativity privileges a certain class of heterosexual person that is married, monogamous, and procreative (read: the king), illustrating how male self-improvement is only considered legitimate if it contributes to the larger social framework of the nuclear family. Conceptions of the king as the successful heteronormative subject then links heteronormativity with aforementioned hierarchies of neocolonialism and human exceptionalism. Marriage itself becomes a commodity through which one can increase their use-value in capitalist society. Once a man is ready (has successfully introspected) he must get married, with only his partner's

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[8] McGown, Todd. *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*. Columbia Univ Press. 2023.

gendered body, not their personality, bearing any relevance to the success of their relationship. Procreation then also becomes linked with identity-creation for young boys and those with masculine-coded bodies—happiness and self-fulfillment can only come from and at the same time be in service of one's children and the family system. The fable, despite its heteronormative overtones, is necessarily desexualized for the benefit of young Robert, further illustrating how heteronormativity in media defines not only sexual relationships but also normative life in general.

The rejection of Robert's initial moral in lieu of his second one is significant as it places multispecies analysis in symbolic opposition with heteronormativity. Any break from hierarchies of human exceptionalism, even breaks still deeply entrenched in our Western consumer culture, necessarily threaten the patriarchal structures of our societies. In this way, human exceptionalism and Western imperialism are linked inextricably with the patriarchy as simultaneous and symbiotic methods of oppression through the binary. This linkage is made visible through materialist analysis of the king's body as object then *metaobject* and his placement within the narrative as the paragoned heteronormative subject. Robert, with his simultaneous placement as the subject, also becomes the masculinized *metaobject* through which beings and institutions are filtered—that is, all of society now exists in relation to Robert, leaving him with a false sense of omnipotence and self-sovereignty. All interfaces become interfaces between Human and Object, resulting in a complete dehumanization of the Other and a complete lack of compassion for the Self. It is through materialist analysis of the body as a coded object that the synchronous violences inflicted upon the Animal, the Man, and the Body through hierarchical binaries are made visible.

Sorry To Bother You (dir. Boots Riley, 2018) explores the idea of enacting transformative social change through the dual lenses of labor organization and art as activism. Set in Oakland, Cassius Green, the protagonist, gets promoted as a telemarketer at global conglomerate WorryFree because of the sales that he gets from using his "white voice." He achieves economic success which alienates him from his coworkers who are protesting and organizing in support of a telemarketer's union. Social change through labor organization is linked with the human to hybrid transformations that occur in the latter half of the movie; the horse-human people (equisapiens) are offered up to the audience as the true harbingers of transformative change. However, the objectification of their hyper-masculinized bodies and the subjugation of the feminine body into a spectacle that exists merely as a foil to the hypermasculinized subject (read: Detroit, Green's partner) reveals how patriarchal values perpetuate even through and beyond class justice. Detroit is sidelined as a revolutionary despite her consistent and genuinely transformative activism throughout the film *not* as a critique of so-called "fake wokeness" in liberal and progressive circles centered around art and aesthetics, but instead because of the gendered role that she is forced to play. Materialist analysis of her performance art exhibition reveals once again the linkages between binary hierarchies of the patriarchy, neocolonialism, and human exceptionalism. The objects that the audience throws at her contain literal colonial implication while also crystallizing the invisible violence of the male gaze. This scene is the true

moment of revolutionary thought inside of this film, *not* the human to hybrid transformations or the scenes of violent protest with which it culminates.

 Sorry To Bother You makes visible the suffocating corporate hierarchies that define working class life while also presenting those active in the struggle for workers' rights and sovereignty. Herbert Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension* that "a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces" (xi). This quote becomes doubly pertinent to my argument as the "aesthetic transformation" that Marcuse outlines—here referring to how exaggerated difference in art illuminates obscured aspects of real institutions—becomes a referent to the literal transformations that the equisapiens undergo.

 Here then, their transformations *are* inherently revolutionary because their bodies simultaneously represent the torturous consequences of late-stage corporate capitalism as they do the counter-hegemonic potential for resistance against and liberation from that system. Within their body is encapsulated both the "prevailing unfreedom" as well as the "rebelling forces," placing them in an interesting position in regards to the larger themes of the film—their mere existence suggests revolution, whether they consent to this re-tooling or not. Detroit undergoes no similar retooling due to her un-masculinized body (here note femininity coded as a masculine lack); with her acts of resistance derided and sneered at, within her body is encapsulated *only* the "prevailing unfreedom" of our patriarchal society with none of the masculinized potential for so-called genuine rebellion.

 The final scene of the movie bears major significance to analysis of the equisapien's revolutionary potential—after his transformation, Green is shown through security camera footage breaking into the CEO of WorryFree's house. Is interpersonal violence really the answer to what are clearly systemic issues? And how does this legitimized version of resistance break down interlocking hierarchies of western supremacy, misogyny, and human exceptionalism? Violence cannot be solved through violence; what we require now is an imaginative refabrication of our coexistent futures, a revolutionary *linkage* of visible and invisible hierarchies at all scales.

 Marcuse explores the final scene aptly—the ending of *Sorry to Bother You* is not happy or resolved because "If art were to promise that at the end good would triumph over evil, such a promise would be refuted by the historical truth. In reality it is evil which triumphs, and there are only islands of good where one can find refuge for a brief time" (47). Detroit and Green are already made into the failed revolutionary, but now the equisapiens, both the promise of and appearance of revolution, must become the imperfect revolutionary. To present them otherwise would be a fantasy divorced from its fantastical elements, in other words: an illusion, a farce that would obfuscate any semblance of cultural analysis. Attacking the CEO of WorryFree may not necessarily be a revolutionary act in and of itself, but it is an act of imperfect activism that encourages the audience to interrogate their relationships with the real hierarchies in their own lives. Marcuse argues that revolutionary art cannot be expected to neatly solve such nuanced and institutional issues as global poverty or class inequality—its role lies merely in the signaling

towards, in the illumination of. Media is merely the impetus for change—all real work must necessarily be done after reality resumes.

Equisapien bodies are reduced to parts at the same time as they are exalted as more-than-the-sum-of, both by the corporation that created them as well as by the revolutionaries that wish to use them. Their physical freedom is closely linked with their assistance in the final protest, just as Detroit is defined throughout the movie by her foiling of Green. This suggests that "unfreedom" prevails even in and through revolution in the form of body objectification, female subjugation, and the transactionalization of interpersonal relationships.

The objectification of the equisapien body with its hypermasculinized features mimics the way in which real bodies, especially those of color or that present as feminine (read: Detroit) are fetishized as parts-with-functions rather than as whole beings. The equisapien body is reduced to and defined by its increased lean muscle mass, enlarged biceps, chests, abs, and penis. Their exaggerated strength encompasses both their potential for increased productivity in the workplace as well as their potential to cultivate tangible socioeconomic change through violent resistance. This strength is then linked with masculine virility and socially-constructed notions of physical desirability through the emphasis placed on the enlarged penis as a principal marker of successful transformation.

This linkage does not happen in the case of Detroit and other such women of color—their physical desirability under the gaze of the heteronormative male subject is and never has been associated with increased productivity or revolutionary potential. Now it becomes clear why the enlarged penis is as centrally-significant a transformation as the muscles through which resistance was made successful: Detroit's revolutionary impotence is not due to the failures of her chosen medium but instead quite literally due to her lack of a penis.

It can be argued that the final protest is actually a moment of radical multispecies solidarity as activism—all sentient beings coming together without hierarchy to resist the invisible frameworks that oppressively define our societies. However, Green's initial interaction with Demarius, the equisapien that frees him from his imprisonment inside of the police van, and the broken and condescending English with which he speaks, squarely reasserts ideologies of human exceptionalism. Detroit reappears after this scene and calls Green a "mastermind," downplaying her central organizing role in the protest which is then paired with a simultaneous reassertion of herself as a sexual object. This continual reassertion triples as for the benefit of Green, the other male characters, as well as for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience member. Here voyeurism is intrinsically linked with the viewing of cinema: actors and/as characters are frozen into images and symbolic icons within a narrative structure. This specific voyeurism doubles as a desire to assert patriarchal hierarchies as the audience plays into the traditional fantasy of female exhibitionism through Detroit's prescribed use-value as the synthesizer of images of heteronormative sexual pleasure[9].

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[9] See also her relationship to coworker and labor organizer Squeeze. Another masculinized revolutionary subject to which she asserts herself as a sexual object, for instance as in the moment they share after her exhibition.

I argue that despite her narrative role as a mere foil to the protagonist Green, Detroit's performance art exhibition is the actual moment of radical thought within the film. Allowing the audience to throw objects at her while reciting a line from cult classic movie *The Last Dragon*, Detroit makes visible the ways in which the female body is violently subjugated through multiple layers of the male gaze. This gaze is then linked with modern colonialism and our imperial consumer culture through the literal implications of the objects themselves. Any dismantling of the Western-supremacist international economic hierarchy necessitates a simultaneous interrogation of misogyny in our media and societies.

The character of Detroit is subjugated under layers of the male gaze which stunts her genuine revolutionary potential within the film. Laura Mulvey writes in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that "there are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (815). These "looks" identify with/as each other as the audience becomes abstracted into the literal camera lens itself at the same time as they become the spectating characters within the screen. These "looks" are then masculinized as the woman is relegated to the role of the performer, the spectacle to be looked-at, the object through which each layer of audience-as-subject projects and cultivates their identity. The character of Detroit, written, directed, and filmed by a man, exists under these layers of male gaze that define our modern patriarchal societies—her role necessarily lies not in the rejection of the hierarchies through which her character was created, but instead in the linkage of their true misogynistic violence with the global violences inflicted upon the Animal and non-Western worlds. Now the layers of gaze through which women are subjugated in media and society double as the layers of neocolonialism through which resource-rich countries in Africa and Asia are exploited for the benefit of our Western consumer cultures.

The clothing that Detroit wears during her performance is significant: a two-piece bathing suit made from leather gloves. The bottom glove has a middle finger that extends upwards and the top gloves are laid horizontally. Mulvey writes, "Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content" illuminating how Detroit, the "woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox" (808), invites the audience to view her body, to engage in the fantasy of masculine voyeurism and feminine exhibitionism, while at the same time exposing how violent that interface actually is. This is violence that is no longer metaphorical, violence that is made concrete through the objects in the scene. Detroit exposes the genuine lack of distance between performer and audience at both the narrative- and meta-level—the audience's eyes watching are made tangible in her bikini: hands already and perpetually groping.

The violence of the male gaze is similarly consolidated into the objects that Detroit allows the audience to throw. The audience is merely invited, not commanded, to inflict pain. One could argue that this invitation along with the spatial context of the performance as part of a fine art exhibition is established consent between performer and audience. However, while Detroit may have consented to the possibility of getting hurt, the actual choice to throw, to aim at her head and body, to inflict lasting hurt, lies squarely within the audience. The appearance of

consent does not ever justify mistreatment: a powerful message that must be centralized in all discourse surrounding sexual assault and harrassment. Here the violence of the male gaze becomes materialized as the audience acts as a surrogate for the male voyeur performing active reconciliation with the anxiety provoked by the unmediated female form (811). This masculine frustration is then vented through the sadistic violence inflicted upon Detroit's body, representative of the subjugation of real feminine bodies of color in our male-dominated societies.

The thrown objects also link the patriarchy with our international Western-supremacist hierarchies. Motorola phones containing cobalt ore, empty bullet casings, and balloons filled with sheep's blood are all objects that contain within them layers of colonial implication. Here Detroit focuses specifically on American foreign relations with resource-rich countries in Africa, incriminating the Western consumer in the global hierarchies that define foreign relations with countries in the Global South. The production of normalized items such as mobile phones necessitates and simultaneously obfuscates the painful labor and often death of those in the global working class[10]. The inclusion of sheep's blood links anglo-american neocolonialism with our continued subjugation of the Animal world. This linkage of international imperial-colonial hierarchies with domestic patriarchies and human exceptionalism is truly radical, suggesting that any dismantling of one necessitates a dismantling of the other.

Green interrupts Detroit's performance, first demanding that the audience stop throwing objects and then asking why she would put herself through this torment. On one level, this seems to signal towards Green's ability to resist the sadism of the male gaze. This is not the case. As Mulvey writes, the male anxiety produced from the image of "woman, as icon" escapes through "the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object" (811). Green here is placed in conjunction with the audience members that he attempts to distance himself from; his feeble attempt at rescue is the same as the physical punishment that the audience members inflict upon Detroit. Both Green and the audience turn Detroit into an object upon which they can project their will, inscribing her body with the guilt and culpability of whatever may occur. Green speaking to the audience is itself a false redirection of blame away from the binary frameworks that assert these violent hierarchies in the first place and a complete devaluation of Detroit's performance art as activism and her autonomy as a sentient being.

Detroit as a character exists only in relation to Green, the masculinized hero-protagonist. Even in her moment of true revolutionary linkage, she is dominated and subjugated in/to the narrative as mere spectacle. This film does not believe that she is the revolutionary that the working class needs, instead offering up the equisapiens as the real catalysts of transformative change. This is problematic, however, as the equisapien body is hypermasculinized and objectified in terms of its capitalist and anti-capitalist use-values. Socially-constructed notions of physical desirability are inflicted upon both the feminized and masculinized bodies, yet only masculine desirability, not feminine, is linked with the potential for social change. Now it

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[10] Montague, Dena. "Stolen Goods: Coltan and Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo." *SAIS Review (1989-2003)*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2002, pp. 103–18. *JSTOR*

becomes evident how patriarchal values seep into revolutionary movements even as they seem to cultivate some amount of material change in regards to class inequality. The equisapiens *do* bring about some amount of change in the material lives of the working class through the creation of a telemarketer's union. However, their hypermasculinity exists only in relation to Detroit's subjugated femininity—feminine physical desirability is linked only with male anxiety, frustration, and violence, revealing the misogynistic hierarchy upon which both the hegemony and the counter-hegemony has become hinged.

Within this movie's failure to present its audience with a successful revolutionary figure exists a lesson on radical intersectional activism as social transformation. All dismantling of class hierarchies must necessarily be paired with active resistance against the layers of male gaze. The patriarchy must be understood as affecting both masculine and feminine bodies; all bodies are objectified and seen in terms of their use-value in our cultures of desirability. Patriarchal ideologies must also be recognized as linked to international hierarchies of Western supremacy as symbiotic violences perpetuated through a hierarchical binary. The subjugation of the feminine body doubles as the oppression of the Global South as the international working class is objectified and exploited for the benefit of the Western subject. This linkage must then be recognized as extending into the more-than-human world as doctrines of human exceptionalism mimic and reproduce the colonial hierarchies of our Western histories. Violence of all scales must be seen as intrinsically linked and even literally the same in order to make visible the necessity of a simultaneous dismantling of all hierarchies and binaries. Perhaps a dismantling that can only happen through community and creativity. Truly whether or not this film is considered revolutionary is now irrelevant; the characters of Detroit and the equisapiens present to the audience an imperative that must be fulfilled off screen: we cannot be liberated from one hierarchy only to make our way quickly into another.

Our methods of activism must adapt alongside and in inclusion of our rapidly changing societies. Transformative change can only be achieved through a radical break from all ideologies rooted in binary hierarchies. Our classical understanding of organized revolution through an enfranchising of the working class fails to address the nuanced layers of oppression under which our identities are constituted. Nor does it truly interrogate the global ramifications of our Western consumer culture and industrial societies. We must move beyond the canonical counter-hegemonic break; what was once understood as revolution may no longer be considered revolutionary. I argue that what lies beyond this break is in fact a linkage of all violences enacted through the binary. The violence inflicted onto the feminine and masculine body through body commodification, especially as linked with heteronormativity and the male gaze/masculinized subject, is itself inextricable from the violence exacted onto the Global South and the Animal world. These hierarchies mimic each other and cannot be seen as separate if any semblance of deconstruction is desired. Understanding domestic hierarchies as linked with international Western domination necessitates a collectivist understanding of what constitutes transformative social change. There is no justice for the exploited Worker without justice also for the exploited Animal and Woman. Radical materialist analysis of these chosen media texts reveals how things

act as literal signals towards global hierarchies of violence and Western supremacy. It is within these things that hierarchies of neocolonialism, human exceptionalism, and the patriarchy are revealed as fused. The individual consumer is implicated in the perpetuation of these violences through the binary— radical change *must* occur on the level of both the individual and the collective. Our very identities and the frameworks through which we organize our lives must be interrogated and unfolded in all of their contradictions. All conceptions of binary and hierarchy must be deconstructed at once through a simultaneous break if we wish to cultivate lasting and tangible change in our rapidly entropying world.

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The Curse of Domesticity: Female Hauntings and the Characterization of Marginalized Women as Ghosts
by Elisa Castillo

The Female Gothic and Positioning Women in the Domestic Space

The haunted house looms menacingly over whatever ground it occupies. The often crumbling abode is filled with shadows and—as its name suggests—ghosts that haunt the property and whoever lives within. In many instances of ghost tales and myths, the haunted figure is a woman, typically surrounded by stories of heartbreak or murder—perhaps both (for instance, the Mexican mythical ghost La Llorona or Anne Boleyn haunting the halls of London castles). Scholar Monica Michlin describes one particular characterization of the ghost as a "cultural haunting," in which "minority identities…[haunt] white America" (Michlin 2). Under this framework of hauntings and female ghosts being influenced by an opposition to white, American ideals, ghost stories can be understood as a criticism of traditional femininity and domesticity. Portrayals of women as ghosts have long since existed in the genre of the Gothic novel, and they have even become a subgenre of their own. The "Female Gothic," as Emma Liggins describes in her novel, *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories: Gender, Space and Modernity,* is a "subversive genre" that allows women to express discontent toward the patriarchy and their fears of being trapped within both the domestic space and the female body

(Liggins 7). The haunted house and the figure of the ghost thus emerge as victims of the patriarchy, and their ghost stories allow their traumas under this social structure to be recognized.

Moving into the modern Gothic, one critical novel in defining the feminine Gothic is Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House.* Written in the 1950s, the novel presents the midcentury American ideal of female domesticity, subverted by the haunting that occurs within Hill House. While *The Haunting of Hill House* is essential in defining the modern Female Gothic in American literature, the novel neglects to portray all aspects of the haunted female figure. In order to fully analyze the canon of Female Gothic literature, the intersectionalities that produce these female ghosts must be acknowledged. Using Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* alongside two ghost stories by women of color, I will analyze the ways in which cultural and queer identities intersect with domestic traditions to culminate in the figure of the female ghost. Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) ultimately portray the ghosts as representations of women marginalized by society for their refusal to follow feminine and domestic traditions.

Although considerable scholarship has been done on the Female Gothic in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature, contemporary texts dealing with ghost stories are often excluded from the literary canon, or they are not considered to be as serious or profound as other genres. Liggins describes this conflict, where "haunting in terms of modernity" is "a concept identified as problematic by historians" (Liggins 21). Modernizing society promotes a general air of skepticism, thus texts depicting ghostly figures are met with reservation. In bringing these twentieth and twenty-first-century texts under the framework of the Female Gothic, it is important to contextualize the texts in American society. The mid-1900s witnessed the growth of American suburbs and thus the emphasis on the home (Liggins 22). Jackson's *Hill House* encapsulates the push for women to find a home and occupy the domestic sphere, submitting all autonomy within this domestic space. Occurring nearly thirty years later, Kingston's memoir portrays a different America, one through the perspective of Chinese immigrants. Within the text, Kingston experiences both the patriarchal structures in American society that attempt to control women in the domestic sphere and also marginalization while assimilating into a new culture. Finally, published only in 2019, Machado's memoir introduces a new element to the domestic sphere, as her queer identity subverts the norm of heterosexuality that practically defined female domesticity. Yet in an America with further cultural and sexual diversity from the white, heterosexual world of *Hill House*, expectations for women's domestic identities remain similarly controlling. The three texts occur in wildly different American cultures, yet despite these changes, each memoir depicts the consequences toward women who refuse to occupy a traditional domestic identity.

The women depicted in Machado's and Kingston's memoirs possess underrepresented identities—being immigrants or queer women as opposed to white, heterosexual women—and are relegated to the status of ghosts by the dominant ideology (white America in the context of the three novels). Yet in telling their personal ghost stories through the genre of memoir,

Kingston and Machado introduce real instances of marginalized women who were silenced, whether in their family history or by society, and became haunting reminders warning women against subverting traditional domesticity. While Jackson criticizes, but ultimately submits to, the limiting domestic sphere, Kingston and Machado breathe life into the ghosts that haunt their narratives in allowing their stories to be told and their silence to be broken.

The Haunting of Hill House **and White Domesticity**

Shirley Jackson demonstrates the dark consequences of patriarchal structures on women by subverting the traditional female domestic space through Hill House, which presents the picturesque American manor with a dark twist. Jackson establishes the haunted house as a space that is parallel to, but separate from, reality. Within this bizarre realm, the novel's protagonist, Eleanor Vance, finds comfort in the domestic setting of Hill House; despite its unsettling aura, she craved this sense of domesticity while living alone. Within the novel's first few pages, Eleanor's unhappiness with her present life is evident: "She could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life…Without ever wanting to become reserved and shy, she had spent so long alone" (Jackson 5). It is immediately evident that Eleanor's character is desperately searching for a sense of belonging and connection, which she believes to have found through Hill House. Jackson's choice of setting the novel in a house is significant for its commentary on domesticity. Eleanor, a single woman in her early thirties, is nontraditional in the sense that she is unmarried and has no children. This status is especially notable as the text is set in the 1950s, when domesticity and motherhood were traits unequivocally expected of women. Eleanor lacks the personal space and autonomy in owning a home, further separating her from the identity of a married, domesticated woman. As she drives to Hill House, Eleanor, for the first time, feels a sense of individuality and personal possession, noting that "the car belonged entirely to her, a little world all her own; I am really going, she thought" (Jackson 15). Eleanor's independence defies traditional expectations of domesticity, which is defined by marriage and becoming a mother. Christine Junker proposes that Jackson "imagine[s] that if domesticity can just be disentangled from marriage and motherhood, it can provide a refuge from patriarchy" (Junker 107). While living at Hill House, Eleanor is at first seemingly successful at carving out a version of domesticity that is exclusive from these two controlling concepts. For a brief while, Hill House becomes a space that is subversive of traditional domesticity, offering refuge to a woman marginalized for her desire for independence.

However, while Jackson attempts to distinguish domesticity from the patriarchy, the two concepts are inevitably linked. In the relief that Eleanor finds in Hill House—believing she has finally found a home of her own—she submits to the patriarchal idea that a women's worth is tied to a house or property. Junker argues that Eleanor's struggle represents a "hope that a different kind of domesticity can engender a different kind of female subjectivity" (Junker 1). Following this "different kind of female subjectivity" women might be able to separate the patriarchy's insistence that they occupy a domestic space with their own desire to do so. Eleanor navigates a unique sense of embodiment by occupying the traditional space of the house while

refusing to fully encompass a traditional female identity. Again, the haunted house allows for this in-between state, as it is grounded in reality, yet what exists inside does not follow convention. Eleanor creates a unique identity for herself in this liminal space; however, she is never able to fully escape the patriarchal demands of domesticity. As Angela Hague describes in an assessment of Jackson's anthology of texts that heavily deal with the subject of home, houses "often function as places of entrapment and incarceration for the women who visit or live in them" (Hague 82). Even within the liminal state of the haunted house, Eleanor cannot separate herself from the patriarchal demand that women find their place in a home.

The novel's ending depicts Eleanor's suicide after being forced to leave Hill House, cementing Jackson's criticisms of traditional domesticity and the consequences of the patriarchy's control over women's identities. By the end of the novel, Eleanor's mind is fragmented by the house as an effect of its haunting. Believing Hill House to be the only place she truly belongs, Eleanor drives her car into a tree and dies. The autonomy behind Eleanor's suicide is ambiguous, and whether she was truly making the decision or was influenced by the forces within Hill House is unclear to readers. Regardless, Jackson emphasizes the danger of forcing domestic values on women and the tyranny of the patriarchy within the domestic space. Within these structures, women feel they must seek domesticity or otherwise face marginalization from society. For Eleanor, the house is a reprieve from her life of loneliness and neglect from her family, causing her to release complete independence in exchange for a sense of belonging. According to Junker, "Jackson's representation of this kind of domesticity takes on the quality of a nightmare, because ultimately, Eleanor hopes that ceding her own agency will provide her with protection from an unruly and uninhabitable world" (Junker 11). Eleanor's death reveals the patriarchy's incessant demand that women occupy the domestic space, a demand detrimental not only to the autonomy of women but also to their lives. Although Hill House seemingly allows Eleanor to exist without forcing her into marriage or motherhood, her suicide reflects that the patriarchy's control over women's agency and the limitations it places on their identities remains a controlling power over the domestic space.

Eleanor's suicide presents a further element contributing to the figure of the ghost: the fragmentation of one's mind. Eleanor's loss of autonomy and personhood is evident in the dissolution of her narrative voice, where at the novel's end it is unclear whether her thoughts are truly her own or influenced by some other detrimental force. Right before Eleanor's suicide, she thinks, "I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself," a statement that first appears to be her final exhibition of autonomy (Jackson 271). However, the following line introduces confusion to Eleanor's final action, where "In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled into the tree she thought clearly, *Why* am I doing this?" (271). The emphasis created by "clearly" suggests that Eleanor's previous thoughts did not come from a sound mind or autonomous decision. Tony Vinci proposes that the fragmented state of Eleanor's mind can be read as a transgression of the traditional human subject, in which "instead of a unitary mind bound by an ostensibly human body…Nell slips in and out of her body" (Vinci 53). The setting of the haunted house again signals a liminal space that allows Eleanor to occupy an existence

beyond the boundaries of humanity. Vinci further argues that this state of being is a result of Eleanor's trauma and her isolation from society. The extended periods of loneliness in Eleanor's life cause her to seek belonging in the Hill House, and ultimately the pressure to fit into this domestic space drives Eleanor insane. While the ghosts of the house arguably influence her mental state and infringe on her autonomy, the most prevalent ghost of the novel is Eleanor's fragmented self; her inability to reconcile these parts of herself and establish an identity that is accepted by society demonstrates the oppressive reachings of the patriarchy. The novel's concluding line—"Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone"—demonstrates that Eleanor's silence was not broken in death, only adopted into the amalgam of forgotten identities that the Hill House absorbed (Jackson 272).

In the Dream House : **Queer Domesticity and Trauma as Haunting**

Despite Jackson's criticisms of domesticity as controlling over women's identities, the novel fails to consider queer domesticity as a subversion of tradition. Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House*, portrays a queer relationship in the domestic space of the haunted house. In the memoir, the haunted house is presented as a physical site of domestic abuse and as a metaphorical manifestation of the abusive relationship haunting Machado. While her relationship occupies a majority of the book's narrative, Machado's life is depicted from adolescence to her eventual marriage to her first wife, from whom she is now divorced. While the Dream House is a physical location in Indiana—the house her abusive lover lived in, where a majority of the abuse occurred—it also exists as a schema for Machado to sort out her memories, sexuality, and experiences. Each room signifies a formative element of Machado's memories: "the back patio: college…the kitchen: OkCupid, Craigslist…The bedroom: don't go in there" (Machado 17). The house's haunting evidently occurs in the bedroom of Machado's mind, which contains the memories and trauma of her abusive relationship. Through a queer relationship, Machado's Dream House subverts the traditional representation of the domestic home. Rather than the nuclear family, two women inhabit the space and are not even married, as Machado points out. As a further subversion of expectations, Machado frames her memoir—a genre defined as being based on reality—as a ghost story. Not only does the symbol of the haunted house allow Machado to organize her memories, but it also allows her to give voice to a part of herself that was silenced while in an abusive relationship. As Machado says, "The memoir is, at is core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past" (Machado 5). In reconstructing her past, Machado is able to reclaim autonomy over her identity and allow the part of her that was silenced to speak her story.

However, the subversion of traditional domesticity and the creation of a new domestic space is not a place of relief for Machado as it is in Jackson's *Hill House.* The memoir presents two primary ghosts: one as Machado's ex-lover (who she deems the Dream House woman) and in Machado herself. The Dream House woman becomes a haunting figure in Machado's life—not for who she was, but for who she wasn't. Machado describes the sensation of realizing she did not truly know her former partner, where "Afterward, I would mourn her as if she'd died,

because something had: someone we created together" (Machado 77). In her memoir, a new type of ghost is created that differentiates the text from the tropes of the Female Gothic in Jackson's novel. The ghost of someone who never died—who never even existed—represents an alternative form of ghost whose haunting occurs as a reminder of the abuse Machado faced. The second ghostly figure is Machado herself, specifically the person she realizes she became after enduring abuse. As this realization occurs to Machado, she thinks,

> And then it occurs to you one day, standing in the living room, that you are this house's ghost: you are the one wandering from room to room with no purpose, gaping at the moving boxes that are never unpacked, never certain what you're supposed to do. After all, you don't need to die to leave a mark of psychic pain. If anyone is living in the Dream House now, he or she might be seeing the echo of you. (Machado 127)

Once again, Machado presents the ghost as a figure separate from death, indicating that one does not have to die to create the effect of haunting. Suffering abuse can make one a ghost in the sense that they are a shell of their previous self, losing the individuality that once defined them. In discussing queer abuse in Machado's memoir, Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain describes that the abuse operates as "the abusive partners take on the roles of consumers, who assume a form of ownership that renders both writers passive" (Bussey-Chamberlain 262). Within the understanding of abuse as consumption, Machado's identity and sense of self is absorbed and destroyed by her partner. Machado uses memoir to represent how the deterioration of one's sense of self can result in their characterization as a ghost, and within this status, they are denied voice.

Machado's haunted house differs strikingly from Jackson's; whereas Eleanor finds individuality and home in the haunted house, the domestic sphere is a place of entrapment for Machado. Machado's identity as a queer woman in a same-sex relationship serves to, as Junker describes, "disentangle" her domesticity from the traditional practice of heterosexual marriage and motherhood (Junker 107). However, even in this subversive relationship, Machado experiences abuse and violence stemming from the patriarchal state. Given that patriarchal forces operate by silencing women and limiting their autonomy—as witnessed by Eleanor's isolation from society—Machado's abusive ex-partner employs this same strategy for control. Machado presents this concept as "unlanguage," although it is first introduced in the context of pleasure. Machado first describes feeling the "lingering tingle of unlanguage," where she consents to having her voice restrained for the sake of pleasure (Machado 42). However, Machado soon experiences unlanguage as a form of abuse, when her partner warns, "You're not allowed to write about this" (Machado 44). Machado finds agency through writing; it is her form of self-expression and is therapeutic in the process of recalling her past and traumas. In stripping away Machado's ability to write, the Dream House woman exerts a patriarchal method of control and prevents Machado from exhibiting agency. This control is one such way Machado herself becomes a ghost, when her forms of identity are limited, and she is left as an "echo" of herself.

One of the most unique traits of Machado's memoir is its structure, in which its nonfiction genre and the arrangement of the chapters themselves give the book life, reflecting Machado's presentation of the Dream House as being alive. *In the Dream House* notably presents

a ghost story in a nonfiction text, uncommon in the genre of the Gothic novel that is closely tied to fiction. Machado's use of memoir, however, allows for a reimagined understanding of the ghost as a fragmented version of oneself. The subdued version of herself that Machado adopted in her abusive relationship depicts how a ghost-like state can manifest in one's identity when faced with controlling forces. Bussey-Chamberlain describes the "shifting subject" of *In the Dream House*, which shifts between the first person "I" and the second person "you," both, however, representing Machado. Bussey-Chamberlain argues that the dual subjects "enacts the immediate and aftereffects of trauma rupturing a self to the point of double existence" (260). In order to process her trauma, Machado's self is split into the present "I" and the past "you," being the recipient of abuse and trauma. Not only does the shifting of subjects create a stark contrast between Machado's fractured, ghost-like self and her healed self, but it also reinforces the haunted house as a metaphorical state of existence. The fragmentation of self occurs in the memoir most strikingly during the chapter "*Dream House* as Choose Your Own Adventure," in which Machado presents a moment of abuse from her partner, and provides the readers with a series of responses: "If you apologize profusely, go to page 163…If you tell her to calm down, go to page 166" (162). This practice of speaking directly to the audience continues until page 176, when Machado concludes, "That's not how it happened, but okay. We can pretend. I'll give it to you, just this once" (176). Although Machado breaks conventions of writer-reader relationships by allowing audiences to choose the narrative, she additionally speaks to her past self in this section. Machado acknowledges her lack of agency at the time with, "That's not how it happened," yet the action of "Choose your own adventure" is one such method of reclaiming autonomy over her actions. A traditional memoir would not allow for this portrayal of agency, thus Machado's text demonstrates a subversion of genre conventions and allows her to reclaim the fragmented pieces of herself that were taken when she was made into a ghost during her abusive relationship.

Cultural, Familial, and Historical Ghosts in *The Woman Warrior*

Maxine Hong Kingston's part memoir, part novel *The Woman Warrior* further presents a unique depiction of ghosts as a combination of myths and female figures from her family history, each meant to instill control over Kingston and her womanhood. The ghosts that haunt Kingston throughout her life are all victims of patriarchal oppression who were in some way silenced or marginalized for failing to follow traditions of female domesticity. The memoir's opening page introduces the first ghost from Kingston's childhood—her aunt in China who committed suicide and killed her newborn baby after having the child while her husband was in America. Kingston's mother tells her the story at a young age, where "In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (Kingston 3). Deemed the "No Name Woman" by Kingston, the woman took her life after giving birth, when the people of her village raided her family's house and essentially blacklisted them. The ability to exist and be remembered is nearly stripped away from Kingston's aunt, whose family attempts to erase her from their history.

Kingston's mother maintains the memory of her aunt as a warning to pass on to her daughters. The No Name Woman's erasure signifies that women do not possess bodily autonomy, existing primarily to serve their husbands and provide them children. Even if a woman does become a mother—as expected under the patriarchy—the punishment for having a child out of wedlock is greater than not having a child at all.

Kingston's memoir further promotes the idea that patriarchal structures cause women to be marginalized and thus characterized as ghosts in society, where they are controlled by being refused voice. Yen Li Loh analyzes the prominence of ghosts throughout the memoir, arguing that there is "a commonality of ghosts in dealing with invisible social structures in minority American literatures" (Loh 211). Following this analysis, the act of haunting is a refusal to be suppressed by the patriarchal systems that created the ghosts in the first place. The existence of the No Name Woman and the other ghosts of Kingston's memoir, such a different aunt who never married and was considered mentally insane, are reflections of the social structures that reject women who do not follow traditional paths in domesticity. The act of not marrying or having a child relegates the women to the status of nonhuman, and their "rejection of marriage as a path to happiness and citizenship results in their expulsion from communal life" (Loh 212). Kingston, however, does not let the female ghost stories of her childhood remain silenced by the patriarchy. In telling their ghost stories, Kingston gives voice to her aunt's life and refuses the erasure of her existence. Kingston describes the impact that the No Name Woman's lack of existence had on her throughout her life:

> "But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have. In twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it…My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her. (Kingston 16)

In memorializing the No Name Woman, Kingston also accepts the burden of her aunt's existence, being the sole member of her family to practice remembering her. Yet she accepts this burden in order to end her aunt's punishment and break the practice of writing women out of history. Ruth Jenkins proposes that Kingston's depiction of her aunt's story essentially redefines silence, where she does not "simply reproduce culturally ordained silence; instead, [Kingston] reinscribes female silence as subversive alternatives" (Jenkins 3). Kingston's practice of transcribing these ghost stories refuses patriarchal efforts of erasing the woman from history. Kingston provides the No Name Woman identity again, and she further asserts her own authority and bodily autonomy by refusing to let them be muted.

When compared to Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, the ghosts of *The Woman Warrior* similarly represent the failure to practice traditional domesticity, but the novel also presents an added element of immigration that contrasts the white, Western domesticity of *Hill House.* Kingston describes that the ghost stories were created as her mother's lessons, where "whenever she liked to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one…She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died" (Kingston 5). After witnessing the death of fellow immigrants and the No

Name Women herself, Kingston's mother tells her children the haunting ghost stories in order to scare them into strength. However, Kingston finds trouble navigating the realities of America and the lasting effects of the stories told by her mother. The No Name Woman haunts Kingston for her story's lack of resolution—in bringing her story to life, Kingston must also continuously grapple with her existence and her family's practice of erasure.

In terms of the cultural practice of erasing a scorned community member from existence, Loh argues that the village's reaction to the No Name Woman was born from a period of secrecy and personal preservation stemming from the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Loh explains that "during the Exclusion, Chinese immigrants changed their names and lied about their personal information," and in consequence "second-generation American-born Chinese were alienated from parents" (Loh 214). Kingston details these exclusionary immigration policies in the United States and their detrimental effects even in China, represented most poignantly in the No Name Woman. Further, Kingston grows up feeling conflicted over her mother's harsh form of mothering. Beyond the ghost stories meant to warn her children, Kingston's mother additionally describes herself surrounded by ghosts once entering America: "But America has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts…I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts" (Kingston 97). Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, finds herself disillusioned and surrounded by white ghosts, made up of white people and their unfamiliar traditions. Brave Orchid teaches Kingston to be wary of the ghosts, yet when growing up, Kingston realizes she is more familiar with American traditions than her Chinese culture. Thus, to Kingston, the ghosts became Chinese family members and villagers she had never met.

Kingston proposes a unique explanation of ghosts, where they manifest as a response to disillusionment and are a mechanism in the process of immigrating to unfamiliar places. Brave Orchid and Kingston thus present the notion of ghosts as a means of preservation. Unfamiliar customs and peoples are categorized as ghosts so that they might be observed, but the danger of having to assimilate into their traditions is eliminated. Qiong He describes the confusing process of encountering new cultures, as Brave Orchid realizes upon immigrating that "America, rather than an ideal state abounding with gold, is actually a country swarming with 'white ghosts,' which leaves her with a sense of loss caused by cultural dislocation" (He 133). Within He's understanding, the ghosts in immigration contain a sense of grief or loss, as associated with traditional ghosts, yet this mourning is the realization that one has lost the comfort and safety of their own culture. The numerous and nuanced depictions of ghosts in Kingston's memoir serve a variety of purposes, and while she similarly criticizes the patriarchal structures that demand female domesticity, *The Woman Warrior* differs from Jackson's depiction of hauntings. For Kingston, ghosts represent an intersection of forces influencing herself and her mother: familial expectations for pious domesticity, cultural dislocation in the process of immigration, and resisting the treatment of being silenced. The action of telling these ghost stories in her memoir allows Kingston to break the silence that women and Asian American immigrants are often forced to embody, immortalizing their stories in the text so that they might never be erased again.

Conclusion

  The Haunting of Hill House clearly details the dangers of failing to follow the domestic process expected in society of marriage, occupying a familial home, and having children. Eleanor's lack of marriage and children isolates her from society, in turn taking away her voice and autonomy. Yet the American female experience expressed in Jackson's novel lacks representation of alternative forms of marginalization that relegate women to the status of ghosts. In the form of the memoir, *In the Dream House* and *The Woman Warrior* each convey unique depictions and explanations for the ghosts that haunt the novels. *The Woman Warrior* presents Kingston's experience of assimilation into American culture, navigating the myths and family histories that her mother told her in childhood with the new, unfriendly society her family found themselves adopting to. While Jackson's protagonist, Eleanor, essentially becomes a ghost due to the fragmentation of her selfhood from patriarchal pressures, Kingston discovers that the ghosts that haunt her are made up of women and relatives that were silenced and erased from family history. Kingston thus navigates the pressures of giving her forgotten female relatives voice by immortalizing their stories in the text and also being the primary recipient of their hauntings. In *The Woman Warrior,* the setting of the haunted house represents American society at large and the pressure it places on female minorities to occupy strict traditions and regulations.

  Machado's *In the Dream House* is the most modern of the three novels, hence positioning a setting and American society that has advanced from the world of Jackson and Kingston's texts. Machado centers an abusive queer relationship at the center of her memoir and establishes the haunted house as the center of her trauma from the relationship. Within the memoir, and in moving through each room of this metaphorical house, Machado processes her relationship and pieces together the fragmented pieces of herself that the abusive relationship created. The primary figure of the ghost in the memoir emerges as Machado's past self, being a stripped-away version of herself who lost agency and was silenced in the process of abuse. In writing the memoir, Machado pieces together her broken selves and emerges as a fully agent human, not the ghost that she was made into. Each of the three novels uses the figure of the ghost and the setting of the haunted house to convey the detrimental effects of forced domesticity on women. The novels present women who refuse to follow the expected domestic identities placed upon them, and it turn they are relegated to the status of ghost. Within this status, the women lack agency and the voice to identify themselves. However, in Kingston and Machado's practice of writing the ghost stories and immortalizing their suppression in the text, the women's silence is broken, and they are able to emerge from this ghost state.

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Mortals of Greek Mythology in Modernist Poetry
by Frances Isler

While the gods of Greek Mythology certainly make for fascinating myths, it is their mortal counterparts and their human flaws and fatalities that create legendary stories. My personal gateway to the art of storytelling came in the form of learning these stories. Then, I found in a class on British modernist writing that modernist poetry not only shares my interest in these mortal figures, but often features them as key figures in their works. My critical project explores and analyzes how mortals in Greek mythology are represented in modernist poetry through sections divided by my chosen characters; Leda, Helen, Achilles, and Icarus. It is significant that mortals, individuals not unlike ourselves, appear in modernist poetry because as Andrew Hoberek writes in his article "But- what can anyone do about it?: modernism,

superheroes, and the unfinished business of the common good," modernist literature has the tendency to "[celebrate]... individualism and critique of institutions" (Hoberek 1). Therefore, how these mortals are characterized and the tropes in literature they tend to represent reflect not just the perceptions of those characters, but individuals of modern Western society who are similar. Their presence in modernist poetry begs the questions: Who is a modern Leda? How might a modern Icarus act? As I have learned in nearly every literature class, how we perceive characters- their impulses, desires, wishes, and actions is the foundation of how we both judge and treat them, both in literary spaces and in real life. The ways in which modernist poets have shifted focus on my chosen characters, a modern Icarus for example, who I label further in this paper as the Defenseless Dead, may appear in the form of an unexpiciable victim of suidice or drunk driver accident, and a modern Leda, the Unwilling Player, may take on the form of a teen mom who was forced into her role through sexual violence. I argue that through the modernist focus on individuality, the tropes these characters have become are applicable to our contemporary world of literature because modernist poets took the creative liberty of redefining who the mortals of Greek mythology are by exploring the potential of their individuality.

Modernism

As mentioned before, a key aspect of Modernism is the focus on individualism. Scholar Michael Levenson in his book, *Modernism*, relays a modernist theory on the presence of individuality in literature. He writes that modernist literature becomes "a vessel for individuals, a history of named characters," which highlights "the transaction between sociality and individuality, and then the reassembly of individuals within the confines of private space" (Michael Levenson 63). Modernist poetry, for the purpose of this paper, is a "vessel" of "named characters," mortals of Greek Mythology, which gives place for reality within the mythic. For an individual, even fictional, to be "[reassembled]" in "the confines of private space," there is a sense that in order to be self actualized as a person, there needs to be a breaking down of parts. Referring back to the impulses, desires, wishes, and actions a dynamic character has, to break down Helen's desires, for example, not only allows for a variety of interpretations of her character, but it gives her an aura of personhood that becomes easier to empathize with. Empathy is perhaps the great weapon of modernist individuality. How could we not feel for these characters after W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, and William Carlos Williams all construct poems that showcase the characters Leda, Helen, Achilles, and Icarus in ways that exceed, differentiate, or expand on their original myths? The manners in which they go about characterizing these Greek mortals exemplify Levenson's statement that "individuals [in modernist literature] remain the focal points of the narrative, but they lose many prerogatives of agency" (Levenson 63). While they become their own stories, rather than playing smaller roles in someone else's story, these characters' wants are created for them. Their entire personality is an extension of a modernist interpretation, thus, as they warp into tropes of literature, they also build a legacy of how their character will be portrayed and perceived since the modernist era of literature. For instance, *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller showcases a much more empathetic view of

Achilles, whom I have labeled The Soldier Son, which could not have been possible to conceive without Auden's rendition of Achilles in "The Shield of Achilles" first.

Leda: The Unwilling Player

I begin with Leda as she is famously the mother of Helen, the focus of the Trojan War, and therefore a catalyst to the entire "game" of mortals in settings with immortal influences. Continuing with the game analogy, I have landed on Leda as the "Unwilling Player" because of her significant yet powerless position in myth. Guy Norfolk writes in his article, "Leda and the Swan – And Other Myths About Rape," that it was "in the Italian Renaissance, when the story [of Leda] developed erotic overtone," and that "what is interesting about all these artistic interpretations is that they depict Leda's attitude as highly ambiguous at best. Thus, Leonardo da Vinci's interpretation, far from depicting a scene of rape, looks more like a Victorian photograph of a doting couple and the sculptures illustrated appear to show Leda in a state of erotic compliance" (Guy Norfolk 1). Leda, like her daughter Helen after her, are constantly the objects of a literary battle of tug-of-war over whether either woman is a seductress or a victim of rape. While most scholars such as Guy Norfolk and H.P. Rickman are in agreement that Leda is indeed the victim of rape, hence Norfolk's title, Ken Dowden recalls the myth more matter-of-factly rather than including emotional connotations alongside the actions within the myth. Dowden writes that the "most striking is the myth that Zeus in the form of a swan copulated with Leda, who subsequently produced an egg containing Helen" (Ken Dowden 1).

However, "Leda and the Swan" by William Butler Yeats takes on a less than subtle position on the myth. Norfolk writes that "Yeats describes Leda's helplessness and terror in the face of a sudden assault. It is an unambiguously brutal rape after which the victim is indifferently discarded" (Norfolk 1). Yeats also illustrates Leda as "the staggering girl" who is both "helpless" and "terrified." The emphasis on her status as a girl and inability to defend herself builds an image against the pointed title of seductress that art and literature often depict her as. Yeats' Leda is a girl, a figure of innocence who could not possibly either seduce or trap a god or stop a god from using her. As Rickman writes in "The rape of Leda," in Yeats's poem, there is no empathy and, excepting only the 'terrified fingers', no reference to emotions" (H.P. Rickman 2). He leans into this almost declarative view of Leda's story both as a method of depicting her in an empathetic light and as a way of constructing Zeus as the real villain.

What feels more deliberate than Yeats' description of Leda is his manner of describing Zeus. He does not write the god as glorious, or even name him for that manner, but instead refers to him by his treatment of Leda. He writes that she was "mastered by the brute blood of the air" and that "the indifferent beak could let her drop" once the scene has finished. Leda's mortality, a detail "indifferent" to Zeus, is highlighted in comparison to Zeus' mastery and control of the scene. Yeats is able to make clear the power dynamics, a detail often skewed with the portrayal of Leda as a seductress, within the poem without ever having to name the god. Leda, then, is not a woman with the power to trick gods, or even the mother of the woman who sparked the Trojan War, but the "staggering girl" (Yeats) who trembles in terror of her situation of being the

unwilling player. Yeats' matter of fact tone aids in Leda's character shifting from an ambiguous seducer to a definitive girl who has no say in her role in a god's game. The way he in which he not only confronts the issue of Leda being a victim of sexual violence but pins the blame on Zeus solely molds Leda into a trope that is recognizable to modern and contemporary literature and media. For example, in doing a literary analysis of singer and songwriter Hozier's song "Swan Upon Leda," it is clear that Hozier's rendition of the story follows a more empathetic view of Leda as Yeats constructed her. He goes along with Yeats' definition of her as a "girl" by writing that "a crying child pushes a child into the night" (Hozier). The image of Leda being a child herself further pushes the notion that she does not have agency in her role in this scene. Also, the ambiguity of the line, Leda being referred to as a "child," allows for Hozier to encapsulate anyone who might fit the narrative of Leda that Yeats formed. He ends the song with writing that "the gateway to the world," Leda, or anyone who gives birth in this case, "have never belonged to men" (Hozier). He goes beyond Yeats' foundation of Leda as the unwilling player because not only has Hozier made Zeus the clear villain, as Yeats did, but he states that no man should take agency or ownership over the process of birth.

Helen: The Shapeshifting Scapegoat

Helen, being the product of the 'divine' rape of Leda, finds herself in a similar circumstance as her mother when regarding her legacy and title. It is her multifaceted character that, instead of being celebrated as a marker of a dynamic character, makes her the perfect shapeshifitng scapegoat. Bettany Hughes, author of "Helen the Whore and the Curse of Beauty," writes that while "we now tend to think of Helen as a passive figure, a feeble thing swept along to Troy on the tide of Paris' libido… a close study of representations of Helen through the centuries yields a feistier figure. She is a woman who is at times applauded, but more often damned, for being sexually active -- and is, furthermore, branded a whore" (Bettany Hughes 37). She, like her mother, is at the center of a sexual scandal, and therefore, their sexuality and agency over their sexuality are the topic of debate among scholars. Hughes continues on Helen's reputation by writing that "Helen's sexual peccadilloes were doubly dreadful because they were perceived as hastening men not just to a woman's bed but to their deaths" (Hughes 38). Now she is beyond being branded as a "whore," but is the seductress of death as well. Male warriors are now no longer blamed for their own aggression, violence, or deaths because Helen serves as a scapegoat for any evildoing within the Trojan War.

Helen not only is known as being sexually promiscuous, but according to Hughes and Yeats, she inspires violent behavior. While W.B. Yeats' Helen in his poem "No Second Troy" is really Maud Gonne, he still argues that Helen as a character is not entirely innocent in her role within the Trojan War. He writes that she teaches "ignorant men most violent ways," suggesting that she not only is at the center of the war, but actually encourages the violence. He continues on the image of Helen as the culmination of the potential for death when he writes she has "beauty like a tightened bow." It is perhaps the power she holds or the threat of violence that makes her all the more enticing. While she supposedly leads men to their brutal deaths, she also

holds the figurative key to the status of glory and nobility. This Helen is defined by being either the gateway to fame and sexuality or as the instigator and seductress of death.

However, as Hughes explains that Helen's reputation is often twisted and multifaceted, Helen is not always the seemingly sadistic mastermind of the Trojan War. In fact, Diane Juffras writes in "Helen and Other Victims in Euripides' 'Helen'" that "if Helen can suffer thus, how can the workings of the gods ever be understood" (Diane Juffras 51). She, despite being an offspring of a god, Zeus of all gods, is not protected from mortality. Moreover, she not only does not reap the rewards of her divine lineage, but instead faces the curse of her beauty as a factor that is out of her control. While Hughes writes that "the more beautiful a woman, the more likely her exterior attributes displayed a duplicitous nature" (Hughes 39), Yeats rebutes the statement in his poem in the line "Why, what could she have done, being what she is?" Both acknowledge her involvement in the Trojan War, but Yeats defends Helen's actions by pointing out a crucial detail, which is that Helen's beauty is not something she inherently asks for or works towards. Hence, if the cause of the war is her beauty, something she cannot control, how could she have controlled the war itself? Yeats' Helen is present in contemporary conversation whenever a woman or girl is told she had been "asking for it" when they are victims of sexual violence. He implicity argues, especially in conjunction with his poem "The rape of Leda," that even if Helen is the pinnacle of violence, she was introduced into the world via a violent sexual encounter, and therefore, who can put all the blame on her? Juffras pushes the sympathetic view of Helen further in detailing how "Helen learns that her mother and her brothers have killed themselves in shame over her behavior" (Juffras 49). Juffras illustrates how Helen, even if the cause of violence, is not safe from loss herself. She suffers too from the impacts of the Trojan War, as well as carries the guilt of responsibility. Finally, Helen Morales best summarizes Helen's legacy as it appears in literature in the article "Rape, Violence, Complicity: Colluthys's *Abduction Of Helen*" by detailing the ways in which Helen's role shifts depending on what narrative is being told when she writes "the abduction of Helen or the rape of Helen or the seduction of Helen" (Helen Morales 63). Not only does she adhere to the mold of the story, but as she is born of Leda after she is raped, the cycle continues with her daughter as Morales comments that "Hermione is her mother's daughter" (Morales 72). She again shapeshifts from daughter to mother, a matter of which she cannot control how the cycle of abuse is upheld. Helen, with her ever changing reputation throughout literary history, is recognized in Yeats' modernist poem as the shapeshifting scapegoat as she supposedly incites violence by being the epitome of beauty. A contemporary artist, Lorde, builds on Yeats' foundation of Helen's reputation in her song "Helen of Troy." She compares herself to Helen throughout the song, beginning with the lines "One minute I was killing them all, and the next, the brown suit wouldn't let me perform…typical" (Lorde). This description of Helen, a shapeshifter of sorts who has to "[play] it coy" (Lorde) in order for the "city," or music industry to metaphorically "fall" for her, has a direct lineage to Yeats's Helen. Just as he uses Helen to describe another woman, pushing the narrative of her shiftiness, Lorde also uses the trope Helen has become, but she twists the definition to be more of an umbrella term for all contemporary women instead of pinning the definition to one specific

woman as Yeats did. In the chorus she repeats the lines "let's hear it for the girls living in the modern world" (Lorde) which suggests that Helen is not a rare case of beauty that triggers violent action, but that all modern girls face at some point the same fate of becoming a shapeshifting scapegoat that modernist poet Yeats carved out. By incorporating all modern girls though, Lorde is able to further add to the discussion Yeats began of who is actually responsible for the violence against women. Because she does not include details of physical attractiveness, she argues that there is nothing about these modern girls that incite violence, and therefore that the only blame to be cast should be on the perpetrator(s) alone, which builds off of Yeats' original depiction and argument.

Achilles: The Soldier Son

At the end of the day, Trojan War hero Achilles is mortal. Scholars such as Jonathan Burgees, Robert J. Rabel, and J.T. Sheppard tend to focus on Achilles and his imperfect, *nearly* immortal status. For example, Sheppard in his article "Zeus-Loved Achilles" showcases the young soldier as he is recalled most often- a story of "grief and death, inscrutable, inevitable, for the hero noble" (Sheppard 123). In many ways, the prophecy of a young death is not unlike the certainty we face that death is "inevitable," even if we are a "hero noble," as Sheppard writes. The promise of death acts as a wave of reality within the mythic. Sheppard also details how "Achilles, in his anger, answered with a threat of his own withdrawal from the war" (116). His stubbornness here is a reminder of his childlike characterization. He acts out and lets his emotions guide him much like a child would, which further sustains the image of him as a son before a soldier. Again like a child, he is arrogant. In Rabel's article "Apollo as a Model for Achilles in the Iliad," he focuses on Achilles's "hubris," which is why "Apollo provides the appropriate warning for Achilles to remember his mortality" (Rabel 430). He overestimates his ability and equates supernatural power with total immortality, which Burgees describes as "Achilles' imperfect invulnerability" (Burgees 218) in his article "Achilles' Heel: The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth."

Another interpretation of Achilles portrayed in these articles is less focused on Achilles as the childlike yet strong soldier, but as the rageful mortal nearly on par with the gods as either a rival or as an enemy. Sheppard paints Achilles as the subject of Zeus' affection. He is the "most hateful… of Zeus-nurtured Princes" (Sheppard 116), seemingly unworthy of this nurturing, and yet favored nonetheless. Sheppared goes on to write that "the Man whom Zeus loves dearly is worth many men—even as now He hath done honour to Achilles" (Sheppard 121). This reading of Achilles certainly feeds into the understanding of how he is both seen as the noble hero and the pinnacle of hubris. It is no wonder that a mortal favored by the god of gods, Zeus himself, should forget his place or mortal status. As mentioned before, Zeus is not the only god Achilles interacts with at an almost equal level. Rabel suggests that Achilles' feud with Apollo may stem from their shared tendency to "exercise the power of divine anger" (Rabel 431). Here, he is not a son to a grieving mother, as Auden later depicts him, but born to Thetis, who Burgees describes as "uncomprehending or heartless" (Burgees 220). Achilles morphs into a figure simultaneously

worthy of sympathy and character to scrutinize. He is the product of his environment and the maker of his own flaws, the noble and tragic hero and the cause of his own death, the mentee and enemy of the gods. Achilles, like most people, is a complex character. He has talents, flaws, enemies, and friends, which is why it is a crucial detail that he is portrayed as a mortal son in Auden's poem because it is a reflection of the modernist focus on the individual.

The image of Achilles as a headstrong and overconfident warrior mostly aligns with W.H. Auden's description of Achilles in his poem, "The Shield of Achilles," as "iron-hearted man-slaying," who ultimately cannot overcome his own mortality. However, Burgees offers an alternate ending to Achilles's downfall:

> "Achilles is depicted in a kneeling position, he reaches rather casually to pull the arrow out. I wonder if this indicates that it is an aggravating wound he has received, not a fatal one. One would think that death through a uniquely vulnerable location would be swift and overwhelming. The lack of intensity in the schema suggests to me that Achilles is not dying but rather dangerously distracted and therefore vulnerable to a second and lethal wound" (228).

This interpretation of Achilles's death allows the argument to be made that Achilles's death is not caused by a fatal character flaw like hubris, but that his death is an example of how even the greatest of soldiers are still human. Whether to provide comfort or to act as a warning, Burgees' interpretation aligns with Auden's more sympathetic view of Achilles as a fallen soldier and son. In Auden's rendition, Achilles is not rageful or all powerful, as he is usually remembered in the myth, but instead he is characterized as a son who is capable of injury and death. Even as he is the "strong iron-hearted man-slaying" soldier who does indeed live up to those epithets, he is also Thetis's "son…who would not live long" (Auden). In fact, his mother "[cries] out in dismay" (Auden) over her son, much like any mother who might receive the news of her son's death in war. This level of emotional realism, and Auden's portrayal of Achilles as unable to escape death in war despite his power, depicts a story much more relatable and therefore easy to sympathize with. Auden's focus on the moment of a grieving mother and a soldier's inevitable death make the violence of war not just mystical or prophetic, as it appears in the myth, but a scene grounded in reality.

Achilles in contemporary literature and media appears in a much more gentle light. The novel *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller is more closely related to Auden's rendition of him in that she focuses on his character as a teenager growing up, his romantic relationship with Patroclus, and even the talk of his ghost from Patroclus' point of view, which all work to make an Achilles that is easy to empathize with. Auden's attention to his sense of individuality and the more mortal, gentle side allow for authors like Madeline Miller to create an Achilles that is able to experience a childhood and a romance alongside the endeavors of war he endures. In a song called "Achilles Come Down" by Gang of Youths also casts Achilles in an sympathetic view in which the bridge of the song depicts Achilles contemplating an implied suicide, where the voices of a supposed Apollo and Patroclus battle to win Achilles' attention. This tension created in the final lines of the bridge in which these lines, "Be done with this now and jump off the roof (be

done with this now and get off the roof)" (Gang of Youths) are sung at the same time allows the audience to place themselves in the emotional state Achilles is in as he feels the burden of the war weigh on him. The band plays into his status as a soldier, but instead of focusing on his role as a glorious hero, they depict the deeply intense emotional turmoil he suffers as repercussions of the war. The repetition of the line as well as the title "Achilles come down" (Gang of Youths) adds a level of ambiguity to *how* Achilles will go down. The song seems to argue, much like Auden, that the *how* is not as significant as the seemingly inevitable fact that Achilles will die. This song pushes further into Auden's depiction of Achilles as a son who is grieved by his mother as the audience is witness to Achilles coming to terms with his own mortality.

Icarus: The Defenseless Dead

Icarus is perhaps one of the most well known mortals of Greek Mythology in terms of how he has taken on the role of the disobedient son, the over ambitious youth, or the physical manifestation of hubris. On the first point, scholars David Quint, author of "Fear of Falling: Icarus, Phaethon, and Lucretius in Paradise Lost," and Theodore Ziolkowski, author of "Crete in history and myth," both seem to agree that Icarus is a disobedient son. Ziolkowski details how "Icarus did not fare so well: disregarding his father's advice, the headstrong youth flew too close to the sun and suffered the inevitable consequence of death by plunging into that part of the Mediterranean thereafter named after him" (Theodore Ziolkowski 12). Quint goes even further, comparing Icarus to Milton's Satan when he writes that "like the mythic Icarus, Satan has disobeyed his father and aspired too far" (David Quint 860). His death, the crashing into and drowning in the sea always seem to be an inevitable fate for scholars. Quint writes that Icarus is not only a "mad flyer," but "condemned to a terrifying fall in untold, oceanic depths" (Quint 852-858). Not only is his fate seemingly sealed, but his short life is, as Quint writes "to be identified with Chaos itself" (Quint 859). He is exceedingly disobedient and the embodiment of disorganization, however, he is not confined to this definition. Ziolkowski expands on the way Icarus is described by writing that "Icarus since the Middle Ages was adopted as the warning image for any life carried to its dangerous extremes…Icarus has been regarded as an image for the artist striving to achieve the unattainable" (Ziolkowski 12). His hubris, while a direct pull of his character from the original myth, is a foundation for how later writers depict him.

Two literary artists, W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams certainly use Icarus in a manner similar to Ziolkowski's definition. While they both also touch on Icarus as a figure in literature, they focus on his lack of presence as he appears in art. Auden, in his poem "Musée Des Beaux Arts," writes that while someone might have "heard the splash, the forsaken cry," it was "not an important failure" (Auden). He is never the centerpiece of the active narrative, even in a poem specifically about him, such as "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams. Here, Icarus' death is merely "a splash quite unnoticed," and his suffering is "sweating in the sun that melted the wings' wax unsignificantly" (Williams). What stands out most from these lines is Icarus as a passive character. In art and in these two poems there is no depiction of his overly ambitious nature or stubborn decision making as to *why* he disobeys his father. Auden

and Williams, instead of taking the creative liberty to give Icarus the power of being decidedly mischievous or haughty, make Icarus the model of a silent sufferer, which as Auden begins his poem, "[about] suffering they were never wrong" (Auden). His motives are decided for him by scholars, and only after his insignificant death. Modernist poets then mold Icarus into the trope of the defenseless dead, as his individuality is stripped. His death is not even recognized, let alone grieved by crowds, and instead of being mourned, he becomes a symbol of arrogant erratic behavior and stubborn decision making of which he cannot even defend himself for. Hozier follows in the footsteps of Auden and Williams in his song "Sunlight," which mentions Icarus' story, but only references him by name briefly. After saying he'd be "the Icarus" to "your certainty," he writes "strap the wing to me, death trap clad happily, with wax melted, I'd meet the sea under sunlight, sunlight, sunlight" (Hozier). Hozier continues in the modernist tradition of assuming how Icarus might have felt moments before his death by implying that Icarus would be "death trap clad happily" (Hozier). He is able to insert himself in the mindset of Icarus and give him emotionally charged action, which Auden and Williams only hover over, but again there is an assumption of motive- that Icarus was not only knowingly flying to his death, but that he did so happily. While he is able to give Icarus more than a surface level reading of his character, this guessing game of *why* he might be happy to fly too close to the sun in Hozier's rendition for example, still enacts upon the trope Auden and Williams molded of Icarus as the defenseless dead.

Conclusion

Modernist poetry and its creators center their characters on the modernist theory of individualism. Their focus on individuality, a character's desires, relationships, motives, and emotional schema morph static, one sided characters into dynamic tropes that have been influential building blocks for contemporary literature. Hence, it is significant that mortals of Greek Mythology, widely known among scholars and in literature, should appear as the subjects of modernist poetry because how a modernist poet elaborates on a certain character shapes how that character is both a fully thought out individual on their own and a symbol of a larger scope of characters and people in fiction and reality. The ability to empathize with certain character tropes, an ability that roots in the nurturing of individuality, not only allows for reality to house itself in what used to seem strictly mythic, but it allows for contemporary figures to find their place among ancient stories. The ways in which Auden, Williams, and Yeats choose to depict Leda, Helen, Achilles, and Icarus have cast a shadow on contemporary literature and media in a manner that has reconstructed both how we now interpret their characters and how we perceive ourselves within the media in which they are present. The poetry of modernism has elevated mortals of Greek mythology to a status of immortality through their transcendence into literary tropes.

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A Conversation with Mr. Parker
by Madison Connaughton

Ballads, Parker, & the early modern stage of Gender Relationships

Broadside ballads were one of early modern England's most widely consumed and engaging forms of entertainment. The ability of these ballads to illustrate eye-catching images, name catchy tunes to which they could be sung, and discuss issues of widespread interest—all at a cheap cost– promoted their popularity. However, it is highly debated whether these ballads can accurately represent cultural influences in the early modern period, as there is a warranted level of debate when it comes to how much information about the life of a previous culture can be derived from a preserved artifact of that time. The debate is particularly true when looking at a concept as nuanced as gender relationships that can become highly contested in early modern accounts and modern research. With that point in mind, Martin Parker, the ballad genre's most

prolific seventeenth-century writer, illuminates a clearer understanding of how ballads engaged with the public and sought to discuss cultural issues, such as gender relationships as he encapsulates the complexities of voices and social scripts constructed in early modern England. This paper explores the types of social conversations and scripts that Parker proposes as he writes on the issues of gender relationships within early modern England.

It is essential to stipulate that the definition of what constitutes the "early modern" period can become highly disputed; this paper establishes the boundaries of the "early modern" period relevant to Parker to be the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, specifically in England. The established boundaries of the "early modern" period for this paper best ground the environment and circumstances in which Parker wrote and created important dialogue. His writing was originally published in the seventeenth century but repeatedly printed throughout the eighteenth century due to the popularity of the ballad form. For the purposes of this paper, the ballads discussed will be focused on as close to the original prints as possible, which were printed in the seventeenth century. Additionally, to provide a more strict definition of the early modern period, as discussed throughout this paper, it will refer to the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries in Europe. This is supported by definition provided by scholar Ryan Pendergast in his article, "Early Modern: 'By any other name…'?", who uses this term over "Renaissance" or "Golden Age" as they glorify or erase the colonization, genocide, and other human rights travesties that took place during this time.[11] As the term "early modern" will be extensively referenced, it is important that it is clearly established to indicate a period of time before current historical events or the industrial period but also known to be more recent than the classical or ancient eras.[12]

To best consider the significance of Parker's contributions to ballad writing in the seventeenth century and within modern research, it is important to address his history as a writer and someone who existed during the early modern period. Parker was known for being prolific in his writing and for his ability to not write about just one side of a cultural issue but various perspectives. It is most unfortunate that, compared to other historical figures with as much influence, Parker is wildly underrepresented in research of the early modern period. However, the fact that so much of his work survives in the form of contemporary prints and later editions made after his death, given the general ephemerality or disposability of broadside ballads, stands as proof of Parker's popularity and likely influence. Traditionally, a single writer's work within popular culture can provide, at best, a small understanding of a limited perspective of a subject within their contemporary culture. However, Parker is unique in his ability to write casually about several perspectives on the same issue, creating an archive of recurring conversations within early modern English popular culture, all by a single author. Drawing from a larger sample of Parker's ballads allows for a proper acknowledgment of Parker's versatility in writing, considering how he was able to create extensive discourse on gender relationships within his ballads, igniting conversation from various perspectives.

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[12] Prendergast, Ryan. 76.

When also looking to provide research within the scope of gender relations and gender theory within a historical context, a standard must be defined by which the paper seeks to measure its ability to discuss and reflect ideas put forth by the early modern period. This paper finds its ability to assume Parker's ability to make commentary on the roles of men and women through an article published by Amanda Flather, who speaks on the categorization of roles and how they were divided in early modern England.[13] While it is a part of the early modern canon in modern research to understand a clear influence and adherence to a patriarchal society and the expectation of women as caretakers of the home and men as caretakers of the family, I found it essential to create some clear expectations that will later be supported and reflected in Parker's ballads. Flather makes clear that while there is an adherence to a patriarchal setup, it is not the idea of men's autonomy and agency that overarches, creating a strict sense of victimhood within women.[14] She explains that it is a much more complicated and fluid narrative in which women are provided some agency, but that this should also not be mistaken for complete independence or even comparable to modern ideas of autonomy within a relationship.[15] By demonstrating how Parker uses men's and women's voices in his ballads, I demonstrate Flather's point about the complicated and fluid nature of gender relations in the early modern period. It is a complicated task to sort through the seeming randomness of ballads written on different subjects and particular issues within gender relationships. However, these ideas can become tied together as they navigate an expectation of how different aspects of gender relationships functioned for both an early modern canon of community on the subject and a modern audience through a historical perspective.

Additionally, I find it necessary to establish the historical context in which Parker wrote, as he did lead a poorly recorded but intriguing life nonetheless. Unfortunately, there is very little record of Parker's personal life as an early modern figure. For the most part, Parker's ballads are the largest proof of his existence and contributions to early modern English society, which is not to diminish the considerable size of his anthology. However, there is one article, from 1919, by Hyder Rollins, who went through seventeenth-century documents and accounts, now lost, that can provide a modern audience with a small insight into Parker's life.[16] He was believed to be born around 1600 and was not traditionally educated. However, it appears he absorbed much from his literary exposure to the extent that he was able to connect to classical literature and more scholarly ideas that developed in the period.[17] Parker is first recorded as publishing ballads in 1624-1625 and was often credited as being the author of works either by his full name, "Martin Parker," or by his initials, "M.P." There is some evidence that he experimented in poetry other than ballads, as well as in pamphlet writing. However, the resulting publications from such

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[16] Rollins, Hyder E. "Martin Parker, Ballad-Monger." Modern Philology 16, no. 9 (1919). http://www.jstor.org/stable/432894.

[17] Rollins, H.E. 449.

experimentations were not as well received as his ballads. He was praised for his flexibility and meter choice in ballad writing. However, he was criticized as being "merely the common run of mediocrity…" when considering his poetic works such as *The Nightingale*.[18] Parker was also believed to be involved in the trade of alehouses, to the extent of actually running an alehouse in London as his works reflected a familiarity with the alehouse occupation and laws surrounding the trade of running one.[19] He generated a large number of ballads from 1625 until 1640 and rose in popularity with the sheer volume of his work; indeed, he is credited with having the most extensive surviving collection of ballads penned by a single author.[20] However, Parker's ballads from 1643-1655 are rare and were most likely either destroyed or not formally published and disseminated since all writing, especially popular writing such as broadside ballads, became restricted by parliament.

Parker's power as a ballad writer was seen as a threat to the stability of the British monarchy during the English Civil War, alongside several of his contemporaries: John Taylor, Samuel Sheppard, John Cleveland, and John Hakluyt. There was a fear by authorities that disseminated print could cause insurrection and thus a felt need to control and regulate the content of what was printed as political propaganda.[21] As restrictions grew in the House of Commons to regulate ballad writing, many writers turned to writing news pamphlets to continue writing on popular culture but escape censorship laws. Parker was among the several writers and began writing more pamphlets from a royalist perspective. His pamphlets never garnered the same attention and popularity as his ballads, but many audiences respected them. However, censorship grew in London, and several of Parker's associates were arrested. While there are no formal records of Parker being jailed, several accounts suggest that he was imprisoned during a large arrest of royalist pamphleteers in 1648, once the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell came into power. Parker was believed to have died in prison between 1653 and 1656 as those believed to be imprisoned with him or know of his imprisonment remarked, "nothing is known of Martin Parker after this date, and he may have died in prison."[22] Despite his spurt of royalist pamphlets, Parker covered many topics within his ballads during his life. His ability to not become too attached to specific political conversations and topics won him a larger audience. While Parker faced several critiques and challenges within his career, as well as the destruction of his work and loss of personal recorded narrative, his ambiguity, and versatility in ballad writing reflected access to more diverse conversation to be conceptualized and variegated audiences within the genre of ballad writing.

Parker has over 65 recorded and preserved ballad titles that cover various genres; within these categories, Parker has a notable focus on gender relations and the complexities of a marriage that can reflect the power of his desire to engage in conversation with his audiences and among his characters. He speaks about the idea of gender from several perspectives and targets a

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[18] Rollins, H.E. 453.
[19] Rollins, H.E. 462.
[20] Rollins, H.E. 455.
[21] Rollins, H.E. 465.
[22] Rollins, H.E. 468.

range of audiences: specifically, young or married men, maids, wives, widows, spinsters, and shrews. In the context of the ballads discussed, the relationship between men and women is typically veiled under the pretense of romantic or sexually interested relationships. However, men can be removed from the title of marriage as young men, while women are almost exclusively identified by their marital status as one of many kinds: maids, wives, widows, spinsters, or shrews. While the narrative structures and roles of women and men can be thus defined strictly, Parker created flexibility in offering opposing perspectives; this allows for social conversations to be set up from varying perspectives. These ballads are broken down into categories and conversations as they are structured through women's voices, men's voices, and conversing narratives that either situate each other across several titles or require two characters to discuss topics within gender relations within the same tune. This paper will use fourteen ballad titles written by Parker that fall within the scope of gender relationships and marriage in early modern England to analyze how those conversations engage with particular audiences or characters to engage with social scripts surrounding the complexities of early modern gender relationships.

Engaging Women's Issues & the Complexities of Social Scripts in Parker's Ballads

When thinking about social scripts and the expectations within a particular community, Parker set forth multiple complex conversations by using ballads written from the perspective of women's lives or using issues concerning women in relationships and asking audiences to engage with his work. His ballads concerning this topic often played with themes of trickery by women, abuse of women, and lessons from one woman, typically married, to be heeded by a larger audience. Bringing into light the conversations he sought to ignite within his ballads from the perspective of and for the audience of women, this section will examine the ballads he wrote to discuss these gendered social scripts that illuminate and broaden an understanding of women's issues and roles within early modern England and the audiences he was trying to reach.

In the ballad "A Hee-Divell,"[23] we first encounter using the story of a woman whose husband is so horrible she compares him to the devil. Parker uses this ballad to open a conversation up on the struggles of women within marriages where they do not feel their needs met or respected. It is written from a first-person perspective, and the woman first describes that she was foolish for marrying for love. She says that while she hated being single, she should have chosen her husband more wisely. She lists her husband's behavior as "basely" (an early modern word often meaning wretched or dishonorable) and repeatedly refers to him as a "knave" (meaning lowly or of the nature of a bastard). By the sixth verse, the woman starts describing the abuse he inflicts on her, stating, "Yet all the thankes I have therefore, / is nought unlesse 't be a beating."[24] insinuating that unless she is constantly assuring and appeasing her husband, he will beat her. The abuse becomes more intense as the ballad progresses, and in the eighth verse, she sings, "And if the meat doe not him content, /

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[23] Magdalene College - Pepys, 1.398, 1.399, Pepys Ballads 1.398-399, EBBA 20186.
[24] EBBA 20186

heele breake my head with the platter."[25] which continues the narrative that her husband has become an all-powerful being in her life, controlling her with violence. In the fourteenth verse, the woman ends her story with a plea to young maidens to consider her story and for married wives with better husbands to pity her. In telling this horrific story of abuse, Parker, as the writer, concludes this ballad by explicitly calling out for his audiences to purchase this song. With the line, "All you Maidens faire, / that have a mind to wed, / Take heed and be aware, / lest you like me be sped."[26] Parker invites any maiden to purchase and engage with this content by arguing that this is an important warning to be considered. Parker then turns to broaden his audience with the plea, "And you good wives, / that heare my wofull Ditty, / If you ere bought Ballad in your lives, / buy this, for very pitty."[27] as the final line. He directly asks other married women to be interested in what he has to say with the encouragement to take pity on the woman in his ballad. Through "A Hee-Divell," Parker ignites a conversation within gender relationships that touches on themes of abuse to be used as warnings and entertainment that he encourages women to reflect on in their own lives as he makes the explicit invitation for multiple audiences to actively engage with this ballad.

A ballad that similarly generates conversation and engages with its audience to discuss themes of abuse and womanly advice in early modern marriages is "A Penny-worth of Good Counsell,"[28] which is written from the perspective of a woman who sings outs to her peers, offering to tell her story in hopes that they consider their own marriages through the lens of her misfortune. It begins with an extension in the title to say, "To Widdowes, and to Maides, this Counsell I send free; And let them looke before they leape, or, that they married bee."[29] The wife immediately makes clear who she is trying to speak with, calling the attention of the widows and maids who may hear this tune on the street from buskers and should be drawn in by her story. The words "this Counsell I send free…"[30] is not a statement on the cost of her advice, as that comes from the title "A Penny-worth of Good Counsell" as ballads were typically sold cheaply for only a penny or two. Those words are actually meant to reflect the idea that this woman has held these thoughts for quite some time and that she no longer can keep them to herself and has to set them free to be heard and heeded by her peers.

The ballad begins with the singer, presumably written as Parker relaying the voice of this woman's story, as they come upon the wife singing loudly in the street, distressed. Parker describes this woman as coming undone with "her hands sate wringing; / shee wept apace, / and cryd, alas; / My Husband hath no fore-cast in him."[31] He uses the imagery of the wife wringing her hands and crying loudly to amplify the anguish of her words, a wife whose husband has no direction in life and can not meet her needs. Parker then turns the voice of the ballad to the woman as she reflects on her maidenhood, "Quoth she, when as I was a Mayden, / I had store of

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[25] EBBA 20186
[26] EBBA 20186
[27] EBBA 20186
[28] British Library - Roxburghe, 1.312, 1.313, C.20.f.7.312-313, EBBA 30215.
[29] EBBA 30215
[30] EBBA 30215
[31] EBBA 30215

Suters brave…"[32] to allow her story to be understood by her audience more personally. Now that the audience hears the story from her perspective rather than recounting events, she shares that her husband was charming when she met him but believes she should have waited longer to know his character. The ballad creates a greater intimacy with the audience with the line, "I tell you friends now seriously, / my Husband he doth nought but chide…."[33] By calling the audience the wife's friends, it changes the environment of someone listening to a ballad and rather a widow, maid, or fellow wife listening to the story of a poor wife as she shares her troubles in community. Further, she creates this repetition of a wife downtrodden as each verse ends with the lament, "My Husband hath no fore-cast in him."[34] in a way that almost reminds her of her misery and more assertive communication to the audience of her situation.

As each verse adds to the growing evidence that her husband is not of good character, it becomes overwhelming the way her husband limits her within their home by not allowing her to leave and restricting her finances even though she brought a substantial dowry and this last line in each verse then acts as a breath to summarize his character in a way that her listeners, or friends as she refers to them, can agree with her. In the last two verses, she then switches from sharing her story and heeding her listeners to reflecting on how she can help her situation and asking for advice from her audience. In the second to last verse, she shares that if she is kind to her husband, "With sweet embraces I will cling him; / Ile speake him faire to have more care…."[35] This may give him more fore-cast or care in their relationship. While sharing this idea with her audience, it acts two-fold. She asks her audience if they believe these actions will help her situation, but it can also be seen as a question she asks herself. Through the doubt of her husband's ability to heal and be kinder to her, she considers the thought to herself of her relationship to the functions of their marriage. This question is then furthered in the last verse as she asks, "But if I see hee will not mend, / come tell me Widdow, Maid, or Wife; / What shall I doe in this same woe?"[36] So if these sweet embraces and fair words do not fix him, the wife asks what advice the local widows, maids, and wives have. For most of this ballad, the wife offers her story and advice on choosing a husband carefully. Her voice is meant to be heard as it is passed from the singer to her own in the second verse. However, she ends this ballad by inviting her audience in, leaving them with a question to generate conversation, what would you do in this situation?

"A Penny-worth of good Counsell" creates conversation in many different ways. It sought to create intimacy by describing the listeners as the wife's friends, creating closeness with the audience, which is then deepened throughout the narrative by a repeated phrase grounding the audience in knowing the wife's situation and closes by leaving the audience with an open-ended question. This question could then be answered by the wife by her audience, but also open a broader conversation within the community as its tale is shared by the wives, widows, and

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[32] EBBA 30215
[33] EBBA 30215
[34] EBBA 30215
[35] EBBA 30215
[36] EBBA 30215

maids who hear this ballad and discuss with their peers what they would do in the wife's situation. All of this plays into Parker's intentions with his ballads, creating conversation both within his ballads and externally within an audience or community.

In Parker's repository of ballads that discussed women's issues within gender relationships was "The wooing Maid,"[37] which is written from the perspective of a 21-year-old woman who deals with the struggles of being an unmarried woman within her community and engages her audience by hoping to be illuminated as to what makes her so undesirable. The woman compares herself repeatedly to the women around her and cites, "For every one else / can have Suters great plenty, / Most marry at fourteene…"[38] while she must be twenty-one and unwed. As the ballad progresses, she compares herself to women she increasingly thinks should not have been able to get married before her. At the peak of her comparisons, she mentions a woman named "Sisly," who is disabled in some capacity and has still managed to be married off by the time she was nineteen.[39] Following each verse is a chorus that speaks to the audience, "Come gentle, come simple, / come foolish, come witty, / O if you lack a maid / take me for pitty."[40] The woman repeatedly invites any man who hears this tune to come wed her. She begs for pity and promises that she is not picky in choosing a husband, for she only needs one suitor to be satisfied, and that suitor can even be less desirable himself, both simple-minded and foolish. By the end of the ballad, the woman's desperation becomes explicitly clear with the line, "For I needs must have one, / be he good or evill:"[41] meaning that she is content with even having an evil and potentially abusive husband rather than continue being single. Even the last chorus escalates in dramatic flair as the last line is changed from the standard "O if you lack a maid / take me for pitty." to "O let me not die a maid, / take me for pitty."[42] continuing the woman's descent into distressed attempts at asking a man to marry her. Parker engages several audiences of both married and unmarried individuals with this ballad as he writes from the perspective of a young woman seeking a husband and, in doing so, aims to engage a diverse audience to best address the topic of desirable qualities of a wife within the scope of early modern expectations of gender relationships.

The ballads within this section sought to engage in several conversations surrounding women's narratives or voices within early modern gender relationships, including topics of abuse, advice, and issues that can arise within marriages. In speaking on these topics, Parker sought to engage particular audiences, specifically maids, married women, and unmarried men, with the issues he set forth by asking his audience for advice or how they would address a situation or by allowing a narrator to provide guidance on the issue. Parker demonstrates through these ballads his desire to elicit particular environments to discuss gender relationships by

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[37] British Library - Roxburghe, 1.452, 1.453, C.20.f.7.452-453, EBBA 30304
[38] EBBA 30304
[39] EBBA 30304
[40] EBBA 30304
[41] EBBA 30304
[42] EBBA 30304

discussing particular gendered issues and audiences in relation to women's roles surrounding marriage, both explicitly and implicitly.

Engaging Men's Issues, Advice, & Social Scripts set forth in Parker's Ballads

Like a Jack-of-All-Trades, the ballads Parker writes in this next section are from the perspective of or written for the audience of men. They include themes of men's virtues to be relayed to women, and how to manage women and advice shared from one man to another. Parker's ballads will continue to demonstrate discourse through many themes within gender relationships– consequently expanding on ideas within social scripts he set forth that allow for the expectations and roles that men play within early modern England, creating a continuously complex demonstration of early modern gender culture within his ballads and his audiences.

A ballad that employs a development of conversation on male issues within early modern perspectives in gender relationships is "The Marryed Mans Lesson,"[43] which engages its audience by using a married man's voice to provide advice and warning about the danger of jealousy within a relationship. With each verse, he acknowledges a different problem or issue that can come up between a man and his wife, most of these issues relating to how a wife can disrespect her husband. For example, one verse considers the ways a wife can be horrible and how despite her horribleness, to heed the advice of this man would be to exercise patience in the line, "A wife at the worst (as I told you before) / a drunkard, a swearer, a scold, theefe, or whore, / By gentle perswasions, reclaimed may bee…"[44] He encourages his audience that jealousy will only make a situation worse, but with virtues like patience, a better outcome is more likely. This idea is driven further throughout the entire ballad as the chorus repeatedly recites a variation of the two lines, "Be not thou jealous I prethee deere Lad, / for jelousie makes many good women bad."[45] These lines emphasize that the narrator is attempting to reach out to his audience with a plea to limit jealousy in marriages, as it will lead to nothing good. At the end of the ballad, in a further attempt to fetter jealousy, the man begins a verse by calling out to both married men and women. In this verse, the narrator says, "Now lastly to both men and women I speake… / All fighting and scratching, and scolding shall cease, / where jelousies harbord there can bee no peace."[46] Parker uses the narrator's last verse to broaden his audience, hoping to engage a larger and more diverse audience as he asks his audience to heed the advice he gives and take a moment of reflection to examine how they see themselves in relation to expectations of their gender within marriage in the early modern period. Looking at the entire ballad, Parker continuously draws in his audiences with open-ended questions and provides advice that his audience can then further engage with outside the constraints of the ballad by setting up a constructive format of dialogue through his ballad writing.

While Parker, when seeking to include male voices and issues within his ballads, wrote ostensibly about advice that can be shared by men, commenting on the virtues and expectations

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[43] British Library - Roxburghe, 1.510, 1.511, C.20.f.7.510-511, EBBA 30343.
[44] EBBA 30343
[45] EBBA 30343
[46] EBBA 30343

of women in early modern society, this next ballad creates a narrative for an audience to consider in their own conversations through the perspective of men's roles dependant on their age and relationship to other men within their communities. "The father hath beguil'd the sonne."[47] is a ballad that tells the tale of a father who misguides his son on purpose to dissuade the young man from his father's female affections. The story begins with a narrator, presumably the person who sings the ballad, sharing the context of the story they are about to tell. They hint towards a ballad that will cover themes of trickery, family dynamics, and gender roles, as well as how the ballad will contain a story that most will probably not have seen in their own life with the line, "Nor I thinke any of you, / since wooing and wedding begun, / That ith way of marriage, / Or such kinde of carriage…."[48] Within the first verse, Parker uses his narrator to encapsulate an audience, drawing them in with a story of gossip that they will be intrigued to know. The voice then turns to the father of a son as he shares some advice. With the words, "I purpose to sing: / and tis of a certaine truth, / A widower old / Well stored with gold…"[49] the father encourages his young adult son to consider marrying a widow. He cites that widows usually come with their late husband's money, so he should consider this an option to raise his status when choosing a wife. Even though the first few verses end with the line "...the father beguil'd his owne sonne."[50] it is unclear where trickery will take place, as so far in the story, he seems like a caring father who seeks to counsel his son on marriage. Especially when the ballad becomes so critical as to call the father an "old fox,"[51] which seems unnecessary as far into the ballad; as the ballad continues, the voice is then passed to the son, who shares his own opinion on the matter and how he has fallen in love, "The sonne told his father, / How that he had rather: / to have in the same his consent. / So to have a view / Of his Lover true…."[52] This lover turns out to be a beautiful young woman, and the son begs his father to consider his affection for the young maid. At this point, the beguiling reveals that the father also falls in love with the woman, and his advice towards his son is not meant as sage advice but rather an attempt to keep his son away from her. This trickery and selfish character is first revealed to the audience, who then are subjected to watching the son be unknowingly manipulated by his father.

The voice of the ballad changes once more in the next section, moving to a third-person point of view as the conversations between the young maid and father occur, and the audience is meant to watch the unfolding of events and use them as a reflection for their own conduct in their relationships. Further, the ballad encourages the audience to think poorly of the father as he is described as "briske as a body louse."[53] and "such an old knave"[54] (an early modern word for bastard or outcast). As the ballad continues, the story unfolds in a rather violent manner. The father successfully swindles the maid from his son and marries her for himself, causing the son

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[47] Magdalene College - Pepys, 1.362, 1.363, Pepys Ballads 1.362-363, EBBA 20170.

[48] EBBA 20170

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[51] EBBA 20170

[52] EBBA 20170

[53] EBBA 20170

[54] EBBA 20170

to become incredibly heartbroken and take his own life by stabbing himself in the heart. After the son has passed, the father realizes the weight of his actions and goes mad, running through the streets crying out for his son. In this verse, we see that the father has failed his son, not only in action but through the use of language to describe his character, "The unnaturall dad, / Ran presently mad…."[55] The father is described as having failed his duties as a parent to guide and counsel his child, making him "unnaturall" in character. The now young wife grows increasingly embarrassed at the events unfolding and throws herself down a well. The ballad closes with two dead characters and one who runs from town to town crying out about his son. The narrator takes the story back over with the last verse as they leave the audience with the haunting message about the consequences of older generations trying to fool those they are meant to guide. They directly invite the audience to take warning in the line, "Let every god father, / A warning here gather…"[56] implying that to be a good father, one must listen and heed the consequences of this ballad. Parker creates an ongoing conversation around the line, "For both were to blame, / And both suffer'd shame…"[57] asking the audience to consider the advice and intentions of men in the community, both those who seek counsel and those who share. In this way, Parker used the power of an intriguing narrative to capture the audience of men from many generations to leave them with the conversation about how they choose to support one another, particularly regarding marriage and choosing wives.

A ballad that Parker wrote addressing and contributing to conversations surrounding issues in early modern expectations of marriage from the male perspective that engages with the practice of young men marrying widows for financial support and benefit is "A Proverbe old, yet nere forgot, Tis good to strike while the Irons hott."[58] This ballad is written from the perspective of a man who seeks to counsel unmarried men to consider the benefits of marrying wealthy widows. The man begins by saying that he has observed an increasing number of rich widows who are looking for husbands and that he believes his unmarried peers should seize the opportunity with the line, "Now is the Wooing time or never, / Widowes now will love Young-men…"[59] As the ballad continues he acknowledges the allure of wanting to marry young maids as there is a better opportunity for love connections. However, he deters men from this option as he sings, "Maydens loves are coy and fickle, / they too much their equalls looke…"[60] explaining that while they may look like an appealing path to follow, it does not reap the most benefits. To further his argument for widows, he goes on to say, "If a poore Young-man be matched / with a Widdow stord with gold, / And thereby be much inritched, / though hes young and she is old…"[61] In this verse, he argues that while a widow may not be what a man desires in a wife as she may not be as young or pretty, it is only for a short while as she is old and will die. He will then be free to marry a young maid with the new money he inherits from the widow and

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[55] EBBA 20170

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[57] EBBA 20170

[58] Magdalene College - Pepys, 1.386, 1.387, Pepys Ballads 1.386-387, EBBA 20179.

[59] EBBA 20179

[60] EBBA 20179

[61] EBBA 20179

her late husband. To continuously drive home this message, each verse ends with a one-line chorus from the title of the ballad that encourages men, "To strike the Iron while tis hott."[62] meaning that these men are presented with an opportunity that has not been traditionally considered in society and should be used to absolute advantage. In this ballad, Parker continues to discuss themes of men speaking about marriage and managing women while also seeking to engage an audience to consider the cultural values of men looking for wives during this time by setting forth an expectation of conversations as structured by his ballads.

Within the ballads that center men's voices and perspectives and their relation to gender relationship issues, Parker ignites conversation through his versatility in employing different themes and structuring various social scripts that his audience can engage with. In these ballads, Parker reaches the audience of married men and women, unmarried men seeking wives, and the complex relationship between father, son, and a woman. He also discusses resolving problems within marriages and the interests, the intricacies of finding a wife as an unmarried man in early modern England, the theme of trickery between father and son, and the consequences of greediness and lust from the male perspective. Parker's ballads scaffold the expectations of gender-related conversations as they bring attention to the narratives that people may encounter with similar problems and how they may avoid or resolve these issues and invite his audiences to question their experiences or engage with his material.

A Conversation Among Characters; How Gender Issues are Engaged with Multiple Voices

So far, Parker's ability to generate conversation on gender relationships has been demonstrated through his ability to engage with audiences from a single-point perspective, this next section will explore Parker's ability to engage audiences and discuss issues in gender relationships across multiple characters with a single ballad or create a single narrative across several titled ballads. The following ballads are thus divided into two categories of conversation: the first are ballads that juxtapose topics and perspectives quite literally across different tunes that return to a central theme within gender relations and the second is a ballad centered around a conversation between two characters, a husband and wife, within a single tune. Parker's desire to deeply discuss gender relationships is exemplified in the next ballads as demonstrated in their respective categories using multiple voices or ballads to disseminate early modern issues within marriages.

An example of a set of ballads that creates a conversation across several publications in order to disseminate themes within the complexities of a marriage are the titles "Keep a good tongue in your head"[63] and "Hold your hands honest men."[64] "Keep a good tongue in your head" is written in the first-person point of view of a husband who loves his wife and believes her to be a good and virtuous person, but her fault is that she is a gossip who can not control her tongue. This ballad was written first in the conversation between the two as the tune listed for this ballad

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[62] EBBA 20179
[63] British Library - Roxburghe, 1.512, 1.513, C.20.f.7.512-513, EBBA 30344.
[64] British Library - Roxburghe, 1.514, 1.515, C.20.f.7.514-515, EBBA 30345.

is "the Milkmaids,"[65] while the tune for "Hold your hands honest men" is cited as "Keep a good tongue in your head."[66] This example is also part of the argument that these ballads are meant to respond to each other. They are set on the same tune to create a conversation, even on a musical level. "Hold your hands honest men" is a ballad written from the perspective of a wife who knows that her husband loves her but finds that in times of anger or conflict, he lacks self-control and patience and turns towards violence to deal with her. These ballads are centered around someone, either the wife or husband, having a problem with their partner's character. While they are taken from opposing views of the other gender, they create conversation by following the exact ballad positioning and rhythmic structure. In both ballads, the tunes primarily comprise the narrator listing their partner's accomplishments in their physical fitness, social skills, and hobbies. They directly answer one another through one verse and respond to each other line for line through rhyming couplets. In "Keep a good tongue in your head," the line, "Her body which I have oft / embraced so smooth and soft…"[67] is introduced to discuss the wife's physical beauty. This verse can then be mirrored in "Hold your hands honest men," through the lines, "His body is straight and tall, / proportioned well withall…"[68] that starts the discussion of the husband's appearance. The direct parallel between the lines strengthens this conversation, "Proportioned aright, / tis straight as any shaft, / Her leg is compleat…"[69] and "In every respect, / Hees void of defect, / his legs are straight as wands…" These verses make a point to discuss the straightness of their partner's legs as grounding points connecting the ballads through early modern expectations of beauty. Additionally, these ballads use a repeating chorus line to drive the central theme home, the flaw their partner has. In both cases, this line is just a variation on the title, "keep a good tongue in your head" and "hold your hands honest men," which would be sung in the same way as these ballads are written under the same tune, creating a deeper connection and evidence of a conversation between the ballads. The complexities that men and women within marriage during the early modern period are demonstrated through Parker's ballads "keep a good tongue in your head" and "hold your hands honest men," and with these ballads, one can disseminate the desire Parker had to engage audiences by using multiple ballads and voices to generate that conversation.

When looking at how conversation about early modern gender relationships can evolve and take on multiple perspectives and seek to expand its audience, the ballads "Well met Neighbor"[70] and "Have among you good Women"[71] have to be considered for their ability to demonstrate the complexity on conversation within ballad positioning and the constructs of conversation that Parker set forth. These titles create an interestingly complex conversation that can be understood from multiple perspectives. The ballad "Well met Neighbor" is written as a conversation between two women, Nell and Sisse, as they describe the horrible way that they see

[65] EBBA 30344
[66] EBBA 30345
[67] EBBA 30344
[68] EBBA 30345
[69] EBBA 30344
[70] University of Glasgow Library - Euing, Euing Ballads 383, EBBA 32002
[71] British Library - Roxburghe, British Library - Roxburghe, EBBA 30093

men treating wives in their community, and each verse ends with the agreement that these men should be hanged for their violence. In opposition, the ballad "Have among you good Women" is a conversation between two men, William Starket and Robin Hobs, who discuss their perspective that the women in their community are taking advantage of their husbands. They come up with different punishments they believe the women deserve. What first connects these ballads is their content; they mirror each other in the storyline as two individuals who pass each other out in public and strike up a conversation, observing their community. Further, within the second verse, these ballads copy one another in verse. In "Well met Neighbor," Nell describes a violent husband who threatens violence against his wife with the couplet, "Know you not Laurence the Miller, / O he is as good as ere twangd, / His wife sayes he threatens to kill her, / O such a Rogue would be hangd."[72] A similar verse is also used in "Have among you good Women" as Robin shares with William a story of a wife who steals from her husband in the lines, "What thinke you of Jone the Spinner, / her husbands pocket she pickt, / And she grudges her servants their dinner / oh such a Queane would be kickt."[73] These verses employ rhyming couplets to create a recognizable pattern between the two ballads. The first line is used to introduce the offender, the next two describe the infractions of the person, and the last line creates a punishment for the person. While it is clear that these ballads share conversation, it is difficult to ascertain which ballad was written first. The complex relationship between these ballads may result from one ballad being written in response to an original ballad and that original ballad being edited to create more conversation.

Unfortunately, there are no surviving original copies of these ballads, so it is difficult to know the progression of this conversation exactly. Nevertheless, evidence for each ballad being the first adds to the argument that an irrefutable conversation occurs between the two ballads. These ballads are written to different tunes; however, "Have among you good Women" is written to the tune of a ballad titled "O such a Rogue," and while "Well met Neighbor" is written to the tune of "Ragged and Torne" each verse in this ballad ends with a verse saying "O such a rogue should be hanged."[74] This line creates a double meaning within the ballad, as it can refer to the abusive husband discussed in the verse and be used as a line to call out "Have among you good Women" written to the tune of "O such a Rogue." This idea would indicate that "Have among you good Women" was written first. Therefore, "Well met Neighbor" would be written as a response arguing that abusive treatment of a wife is always uncalled for, which opposes the initial argument. Oppositionally, the ballad "Well met Neighbor" is sung primarily from the perspective of Nell sharing with her neighbor, Sisse, all the abuse she knows about throughout the community. This idea is made even more evident as "Have among you good Women" mentions Nell at the end of the ballad. In "Have among you good Women," Nell is described as being unable to part from her friends and that she should be carted for her indecencies in the

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[73] EBBA 30093
[74] EBBA 32002

lines, "She lodges with mouldy fac[]t Nell, / and I doubt they will never be parted, / Till the one get the lash in Bridewell, / and the other from Newgate be carted."[75]

As previously mentioned, it is difficult to know which ballad came first definitively; however, one line in "Have among you good Women" suggests that it was written first, "Well met Neighbor" responded, and "Have among you good Women" was edited and rereleased with an added verse. The line in "Have among you good Women" says, "But stay neighbour, / harke you one word, / which I had forgotten before…."[76] This line suggests that the ballad may have ended initially with the verse before, but after the response that Parker wrote with "Well met Neighbor," he went back and rewrote the original ballad to include the last verse, which directly calls out Nell. Its phrasing suggests that the speaker had an original statement but calls back his audience to include one last word. This is a metaphor for Parker writing an original ballad and inviting the audience back once more to include more thought. A conversation was created in any case or understanding of these two ballads. Parker employs verse structure and almost a call-and-response conversation between these two ballads that expands on what can be defined as conversation, as the ballads are drawn into the concept on a two-fold, through cultural expectations and social scripts that the content of the ballads address and setting forth a literal format of conversation as these ballads respond to one another.

These several sets of ballads engage their audiences and discuss subjects within gender relationships in literal conversation through ballad positioning and spreading discourse in patterns of two (and in the case of "Well Met Neighbor" and "Have Among You Good Women" possibly three) ballads over one narrative. Furthermore, Parker extends his audience by using the narratives of troubling characteristics and marriages to be seen as warnings to those of early modern England who are not yet married but looking for partners. These ballads demonstrate how Parker spread his writing of gender relations and discussions of early modern marriage from multiple perspectives in order to establish conversation among characters, issues, and audiences.

The next section of ballads demonstrates how Parker was able to create a conversation that employed the use of multiple complex perspectives that did not have to stretch across multiple ballad titles to engage the audience and characters within the text. In speaking to a larger audience, Parker includes narratives of both men's and women's experiences and their respective roles in a relationship. The different gender perspectives are enacted by exchanging roles—to ill ends– in the ballad titled "The Woman to the PLOW; And the Man to the HEN-ROOST"[77] The ballad begins with an argument between the husband and wife, in which the husband critiques his wife's abilities as a housewife. The wife challenges her husband, and they agree to exchange household chores for a day to experience the other's role in the marriage. By the fifth verse, all has gone awry, and the husband encounters an immense failure and causes harm to his child in the line, "Another time he went to rock / The Cradle, and threw the Child o th floor, / And brok his Nose, and hurt it sore."[78] While both the husband and child suffer injury

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to pride and face in the home, the wife meets a similar catastrophe outside, in the field. While trying to fill her husband's role, the wife makes several mistakes leading to the consequence, "She overthrew it, nay and worse, / She broke the Cart, and kild a Horse…"[79] After both the husband and wife face frustration and defeat they return to the home at the end of the day and discuss their mishaps. Each partner is given a verse to speak to the audience by the end of the ballad. The wife uses her lines to encourage women to enjoy their marriage roles. The husband calls out to other men to learn a lesson from his experience and appreciate the respective roles within early modern English marriages. Ultimately, this ballad does not attempt to advance one side of the argument or the power of one gender above the other. Instead, like so many of Parker's broadside ballads, it continues to contribute multiple perspectives on the complexity of early modern English culture surrounding the topic of gender relationships. While Parker can create a conversation between a ballad and its audience, Parker also demonstrates that he can create a dialogue between ballads and characters that further topics within the theme of gender relations.

When thinking about social scripts and how conversation can be used as an example of social influences of etiquette, Parker's "Man's Felicity and Misery" has to be discussed for its ability to engage with both men's and women's perspectives in the complexities and expectations within an early modern marriage. While looking at conversations that engage with audiences in this context, we often discuss dialogue between a man and woman, usually man and wife. However, this ballad offers the conversation between two men and their experiences within a marriage that includes insight into two very different marriages within, presumably, the same age group. The ballad takes on the conversation of two cousins in London, Edmund and David, who are married and discuss their wives' qualities. Edmund is seemingly a newlywed, while David has been married for some time; this difference in time married will alter one's perspective on the joys of marriage throughout the ballad. Edmund begins the ballad by greeting his cousin and telling him of his new wife, acknowledging that he is unique, but believes that he has the best wife a man could have. David responds with a congratulatory echo of Edmund's news and laments troubles with his wife. The two then take turns making twin verses that will lead to Edmund picking the topic and often complimenting his wife, to which David then returns with a response of how his wife fails in the ways Edmund's wife succeeds.

One of the more obvious examples of this back-and-forth comparison of Edmund's and David's wives in found in the leading lines of two verses. Edmund sings the first one in the couplet, "My Wife is affable and meeke, / To please my fancy shee doth seeke…"[80] in which he describes his wife's tender nature and though she portrays a modest beauty if she does desire to accentuate her looks it is to please her husband. Edmund also sees his wife as an overall pleasant person who is easy to talk to and desired company within his community. This is then immediately juxtaposed by David, who cries out, "My wife is obstinate and froward, / Shee's sullen, peevish and untoward…"[81] describing his wife as incredibly difficult in nature. David

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feels his wife is unpleasant company as she will be critical in conversation. While Edmund's wife is described as "meek," giving the appeal of someone who is even-tempered, David's wife is seen as "peevish" and "obstinant," implying that she may be easily angered and stubborn, making her difficult company and maybe not as well-liked by her peers. The capabilities of their wives to be seen as good or bad within their roles can then be expanded upon across several verses towards the end of the ballad.

The debate of the competency of their wives is actually started by David, who makes the statement that his wife does not trust him with almost the entirety of his verse, "If I upon a woman looke, / My wife will sweare upon a booke, / That she is certainly my whore, / Though I nere saw the woman before. / Shee'l claw her eyes out if she can…"[82] Through this verse, we can see this continued aggressive nature within David's wife as she is suspicious of her husband's fidelity. At any chance to accuse her husband of cheating, she will attack both David verbally and physically attack the woman if given an opportunity. Edmund then responds to this idea by saying in his verse, "My wife will never follow me, / Goe where I will, at home stayes she, / Though I from Morn till night doe rome, / She smiling bids mee welcome home, / This makes me haste home to my Nan…"[83] Edmund implies the idea that he is free to live his life however he sees fit, and will always be safe to return home to a loving wife, unquestioning of his behavior or how he conducts his business outside the home. Edmund also shares that because his wife is so sweet, he would not dare think of being unfaithful, as her sweet nature makes it desirable to return home. To this, David responds once more to this idea with the verse, "If I unto the Alehouse goe, / To drink a Jug of beere or so, / Though nere so fast I thither hye, / My wife is there as soone as I…"[84] saying that no matter where he goes his wife will follow him. While Edmund lives with the security of knowing his wife will stay home and he has the desire to go to her at the end of the day, David lives in the opposite reality in which he can not escape his wife as she will follow him wherever he goes and has the desire to be away from her constantly.

If the content of each verse was not enough, these verses also end with the chorus line for each of these men reflecting on their respective wives. Edmund, characterized by the love and adoration he has for his wife, is filled with the line or some version of, "Shee is the best Wife that ever had man."[85] Edmund deliberately says that his wife is an example of the best characteristics a wife can have. Further, everything that makes up Edmund's wife is seen as the desirable qualities that make her the best wife a man could have. In opposition, David uses his line to further complain about his opinion of his wife with some version of, "Oh she's the worst wife that ever had man."[86] Like Edmund, David explains that every story and description of his wife's behavior makes up the qualities of being the worst wife a man can have. These characters both use this ballad to set up the expectations of wives they have, praising them for the virtues of Edmund's wife and the pitiful behavior of David's wife. This is further proved by the author's

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character, traditionally just a sung characterization of Parker's internal dialogue, who ends the ballad with a final invitation to the wives who listen to this ballad.

Parker initiates conversation to take place within his audience, directly calling them out, "You wives who have heard this discourse, / Now shew who's better and who is worse…"[87] and asking them to participate in what he has presented as the difference between a good and lousy wife. This quote makes Parker's intentions evident that the ballad was created to set up a conversation, literally, among men and the ways they view their relationships with women in marriages, but also include women, particularly wives, to examine their etiquette within society and consider the social scripts set forth by Parker.

A ballad takes on an interesting conversation of multiple characters trying to engage with a larger audience to address the weight of each role within a marriage as a wife feels disrespected by her husband's assumption that her contributions to their marriage are not as tasking. As the ballad progresses, the husband turns into his wife to create a conversation with her that audience then witnesses. "A merry Dialogue betwixt a married man and his wife concerning the affaires of this carefull life."[88] is a ballad that seeks to discuss a man's perspective on the contributions to the marriage by a man and woman by seventeenth-century standards, with an evident bias of the husband that men contribute more to a marriage. However, this position is argued by his wife, who makes the case for herself and other women within a marriage by interjecting at multiple points to share her own story and the women in her communities struggles within their marriages.

The ballad begins with the husband naming his audience of good wives and starts singing that he acknowledges the troubles and labor women contribute to the functions of family life but that this contribution is far less laborious than what men perform. Stretching from the end of verse one and into the introduction of verse two, the audience is given a clear picture of the husband's argument, "Their labours great and full of paine, / yet for the same they have small gaine. // In that you say cannot be true, / for men doe take more paines then you…"[89] Through these lines, he states that he sympathizes with their roles in a marriage, but compared to the impact the work has on the relationship, he believes men take more pain than women. While the husband does attempt to use this argument to position men as above women in a marital relationship, he does suggest that this comes from a place of defense for his contributions in the lines, "Yet let us doe all what we can, / your tongues will get the upper hand."[90] This verse suggests that he feels at the mercy or, more often, a lack of mercy of women's words. Even as he begs for women to acknowledge his work in the relationship and hold their comments, the following verse is a rebuttal from his wife. She does not try to defend herself with any direct call out but instead begins reciting her daily schedule as proof of her work, refuting the idea proposed that she has time to be idle in a day. The verse begins with the lines, "We women in the morning

[87] EBBA 20182
[88] Magdalene College - Pepys, 1.388, 1.389, Pepys Ballads 1.388-389, EBBA 20180.
[89] EBBA 20180
[90] EBBA 20180

rise, / as soone as day breakes in the skies, / And then to please you with desire…"[91] What is essential to note is that not only does she describe the physical labor she is responsible for of rising and preparing the house, but the emotional responsibility of constantly pleasing her husband. Her argument allows for her physical efforts to be seen, but her case most clearly lies in her emotional work and the weight and toll it takes on her. The husband does not as clearly understand this as he returns to the argument of physical labor with the lines, "Why men doe worke at Plough and Cart, / which soone would break a womans hart…"[92] He continues to push this idea that because his work is more physically laborious, he should be awarded more respect and honor within the relationship. Along with this argument for respect, he repeatedly centers himself on the idea that women should not speak ill of their husbands as most of his verses end with some version of, "In praise of wives speake you no more, / for these were lies you told before."[93] This is not the same as some chorus lines we have seen before, as it is not a repeating line, but a similar argument is made in some capacity every time he speaks. It is important to note his passion for this part of the argument as well as the difference in contribution to the relationship as an interesting dynamic is introduced by the wife in the ballad.

Throughout the ballad, a dynamic is set up in which the husband and wife can mildly agree that men contribute most of the physical labor to maintain the family's financial and household stability. In contrast, the women contribute most of the mental work and smaller tasks that maintain emotional stability and routine chores within the family. While their roles in the family keep this primary setup of men (physical) and women (intellect), this idea is carried on into how conflict is handled within many marital relationships with men responding to conflict with physical violence while women will use communication (often viewed as nagging) in response to conflict. As the wife reveals to her husband, the audience, in a way, makes a more considerable comment on societal manifestations of expectations that men will maintain that physical aspect of their role in the conflict by becoming physically aggressive and violent. In contrast, women will maintain an emotional, intellectual perspective in handling conflict with violent language. She makes this argument towards the end of the ballad, "Will you poore Women thus abuse, / our tongues and hands we need to use. / You say our tongues doe make men fight, / our hands must serve to doe us right."[94] The wife levels with her husband's accusation of being verbally violent by saying in the same way that men instinctually resort to using their hands against their wives; wives naturally use their words to defend themselves when feeling inadequate in their marriage. This argument changes the husband's tone as he begins to understand what his wife is trying to communicate. He immediately changes his previous statements and offers, "Then I to you must give the way, / and yeeld to women in what they say…"[95] He humors his wife and allows her to speak. As the ballad comes to a close, they come together in agreement that even though it is the instinct of men and women in conflict to resort to

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physical or verbal violence, they each take turns in advising the audience to choose wives and husbands who are slow to anger and respectful of each other within a marriage.

The ballad finishes as the husband sets the example and establishes the social script for his audience within his marriage that mutual respect and agreement are best for a successful and happy marriage with the lines, ""Well, come sweet heart, let us agree… / I will love thee as my life, as ever man should love his wife."[96] While the ballad is not as clearly structured as other conversational ballads that Parker writes, it sets up a more organic conversation on the struggles within a marital relationship that an audience may connect with in a more genuine capacity. Parker uses this organic conversation to guide an audience to consider their partners' contributions within a marriage and how to work together to create a content and well-respected relationship. He invites reflection to married audience members and encourages unmarried people to remember this ballad when looking for their future partners. While this ballad created an unconventional form of conversation as the audience was given both the role of engager and viewer throughout, it was still a dialogue Parker felt worth having to create connections within early modern English society on the topic of marriage and gender hierarchies.

As the dynamics of marital relationships have become continuously discussed in several contexts throughout this paper, it is essential also to discuss the contributions of "Robin and Kate: or, A bad husband converted by a good wife, in a dialogue betweene Robin and Kate."[97] to the dynamics of how conversation can cause cultural change even within an individual. This ballad takes on a dynamic not as popularly seen within previously discussed texts as it covers the narrative of a husband's character being reformed by his doting wife. Not often does Parker position women in the space of correcting their husband's behavior without either being punished for speaking out of place or being criticized for their contributions or shortcomings within a relationship; however, this ballad attempts to do just that.

The audience is first introduced to the narrator, who describes a story he heard of a man who was known as the town drunk, how his wife begged her husband to change his ways, and eventually, he gives into his wife's requests out of love. Additionally, the audience is initially shown Kate's request as her chorus is introduced as, "Turne backe agen Robin, / and ga not to drinke."[98] Kate expresses that she wants Robin to turn away from the alehouse and return home to be with her at the end of the day. However, Robin is introduced as a loving husband that can not stay away from the bottle and playfully argues with his wife that he provides as much as he can and should be allowed this vice. He makes the argument in the second verse, "Thou hast all the good / that a wife can desire, / Thast servants to tend thee, / and I pay their hire: Then for my good-fellowship / doe not thou prate…"[99] stating that he provides her with more than a fair share of accommodations with servants to help her with her chores and pays them so she never has to worry about money. In exchange for this help he provides, he asks Kate not to question and nag him about this subject. At the end of each of his verses, he attaches some version of the line, "For

[96] EBBA 20180

[97] British Library - Roxburghe, 1.354, 1.355, C.20.f.7.354-355, EBBA 30241.

[98] EBBA 30241

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I must and I will / have my humour sweet Kate."[100] as a resounding chorus that he is entitled to and requires alcohol.

What is interesting is that this dialogue discusses a rather sensitive topic of a man drinking excessively, a wife becoming involved in matters of financial affairs and desiring her husband to be at home with her, which, as seen in other ballads discussed previously would be met with violent language and descriptions of nagging wives by husbands and basely natures by wives, Kate and Robin treat each other with pleasant dispositions for the most part. They both refer to each other with the affection of "sweet" when speaking. Kate, in the third verse, begs her husband to consider her words with the statement, "Sweet husband consider / and take my advice, / Let not thy companions / thus lewdly intice / Thy heart from thy Kate, / but upon my words thinke…"[101] which suggests that even though Kate is disapproving of Robin's drinking, she still thinks of her husband as a good and loving man. She describes him as her "sweet husband" and asks Robin to reconsider who he keeps as company as they may try to poison this gentle disposition within him. Robin also uses the word "sweet" to describe Kate; as mentioned, his chorus sings the lines, "For I must and I will / have my humour sweet Kate."[102] In this space where Robin may be inclined to become frustrated with Kate, he returns to this mantra of maintaining his stance of needing to drink and using kind language for his wife.

Kate explains in a verse much later in the ballad that she does not seek control over Robin but offers wifely advice, this may then be some indication of why Robin does not feel his wife is overstepping or judged for his actions. Kate explains in the second to last verse that last of verses which the audience hears from her, "I doe not command thee, thats not my intention, / For my humble duty unto thee is such…"[103] While her conversation with Robin does initially come across as though she is trying to ask her husband not to drink anymore, she goes on to explain that this is not her intention. Instead, Kate seeks to illuminate her husband's recent habits and ask him to reconsider his actions. In reiterating her advice, she lends, "I give thee good counseil, / I doe not command: Then with due discretion. / upon my words thinke…"[104] restating that she does not mean to be conveyed as commanding in her marriage, but as suggestive. Kate also returns any misplaced power in her words to her husband in the phrase, "with due discretion" implying that while she can suggest as many ideas as she wants, these words are also to be examined by her husband in how he sees fit. Robin comes to the conclusion at the end of his final verse as he reflects on his behavior and heeds Kate's counsel. He acknowledges that her words come from a good place and cares for Robin's well-being in the line, "Ah now my sweet Kate I perceive very well, / thy words doe proceed from a hearty affection…"[105] Kate's approach to speaking with her husband and trying to persuade him not to drink has worked. Robin even goes on to take full responsibility for his shortcomings as a husband and promises, "My former

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ill husbandry, / I will repent…"[106] which is then clarified to mean that he will stay home with Kate and stop drinking excessively in the last lines before the chorus, "in thy sweet company, / rest well content: / Strong Liquor no more, / shall impaire my estate."[107] This line also suggests that Robin sees the toll his drinking had on Kate and not just himself, as he uses the word "estate" when describing the harm his drinking did. He promises that his drinking will not impair or injure those within his responsibility, including Kate. The audience also sees a change in the last chorus line from which Robin begs Kate to acknowledge his entitlement to drink and instead sings the line, "Now Ile stay at home / with my bonny sweet Kate."[108] stating that instead of wanting to drink, he would rather be at home with his "sweet Kate." Through the dialogue in this ballad, Parker uses the character's self-reflection and conversations to set up and introduce possible conversation on a topic such as alcoholism in a marriage.

Parker creates an interesting dialogue and shift in cultural conversation surrounding how advice can be shared and heeded within an early modern marriage. The initial introduction of this conversation to the audience presents a woman who would usually be seen as full of incessant prattle and nagging about her husband's habits. However, Parker uses language to recenter Kate as a devoted and concerned wife who seeks to counsel her husband. This then repositions the wives' conversation concerning their husbands as having a voice when using it to counsel instead of command their husbands. It invites the audience, specifically women, to consider how they speak to their husbands and how they can also seek to provide sage advice within their marriages. It also extends to husbands, asking them to consider the advice their wives offer and take it more seriously. Parker creates this conversation to extend across men and women with gender relationships and how respect for one's perspective on situations that may come up within early modern marriages should be considered.

Ballads were one of the largest forms of entertainment within early modern England, and Parker's contributions to the ballad scene, specifically the work he wrote dedicated to the genre of gender relationships, demonstrate the way in which ballads could be used to generate conversation among an audience or within a narrative. While his work spans more topics than gender relations, in even such a specific and nuanced topic, Parker includes the perspectives and audiences of a wide variety of people and thus a broad consumer market: young and married men, maids, widows, wives, shrews, and spinsters. In some cases, as my analysis shows, he even created themes of conversational debate within and between ballads that were important and sold among early modern Londoners, thus encouraging conversation amongst the public regarding gender relationships. Parker's success as a ballad writer was grounded in his ability to cater towards multiple audiences and create those meaningful conversations and narratives. While it can be challenging to understand Parker's perspective on many of these conversations, he can undoubtedly be seen as a carrier of this culture for his contemporary audiences and those who research him today. As his work is carried into the twenty-first century, his vast contributions to

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the conversation on early modern English gender relationships and their portrayals in popular culture accompany it. Parker's contributions to this topic reflect the narratives and conversations of experiences within gender relationships that he sought to disseminate within his works and discuss with broader audiences.

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Against Transnormativity: Approaches to Trans Identity in Literature of the Internet
by Gwen Altschuler

       Transnormativity, as a theoretical apparatus, has become increasingly prevalent in academic work on transgender identities. Concurrently, researchers are increasingly interested in the ways in which transgender identity is mediated on the internet. I use three works of transgender speculative literature in order to critique the usefulness of transnormativity when discussing trans experience of the internet. Alison Rumfitt's horror novel *Tell Me I'm Worthless* is about two queer people's lives, online and in person, as they deal with the aftermath of a traumatic night in a fascist haunted house. Rumfitt contrasts internet and IRL (in real life) experience of transness: transnormativity is a useful concept for the IRL scenes but becomes unhelpful when trying to understand the digitally-mediated moments of trans experience. "No Tiger" by Mika is a collection of experimental literature focusing on imperialist violence, digital identity, and transfeminine life. Mika, through speculative literature, creates an analogue to Jasbir Puar's *homonationalism* that I tentatively call trans*nationalism. Mika's writing serves to show the *impossibility* of any theory of trans*nationalism, thereby critiquing the foundational

concept of transnormativity. Lastly, I look at *Foldscape* by Porpentine Charity Heartscape, a work of interactive fiction that consists of a collection of folders and text files that the user explores. *Foldscape* problematizes the relationship between reader, player, and character, creating new possibilities for (trans)gendered identifications divorced from transnormativity as a theory. Together, these works provide an alternative way of thinking through trans identification online by giving voice to alternative norms.

Vargas et al understand transnormativity in terms of a transnormative pattern, "a social construct that decides which trans people are acceptable and which are not, and therefore who should be excluded from the logic of the capitalist, heteronormative system" (Vargas). This is representative of the popular understanding of transnormativity in academic work. In all such understandings of transnormativity, the idea that some trans people are "acceptable" is foundational. Transnormativity, as a concept, proposes itself as an analogue to homonormativity.

Johnson's foundational work defines transnormativity as "regulatory normative ideology, transnormativity should be understood alongside heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998; Ingraham 1994; Warner 1991) and homonormativity (Duggan 2003; Seidman 2002)" (Johnson). Johnson argues that "For individuals who do adhere to a medical model of transgender identity, transnormativity simultaneously affirms the legitimacy of their gender identity and restricts their access to gender-affirming medical care" (Johnson). Transnormativity is a double-edged sword, then. Certainly, in the mainstream view of transnormativity, those trans people who properly fit within the proscribed bounds of the medical model *are* rewarded with some level of legitimacy. This legitimacy is fraught, of course, and subject to arbitrary retraction at any time. But there *is* an idea of a [legitimate] trans figure. This figure is someone who feels *born in the wrong body* or some similar narrative (Johnson).

The normatively ideal trans person is cis. The ideal trans person does not exist, has stopped existing. The ideal trans person is sitting at a vanity, she is doing her makeup on camera. The ideal trans person keeps quiet about it. The ideal trans person would never transition. The ideal trans person is a digital object, a locus of fetishized violence, stays off the sidewalks.

I do not understand transnormativity as claiming that trans people who are legitimized are rewarded. Though some theorists may treat this as the case, I intend to critique a more conservative formulation of transnormativity. Theories of regulatory ideological systems that rest on the legitimation of a narrow identity are problematic if they suggest that the legitimized identity is protected from censure. In the comparative case of sexism in general, consider the *Double Bind* of patriarchy, as characterized by Susan J. Brison. Those women who do, in fact conform to all standards of femininity are not rewarded for it (Brison). Women who do not wear makeup are slurred as frigid, those who do wear makeup are slurred as attention-seeking. In this case the *image* of perfect femininity is what is required to uphold the regulatory systems of sexism. Analogously, I understand the theoretical apparatus termed *transnormativity* as resting on the assumption that there is a coherent and normative image of transness. It does not rest on

the assumption that those who conform to this normative image are rewarded or protected. I critique the claim that there is *any* coherent transnormative image on the internet.

Tell Me I'm Worthless

In *Tell Me I'm Worthless*, Alison Rumfitt presents a number of perspectives on trans identity. These perspectives, though they contradict each other, internally rely on an image of a normative trans identity. The character Harry, a trans man, starts the novel as a member of a trans-exclusionary radical-feminist (TERF) organization. Harry, for most of the story, is closeted even to himself. When attending a meeting, Harry notes that due to the noise of trans women who are protesting, he will have to scream "to get her [sic] point across… and that's what the protestors are doing, too. Maybe that's why they really are women" (Rumfitt 40). In considering screaming as a criterion of validation for womanhood, Harry is working primarily from images of hysterical women; he compares the trans women he sees to that image. On another level, Henry understands femaleness in terms of sound, of sonic character. As he walks past the protestors, he feels that the "chanting is directed straight at her now, stabbing her all over," the auditory space becomes physically violent (40). Given that the sound of the women around him has been charged with problematically gendered meaning, the solidification of sound into weapons is a reification of that densely gendered valence. This reification casts trans voices as artificial and constructed, a "tuneless, empty chant" (40). The chant is empty, vacuous, there is nothing behind it. This characterization operates on a cissexist logic "founded on the assumption that the trans person's gender is not authentic because it does not correlate with the sex they were assigned at birth" (Serano 13). The 'artificiality' of trans femininity is further critiqued as "tuneless." This implies that gender ought to be 'in tune' with something, it ought to be harmonious. Sonic harmony is taken up again when Harry "laughs, a light nervous laugh" at the chant "non-binary is valid!" "because it doesn't even fit the structure of their chant," which has followed the rhythm "trans women are real women" and "trans men are real men" (40).

Throughout the majority of *Tell Me I'm Worthless*, Harry is referred to as a woman by himself, the people, around him and—problematically—the third-person narrative voice. However, the chapters which are about Harry are strongly focalized from his perspective, only departing from his view at specific moments. To preserve the voice of the text, and Harry's voice as the text presents it, I do not edit quoted passages that misgender or deadname the characters of Rumfitt's novel.

Despite, ostensibly, believing that trans women are not real women, Harry finds the chant "non-binary is valid" to be more worthy of derision because it does not fit into the transnormative schema established by the rhythm of the chant. Harry invests in transnormativity *in spite of himself*. The situation is auditory and particularly experiential. It is a social situation mediated by immediate sound. Hierarchies of gender—transnormativity being just one such hierarchy—serve as guiding lights to Harry's audiation and critique.

In his interactions with internet media, Harry becomes increasingly unable to invest in transnormativity. Ideal images of gendered existence become unstructured and displaced. The putatively normative image of transness is unable to fix itself in Harry's mind. This is most notable when Harry, following a discussion of his research into trans fetish pornography, pays a trans woman for a custom pornographic video in which he "is a man called Harry" (96) who has a fetish for videos that "are all about trying to hypnotize [people] into thinking, or realising, that they're women" (92). Harry believes that "sissy porn," the term for this genre of pornography, "produces transwomen like a factory" (83). This is in line with the common transphobic perspective that trans women are indulging a sexual fetish through their transition. Harry, watching the video, "isn't sure if, to her disgust, she's horny, or feels sick" (96) In an inversion of the ideology that trans women are produced by this pornography, Harry, as a trans man, uses the fetish pornography to experiment with a new name and is problematically ambivalent in his reaction. In the context of digitally mediated identity-experimentation, normative ideas about what constitutes transness, such as being a "real" man or woman, fall away in the context of internet pornography. This pornography is inherently un-real, as it is commissioned by Harry under false pretenses—he intends to use the video for 'research,' an aim that is other than the intended purpose of pornographic content. Further, nameable emotions become confused and meaningless. Harry cannot label the experience he is having because it does not fall either within or without the schema of transnormativity. He is left with action and immediate bodily experience, as "her hand goes between her legs anyway" (96). The autoerotic act occurs "anyway," regardless of ideological suppositions. The somatic experience of transgendered desire is separate from any normative precepts Harry has developed IRL.

No Tiger

No Tiger, by Mika, is a book of trans experimental poetry and short prose focusing primarily on digital mediation, images of contemporary US imperialist war, and "identity fragmentation within forever violence" (Mika, back cover). Throughout the text, *No Tiger* takes up a trans analogue to homonationalism, which I will call trans*nationalism (to distinguish it from the more well-known transnationalism). *No Tiger* shows that trans*nationalism, as mediated through digital means, is an inherently and necessarily incoherent theoretical apparatus. Homonationalism is founded on homonormativity, and the trans*nationalism is similarly founded on transnormativity. If homonationalism were shown to be totally incoherent, then this would cast some doubt on the usefulness of homonormativity as a theoretical tool. This would not single-handedly disprove the validity of homonormativity. However, homonormativity is one of the core concepts of homonationalism, and so the incoherence of homonationalism would cause academics to take, at least, a closer look at homonormativity. The impossibility of trans*nationalism on the internet works to destabilize the possibility of transnormativity online. Through demonstrating the incoherence of a trans*nationalist concept, I show that transnormativity cannot be safely deployed in the development of critical queer theories.

Homonationalism, as defined by Jaspir Puar, "draws on Duggan's version of homonormativity" which itself "designates the sexual politics of neoliberalism – the sexual

politics of the upward distribution of wealth, the privatization of public goods and the sovereignty of the market" (Schotten). Under Schotten's interpretation, homonormativity is an explicitly neoliberal project, not "an index of [radical queerness](#)" where the more homonormative someone is the more like heterosexual normative ideals they are. The *nationalism* half of homonationalism is similarly specific: Schotten argues that Puar's nationalism is "ideological modes of belonging to the US nation-state and, in particular, *post-9/11* modes of patriotism and citizenship" (Schotten; emphasis added). Because it is particularly "post-9/11," the nationalism in question is a nationalism tied up with the war on terror. Homonationalism incorporates a particular

> Understanding that homonormativity is not *exactly* a 'gay version' of heteronormativity, we can try to expand this nuance into our idea of transnormativity. So, Harry's investment into transnormativity despite his opposition to trans identity can be understood through Harry's investment into neoliberal economic schemes. In particular, contemporary media criticism serves as the locus for Harry's fantasies of upward mobility. It is no coincidence that Harry writes transmisogynist media criticism.

Islamophobic orientalism by "queering racialized threats to the nation and national security as (for example) terrorist" (Schotten). The racialized threats to the nation, under homonationalism, are simultaneously queer; "the queer/perverse/racialized nonnational terrorist," and also regressively opposed to "the (white) gay patriot" (Schotten). Mika imaginatively locates (US American) trans experience on an Orientalized virtual 'middle eastern' plane of media-filtered violence. The 'forever war' of Islamophobic imperial conflict has seeped into our media, particularly digital media.

Transnormativity, as a theory, intellectualizes a desire to define trans realness and to understand trans desire in terms of the defined 'realness.' In the poem "mika eat your heart out bitch!" trans desire is shown to rely on modes of *realness* that are outside the domain of transnormativity's concerns. The opening stanza exemplifies this complicated relationship between *real* gender and digital/technological experience: "desperate to show the net how real / of a girl i can fucking be / organs wilted & perfumed in copper / i encounter Her" (Mika 7). Being a 'real' girl was touched on in *Tell Me I'm Worthless*; however, Mika locates a desire for realness in terms of "the net." This realness exists in a gaze, as the speaker wants to "show the net," to find validity [reflected](#) back at her from the internet. The cryptic line "organs wilted & perfumed in copper" calls to the second to last stanza of the poem, "nicotine tossed over lungs death accelerant / day-to-day empty sonic booms / the sirens loose on my senses" (7). The "wilted" organs are lungs, covered with nicotine. The "copper" is the particulate metals inhaled from a vape device. Nicotine vaping is understood as a self -destructive "death accelerant," where 'accelerant' also denotes flammability. This is an image of chemical warfare, inflicted on oneself in the gaze of the net. The images of warfare are reinforced with the daily "sonic booms," the sound of fighter jets flying overhead. The sonic booms are "empty" in that they are fantastical and imagined. War takes place *somewhere else*, somewhere Orientalized, Other, and

not Here. That a sound can be empty is consonant with Harry's experience of the crowd's chanting. Transfemininity is repeatedly characterized as empty. The artificiality of transfeminine expression is overlaid on the image of othered warfare. The "sirens loose" on the speaker's "senses" signify emotional panic as air-raid sirens. Again, this image has a dual valence—warfare and transness—as "sirens" are also the mythically seductive figures of the Odyssey. The description "loose" refers to being untied from the mast, vulnerable to the destructively feminine power of the sirens.

Having mapped transfeminine experience onto digital images of war, Mika interprets this specific violence as uniquely nationalist. "STANDARD ISSUE M84 STUN GRENADE" understands this mapping as destabilizing and eventually incoherent. The speaker understands trans female bodies in the language of computer pseudo-code, as "the XX defined null" (47). This does more than just describe a lack of XX chromosome pairs. If that were the case, we would expect "the XX defined *false*." Specifically, *null* describes a value which has not yet been defined. The fact of whether the XX is true or false is undetermined and, hence, subject to change. So, in the second stanza, Mika writes "by 27 i'll have fake double X's," projecting an artificial assignment of a value onto the null variable. "Fake double X's" also references a derogatory way of speaking about breast augmentation surgery. Surgical intervention on the body, while "fake," is able to define sexed identity in this pseudo-code language. The intervention of nationalism on this is described as "the USMC eagle slide my tits down its gullet" (47). US imperialism's

> i woke up and shambled out of bed i stretched and yawned i went to the full length mirror propped against the wall right next to my crosley record player i looked at myself i saw my straight brown hair cut into a bob i saw ends of my brown hair brush the top of my shoulders i saw my green rectangular glasses i saw my pink buttonup pajama shirt draped over my shoulders i saw the beauty mark on my cheek i saw my uneven teeth i saw my cute blue pajama bottoms i saw lip-gloss in my left hand i saw my hazel eyes
>
> my hazel eyes sometimes look green catherine said that my eyes sparkled in the light
>
> i saw my messy brown hair i saw long scratches down from temple to jaw i saw an old sickness i saw my cute pink pajama top i saw my purplish irises i saw my long brown hair draped over my shoulders i saw the beauty mark on my cheek i saw the sharp rock in my right hand —in the mirror
>
> i looked at myself in the mirror and i saw—
>
> a man with a gun and a lip-gloss threat and a happy mayor and a female monster and a brooding love interest
>
> i saw an old dog with brown fur i saw a conversation with a deacon i saw a reticule over my forehead i saw a king james bible in my hand i saw my blond hair in a messy bun i saw cheaper drugs i saw a monkey make friends with an old dog i saw mold in the ceiling i saw my face stretched from the floor to the ceiling i saw the mold seeping into my eyes i saw a tennis disaster
>
> after a long day of looking in the mirror i was tired so i took off my dayclothes and put on my sleepclothes and i went under the covers and i pulled the covers over my head and i went to sleep.

incorporation of transness into its colonial project is a bestial devouring. At this intersection of sexed interventions, digital understandings, and US militarism, the trans body becomes a site of sexual (imperial) violence. If homonationalism rests on the projected media-image of the normative gay figure, then trans*nationalism rests on the image of the normative trans figure. However, the normative trans figure (subjected to US sanctioned violence) is a "pay-per-view spectacle // violation worth \$\$\$15" (47). The commodification of the trans female body is

understood as "pay-per-view," and thus mediated through cable. In the second the last stanza, the female figure, victim of the titular flashbang, is "fortuna trapped in overwound cassette" (48). Literally, the divine (ideal) female figure trapped in a medium, the cassette. That it is "overwound," suggests an impossibility of containment. The bounds of the medium are overstressed, overtightened. *Overwound* also suggests that that the cassette has been recorded over too much. The medium cannot contain all the meaning that is forced on it—the trans body cannot withstand the contradictory forces of imperialism and transnormative ideals.

"Flashland" is a short experimental narrative work from the perspective of someone obsessed with a mysterious videogame, described as a "transient program spectre" (22). Character creation becomes a moment of fraught digital identification, as the narrator wishes to "be able to maximize HER self-esteem maybe," regarding the digital avatar's characteristics (23). "HER" is in all-caps, emphasizing the gendered pronouns for the avatar, this reaches an extreme a paragraph later in the line "SHESHESHESHE" (23). There is an anxiously manic repetition and emphasis on the avatar's gender that functions as a desperate desire to identify with the digital figure, "HER cursed to ME, ME blessed as HER" (26). The digital identification fails with regards to emotional connection, but "really it has the only option that matters the false dichotomy. MALE or FEMALE, a third option necessary in our (falsely) neatly kept reality" (23). Unpacking this sentence a little bit, we can see that the gender binary is not able to encompass the range of experience in reality. Here, reality is not able to be "neatly kept," divided between normative and non-normative. Binaries of all kinds are false.

Foldscape

Foldscape proposes an alternative theoretical framework to cisnormativity that is not based on transnormativity. *Foldscape* suggests that the point of audience identification for trans literature should be understood as transgender. That is, to understand trans literature the reader should take the interpretative position that what they read is, in some way, *for* trans people. By understanding trans literature in terms of points of identification, we are able to discard problematic discussion of transnormativity by looking at the actual logic of the text. The text proposes a particular normative point of identification, and this point can be unearthed through close reading.

In Porpentine Charity Heartscape's electronic work *Foldscape*, the reader is presented with a digital folder full of folders. One of the folders is called "mansion". So, let us investigate the mansion. In it, we find five more folders, named "crying spirit in the basement with the power generator," "crying spirit in the basement with the power

There is something uncomfortable about labelling a work *trans*. What does the term "trans literature" even denote? Is it all literature by trans people? That seems flatly problematic, surely trans writers can make art that isn't "trans art". (Although, maybe, we can't; maybe our work is always tied to the limiting identities that cissexist society places on us.) Is it all literature *about* trans people? Again, this seems wrong, *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman is not typically considered trans literature. What the works selected in this paper have in common, I think, is that they are circulated amongst the trans community and treated like they have *something to say* about trans experience.

generator," "crying spirit in the hallway," "crying spirit in the pond," and lastly "crying spirit in the locked room.zip" (Porpentine; Foldscape\mansion).
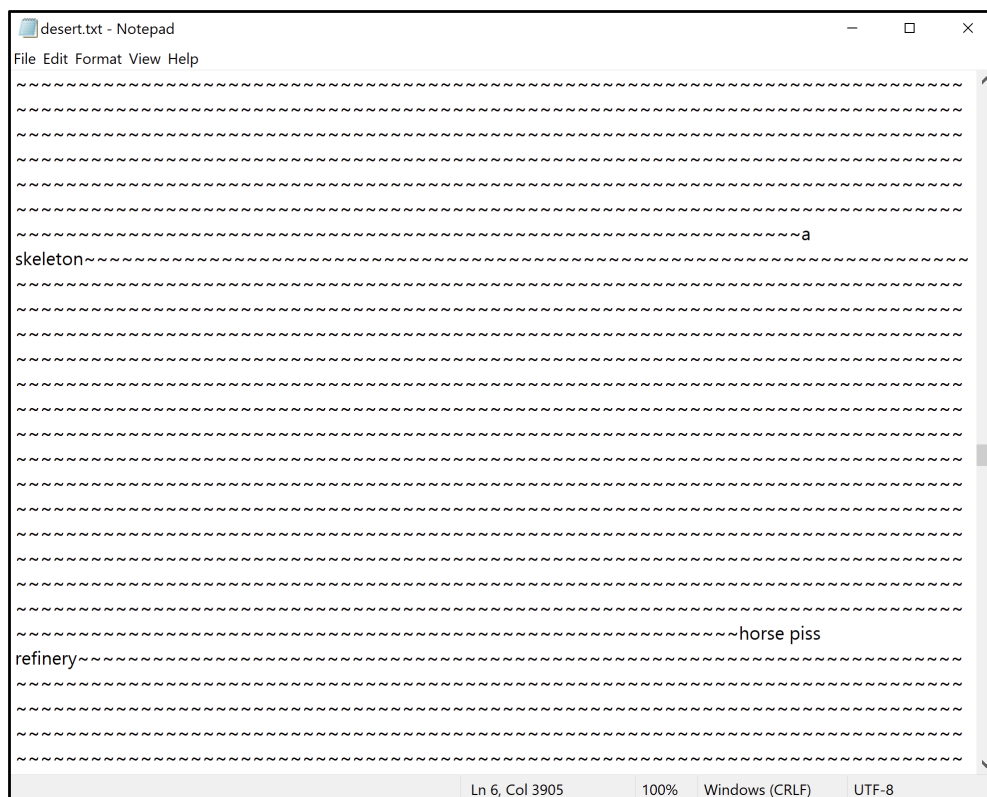
> *Foldscape* complicates the position of 'reader.' In experiencing the work, one might also be understood as a *player* or a *user*. Each of these denotations bring out distinct interpretive perspectives. As a reader, my interaction with the work is purely interpretive. I invest my own perspective into the work, and my experience of the work is a mix of text and (personal) context. As a player, I approach the work as something to be progressed through. It is a video game with rooms and secrets and treasures and stats and levels. As a user, *Foldscape* is a computer file. It has a hierarchy of access; it has particular properties like security, file size, and file type.

Type	Size
File folder	
File folder	
File folder	
File folder	
Compressed (zipp...	

All of the folders, except the last, are empty. We are curious, wanting to investigate this apparently haunted mansion, so we investigate this last folder only to find a password protected folder named "the handle would not move, almost as if it were being held on the other side.zip" (Porpentine Foldscape\mansion\crying spirit in the locked room.zip\crying spirit in the locked room). Aside from the unique format of writing interactive prose into the titles of various folders, Porpentine's work captures an investigative mode of interacting with digital artifacts, or with the internet itself. The reader is prompted, not by any overt direction but by the simple existence of a locked file, to scour the rest of the folders for clues, for meanings. In "Fear and the Cisgender Audience," Lucy J. Miller argues that most cinema about trans identities treats transness as a frightening image. She argues that "Being cisgender is the point of identification, and the narrative conventions and visual codes are constructed in line with this identification," (Miller) and so, in films such as *Sleepaway Camp*, the reveal of transness is treated as a *reveal*. It is not expected (to the cisgender audience) that the killer is secretly trans. This is not a part of the projected worldview of the, as Miller puts it, author and expected viewer. All of the "emotions elicited by the films reflect an ideology of cisnormativity" (Miller). For Miller, cisnormativity seeps into the texture of a work. The emotions elicited by a cisnormative film will be cisnormative emotions.

Foldscape calls to an emotional register that is particular to my experience of gender, even without explicit reference to trans identity. Miller correctly argues that "the point of identification in transgender films must be shifted away from being cisgender;" however she claims that transgender films should focus on lines of identification that are common to cisgender and transgender people (Miller). Porpentine's work takes a different view. Rather than attempt to make a trans work of art understandable to all people, Porpentine's *Foldscape* serves as a work of art that is, in part, about transness—in ways that enter into the emotions of the

piece. So far *Foldscape* does not seem explicitly about transness. When encountering the work for the first time, I nonetheless felt like it was saying *something* about trans experience, although I could not point to what exactly that was. The emotions that the piece evoked as I scanned its folders reminded me of scrolling the internet in middle school, looking for points of identification, things that I can claim as part of myself. In "desert" folder, inside of the "borderlands" folder, I found such points of identification. Before continuing, it is important to remark on the digital location of desert.txt, a folder called "borderlands." So, trans identification exists in the borderlands of art, where I follow Monica Perales's understanding of borderlands as "a state of being and consciousness, continually being redefined," asking us to consider "role of racialized gendered violence to the structure and maintenance of colonial power in the borderlands" (Perales 163-164). Considering the role of racialization and colonial power in the text, the use of a "desert" reflects the Orientalized desert of violence depicted in *No Tiger*. The influence of this extends throughout the work, calling to the reader to search it out; in the logic of *Foldscape*, to find the password to unlock the .zip file.

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desert.txt - Notepad                                    —    □    ×
File  Edit  Format  View  Help
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refinery~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
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~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
                         Ln 6, Col 3905      100%   Windows (CRLF)   UTF-8
```

The [desert.txt file](#) is a long txt file of "~" repeated to mimic rolling sand dunes. At various points in the file, strings of words appear, describing structures one encounters as they 'search' the desert. Around halfway through the file, the reader encounters a "horse piss refinery." This is a reference to the idea, circulated in some internet groups, that pre-industrial trans women would

extract estrogen from horse urine. Porpentine juxtaposes this (likely mythologized) pre-industrial image with a "refinery." The mythologized past is transformed into something life-giving (estrogen) through the process of mechanical refinement. This digital work presents an image of the internet as trans-gendered cultural refinery Later in the file, the reader encounters an "emergency estrogen cache," after a long trek through the desert. The implied audience is clarified by this inclusion. It is not water that we find in the desert, but estrogen. The audience is assumed to be people who, after a time in a desert, would need "emergency estrogen" to be deployed in advance. Borrowing from Miller, the point of identification is trans.

Continuing to search *Foldscape* brings us to a folder called "fuck alley" with a .txt file called "orgy," wherein we find a google docs link and the text "could be dangerous people, but maybe worth checking out. lots of animals there too. was it an orgy? maybe it was a party. maybe it was a forest. the transmission was unclear" (Porpentine; Foldscape\fuck alley\orgt.txt). There is an ambiguity here, is it an orgy, a party, or a forest? The text claims that this ambiguity is due to an unclear transmission, but these words sound nothing alike. With some trepidation, I pasted the link into my search bar to find pages of random sentences in various fonts. This google docs has been used a guest-book by readers of *Foldscape*, signed by many of the people who found it. One can trace out full conversations in the jumble of text. It is in the marks left by other readers that I found the password for the locked file. *Foldscape* reveals that progress exists in digital community. The anonymity of the online space allows for experimentation and confession. I am reluctant to reproduce any screenshots of this file. It somehow feels like a violation of this space. One user notes that the document is occasionally made blank again. Poems are lost, past conversations and connections are deleted. *Foldscape* provides a microcosm of the internet, in this way. A place of ephemerality and anonymity; the feeling at any moment that you are intruding on someone's personal thoughts.

Each work undermines the validity of transnormativity in the context of the internet. *Tell Me I'm Worthless* depicts the destabilization of a normative trans image when in immediate relationship to the internet. "No Tiger" reveals the impossibility of reconciling transnormativity with imperialist fantasy, rendering any trans*nationalist theory analogous to homonationalism incoherent. Lastly, *Foldscape* provides an alternative to theories of transnormativity by calling attention to the normative point of identification in digital texts. Together, these texts provide a case against transnormativity. I do not argue that transnormativity is always incoherent, or that there are no internet spaces where transnormativity is a useful theoretical tool. Rather, I want to problematize and question academia's reliance on transnormativity, especially in the context of internet-mediated trans experience.

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Section 2: Creative Worldbuilding

Planet Other
by Cassidy Creer

Artist Statement

I want to create fictional literature that reaches out to audiences who haven't been historically included in most genres of literature. Throughout my educational career, specifically in literature courses, I have become accustomed to the sigh-inducing plethora of male authors on each syllabus. Then, I took my first speculative fiction class at UCSB and finally found what I had been yearning for throughout my high school and college years. Speculative fiction is a genre of literature that often encompasses science fiction, fantasy, and horror. It is a genre that focuses on social issues and uses world building as a tool to create "other" worlds different from our own.[109] In my work, I create the sister-planet to Earth, Planet Loryn. It exists in an alternate dimension called the Equat Dimension. The protagonist in my story, Kyra, serves as a representation of the "other" identity in the "other" world that is often portrayed in works of speculative fiction. Throughout my short story, I touch on the social themes of gender inequality, eugenics, and living with a disability within an intolerant population. For my short story, my

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[109]Gill, R. B. 2013. The uses of genre and the classification of speculative fiction. *Mosaic : a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46, (2) (06): 71-85, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/uses-genre-classification-speculative-fiction/docview/1366018308/se-2 (accessed June 9, 2023).

research included analyzing peer-reviewed critical analyses of speculative fiction as a genre and multiple speculative fiction short stories and novels. Although speculative fiction has been talked about since the 1940s, its defining boundaries as a genre are still being explored today. However, there seems to be an overall consensus of the overarching purpose of speculative fiction. This purpose is to explore social issues in an environment that is different from Earth as it exists today.[110] Through analyzing protagonists such as Nalo Hopkinson's Tan-Tan and N.K. Jemisin's Essun, I was able to build on this idea of the "other" identity.[111] My creative research allowed me to define the "other" identity as any identity that is different from an able bodied, deemed physically fit, heterosexual, white cis-male; basically any person who has not experienced the everyday life of the identity that our society has historically catered to in every way.

In my work, I followed the methodologies that are frequent in the speculative fiction genre. This included creating a protagonist that doesn't fit the "norm" of American society, a world that is completely different from Earth, and a society that represents social issues. My story illustrates the potential dangers of gender inequality and the effects it can have on a growing society, even fantastical societies. I want my work to reach out and resonate with people that have been historically marginalized within the literary sphere. I want my readers to digest the social commentary. I want them to feel represented. I want them to feel seen.

Planet Other

Our ancestors embody our failure and our success. Our ancestors overcome our mistakes, so that we do not repeat the same insidious cycles. Kyra's ancestors learned from your ancestors. Their ancestors watched and observed your Planet Earth up until its last breath as a body.

Kyra's home is different from your home. Your home was filled with more land, more people, and more conflict (and more *freedom)*. Your home is dead, a distant memory to Kyra's species. They have been avoiding the misjudgments that killed your planet 3000 years ago. Kyra's ancestors eradicated the mistakes of your past. They have survived. They are survivors. Their home is Planet Loryn, the sister planet to Earth, only it exists in the Equat Dimension.

Planet Loryn is relatively small compared to Earth, measuring around half of Earth's size. The planet has one strip of land that measures 100 miles wide traveling vertically around the circumference of its sphere. The body of land inhabits an array of plant and animal diversity. Its soil is dark and rich, ready to embody its role in the cycle of life. Its soil is covered in a thin layer of deep green moss, impenetrable to species that lack the correct skeletal apparatus. You humans would be fine. You could sink your toes deep into the wet, cold soil, creating a temporary anchor with each step. The land figure perfectly dissects the two existing bodies of water on our planet:

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Freshwater and Saltwater. On the Western side of the land strip, there is Freshwater inhabiting the "male" sex of the planet's apex species. On the Eastern side of the land strip, there is Saltwater inhabiting the "female" sex of the planet's apex species. I use these sex labels merely to ground you, make you more comfortable, to situate you in Earthly familiarity, so you won't get too lost and confused.

Sorry, was that patronizing?

Then again, you are from Earth, so I think I can safely assume you already possess that condescending skill, readily available sitting in your human survival toolkit. I know I sound bitter. I can't help it. I was there the day that Earth finally possessed the technological and scientific instruments to communicate with our species. I was there the day we found out that Earth was dead. That day changed everything. You changed everything. And for that, I will never forgive you.

PRESENT DAY: YEAR 6889 AED (AFTER EARTH'S DEATH)

Kyra glances at their reflection in the abalone mirror. The abalone mirror is their favorite. It's hard not to like your appearance when it's mirroring back at you in shades of metallic purple and blue. As if their own reflection traveled through rainbows just to make it back to them. The abalone mirror stood about six feet tall in Kyra's assigned bedroom. They couldn't help but glance towards the bottom of the mirror, a habit they're constantly trying to break. But, there it was, as if all of Kyra's shame could be stored in one body part.

Everything else was *normal.*

 Their long, dark brown hair was braided into five identical strands that rested on their broad shoulders; *normal.* Their gills flared open and shut flowing on the left and right side of their neck; *normal.* Their dark gray body shimmers as they sashay in the remnants of the shellfish. The word *normal* is starting to sound anything but normal the more Kyra thinks about it. They continue inspecting their body. Their arms are long and strong, complementing the size of their legs. They trail one of their webbed fingers down the center of their breasts, down to their belly button. They turn slightly, angling themself so they could see the length of their dorsal fin extend from the center of their shoulders to the base of their tailbone. Kyra elevates themself slightly to watch as their legs dangle lightly. Their legs are long and thin, with two dorsal fins extending from the back of their knee down to the base of their feet. Their feet. They look away. But, it's the same feeling you experience in your human world when you kill an insect. You don't want to look at what's under your newly tarnished shoe, or now unusable paper towel; but you have to. Your curiosity of whether that fly or spider is actually dead will win nine times out of ten. So, Kyra opens their eyes and forces themself to look. Yup, it's still there. Like it always is.

"You are the bane of my existence," they sigh as they examine their left foot.

"Kyra are you up? Please come down and eat some fish before I have to head off to the Deciding," Elder Locat calls from the eating area.

The Deciding. Great. Krya glances in the mirror one last time, before gracefully gliding through the hole located in their bright orange coral reef wall. They zoom past the holes distinguishing their fellow grouplings and make their way to the eating area.

"I know this is a hard time for you, with the Deciding and all of your fellow Salty Grouplings running around excited. But, you're in this reef for a reason, Kyra. You need to bond with these Salties," Elder Locat says with genuine concern .

Elder Locat and Kyra suddenly glance at Kyra's left foot.

"Why do I have to bond with the Salties? They teach us in Lessons that the Breeding Center separates the Salties from the Freshies because they will die if they are put into the wrong body of water. But, maybe I was supposed to be with the Freshies and someone accidentally put me in the Salt body and that's why my foot is different from everyone else," Kyra whines at Elder Locat.

Elder Locat looks away from Kyra, refusing to meet their gaze, "I don't know, Kyra. I'm pretty sure the Breeding Center has a perfect system. They don't make mistakes. I've been to the Breeding Center. I've been the decided at The Deciding. It's impossible for you to know this, but you should be happy you're not allowed to be considered."

Kyra wants to pry for more details, but they know better than to push Elder Locat. Instead, Kyra decides to clear their mind and heads out of the colossal coral reef home. Kyra places their ankles together and moves their body in the motion of the human dance move: the worm. Their dorsal fins glimmer from the white sand reflecting off the ocean floor. Kyra starts to approach their destination. This safe space is dark, almost so dark it has no visibility. If it wasn't for the translucent, almost sparkling, silver-blue lights emitting from the ocean floor, everything around Kyra would be pitch black. But, these slivers of light emit beautiful visibility all around them. Kyra can see their favorite perching rock sparkle as the light rays reflect off its white surface. They can see the different shades of green in the seagrass splayed out in random patches. The light rays stop at a ridge 300 feet above Kyra's safe rock. The rays create a one-way see-through effect, where Kyra can see everything above the separating ridge, but no one can see below without penetrating the seemingly invisible layer. Grouplings aren't supposed to swim off on their own. Grouplings are not supposed to go this far outside of the communal areas without permission or guidance of an elder.

But, Kyra isn't bound to *normal* groupling regulations.

They are viewed with pity and an unspoken knowledge that they are not a part of the *normal* groupling social scene. At one time, this distinction between Kyra (*other)* and the grouplings (*normal)* hurt Kyra to their core, but now they see it as an opening to *freedom.*

THE DECIDING

"Grouplings and Elders please calm down, and please no more intermingling," the presenting Elder says while giving their audience a chastising glare. "This year we will require more grouplings than ever before," the announcer continues while the crowd erupts in hushed, excited murmurs.

Krya doesn't know why they are even there. They don't even get to be evaluated, so why are they required to even show up? Kyra feels a webbed hand stroke their shoulder with comfort. They didn't need to turn around to know that Elder Locat was the owner of this warm gesture.

"Let's begin!" plays out while various ocean creatures assemble themselves preparing to sing their assigned parts.

Kyra looks around. At first glance, this all looks seemingly innocent. The various Salt creatures line up to perform. The pufferfish emits a deep baritone tune. When Kyra watches them closely enough, they can see the fish unhinge its jaw in preparation for the inhalation. The once small body turns into a giant, light brown ball with sharp spikes threatening anything that surrounds it. Once the puffer fish blow themselves up with water, they let out a long, loud exhalation of deep and low tones that almost make the pink coral reef vibrate under Kyra's feet.

Their *feet.*

They are hyper aware of the absence of vibration in between their toes on their left foot.Then, Krya turns to the eels. The eels expel high tenors that visibly start at their tail, traveling quickly like a ball of air rushing through their long, narrow bodies. The balls of air accentuate the bright teal lines that separate the brown spots surrounding the eel's body. Kyra whips their head around to look at the most remarkable of them all, the lionfish. Their orange-brown and white stripes quiver with each soprano note they release. The power each note holds should cause some sort of jarring movement, but the lionfish holds steady in their allotted placement. Kyra watches as a picture of each Groupling between the ages of 50 and 60 human years is displayed on a black and smooth vertical rock. Kyra's species usually live to 200 human years, but what they don't know is this number has been decreasing dramatically over the last century.

<div align="center">

Petrise Commune - 30 wave-years
Appearance: 8/10 Cobalts
Health: 9/10 Cobalts
Intelligence: 7/10 Cobalts
Overall Score: 24/30 Cobalts

</div>

The vibrating crowd watches as each Groupling receives their judgment. As Kyra watches, their entire body tenses in anticipation. Kyra knows their name is not going to appear on the luminescent rock screen. But, maybe if they look hard enough, with enough will, their name will shock the entire crowd with a perfect score!

It doesn't.

It never will. Petrise is worth 24 Cobalts, and Cobalts are the most valuable compound found in Kyra's ocean home. Kyra is worth none *socially*. Unwilling to further their humiliation, Kyra hops up pressing their ankles together. They zoom through the coral structures of their secretly depleting commune. They feel the tiny swoosh of water that separates them from the edge of every surface they pass in their retreat.. Finally, Kyra lands on the shiny white rock that marks their safety. They start to taste the familiar flavor of their tears against the stark taste of the Salt Water. The taste is hard to explain. The tears are salty, but not like the ocean water. Kyra can taste that the tears are a part of them. The tears are special to Kyra and only Kyra. As they close their eyes and lay their head on their slippery knee, they see something -

FLASH!

"Hello?" Kyra asks in a shaky, but strong voice.

Nothing. No creatures seem to be lurking around them. Whatever. Kyra returns to their isolated pity party -

FLASH!

Kyra cautiously swims behind a rock next to their perch, peeking over to where the flashing seems to be coming from. They stare at the translucent, bright gray rays of light…waiting. Nothing happens. Just as Kyra is about to swim back to their safe spot -

FLASH!

"Hello? Who's there?" Kyra asks in a weaker voice.

When no one replies, Kyra swims closer and deeper, investigating the unknown. They've never gone this close to the light rays before…they've never had a reason to. Kyra swims down to the base of these tunnels of light. The closer they look at the base, the more confused they get. The base is bright, brighter than anything they've ever seen. The more Kyra looks at the brightness, the more darkness creeps into their vision as they look away. Kyra can see these structures aren't really tunnels at all. Each individual eruption of light seems to be illuminating from five distinct points. There's a point at the top of the emission, below it lies two points directly across from each other, and then two more points below that.

It's beautiful.

FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!

Different individual tunnels of light flash at different times. Kyra giggles at the strange, radiant show. They had no idea the rays of light that have comforted them for so long, came from so many individual origins. They look like they are in clusters. One cluster has three light bases that form a diagonal line. Another group has seven bases, the bottom four bases almost create a perfect square while the remaining three look like a handle of some sort. One of the bases in the square flickers.

FLASH!

Then one on the top of the handle -

FLASH!

Kyra lets out a surprised laugh. They swim over to the top of the handle structure and wave their hand over the tunnel of silver light.

"Woah!" Kyra exclaims as a rush of electricity rushes through their arm, then their torso, legs, and feet - "Ow!"

Kyra looks at their left foot and winces. They shake their foot as the sting lingers and then dissipates.

FLASH!

But, this time the flash comes from beyond the area that Kyra is exploring. They timidly swim towards the new flash until the only thing separating Kyra and the area of the new flash is a small patch of seagrass that barely extends above Kyra's head. Kyra takes a deep breath and cautiously moves into the grass.

FLASH!

This time, Kyra feels the flash in their body, feeling the same electric sensation they felt when they touch the tunnels of light. Except when they feel this flash, they are snapped back into a memory, a memory of their ancestors.

1500 AED (AFTER EARTH'S DEATH)

"I don't understand why the Elders are doing this," groupling Hylie says with tears in their eyes.

"They said it's better for all of us if we separate. They said if we don't, we are killing our planet," Bruin says while mirroring Hylie's tears.

"How will I talk to you? Who's going to tell me when my braids are out of place or stuck to my fins? I guess you don't need me for that since you don't have any braids or anything" Hylie says, suddenly aware of the physical differences between Bruin and themself.

Where Hylie has five identically long braids, Bruin has short scruff surrounding their head. Where Hylie has two symmetrical breasts, Bruin has none. And, finally, where Hylie has a small opening at the center point between their hips, Bruin has an almost fin-like structure ready to fertilize.. But, that was then.

Before.

Back then, Bruin had the freedom to choose their mate, whether the mate looked more like Bruin or more like Hylie. These are minute differences in appearance. There are actually more physical variations amongst Hylie and their fellow breasted grouplings than Hylie and Bruin. But, what's really striking is that both grouplings have no fins on the back of their feet and no webbed toes. Even without the weebing, their toes are still long enough so when they put their feet together to swim it still creates a powerful swimming machine.

"I can't just not see you. You're my best friend. I don't even know what a Breeding Center is, Bruin," Hylie whispers, starting to cry again.

"Not here. It's not safe with all of the Elder patrol. Let's go to the lights. I'll go to the Fresh lights and you go to the Salt lights. Use the stone word maps so we can talk safely," Bruin replies as the two Grouplings separate.

As Bruin swims towards the land strip, Hylie follows a familiar path. Passing through different bright orange and pink coral formations. They reach the dark rock ledge and dive down towards the large white rock surrounded by seagrass. When they finally arrive at the formation of light, they stand silently as they take it in. Then, Hylie swims across the seagrass to a large bed of light clusters. Hylie and Bruin have created flash codes on various stone surfaces next to each cluster. Hylie swims over to the cluster they call *Taurus*. The stone next to this collection of light tunnels signals:

Top Point One FLASH: Hi, are you stable?
Top Point Two FLASHES: Do you want to sneak away and hunt for food?
Top Point Three FLASHES: I need to go to sleep

Hylie extends their arm through the top point of the center light tunnel within the cluster once every two human minutes, waiting for Bruin's reply.

FLASH! FLASH!

Hylie sees the flashes coming from the bottom light tunnel of the cluster.

"When do you leave for the Breeding Center," Bruin flashes.

"Tomorrow morning. The Elders are saying it's an honor to be chosen. But, why are they doing this? Separating us based on the mere absence or presence of a fertilizing fin? That's separating half of our community, Bruin. What's going to happen to our community? We are connected to each other. We need each other," Hylie moves breathlessly as they zig zag through light clusters.

"I passed by Bhast and Zelle crying in each other's arms. The taste of their tears told me it was them before I even saw them. They told me the Elder patrol is forcing them to say their goodbyes before they are permanently separated. They said one of the patrol Elders laughed at them and said if they were lucky, maybe they'll see each other again in the Breeding Center. Do you know where it is?" Bruin replies.

"I don't know for sure, but I heard Elder Barret whispering to a patrol Elder. They said the center is at the most Northern point of the land strip. They said it was placed in the middle of the strip with aqueducts of Fresh and Salt water leading back to each body of water. Bruin, I'm scared -" Hylie cuts off.

PRESENT DAY - LIGHT FIELD

Kyra snaps back into reality. Freshies and Salties used to live together? That doesn't make sense. Salties can't live in Freshwater and Freshies can't live in Saltwater. That's survival 101 on Planet Loryn. As Kyra exits the magical seagrass, their gills start dancing and their heart rate increases.

The landscape in front of them is humanly breathtaking. The field of light possesses a strange dichotomy between remote anonymity and clear evidence that this used to be some groupling's domain. There is seagrass planted around the entirety of the light field, even where seagrass would not have grown naturally. It looks like someone moved rock formations to create the proper soil conditions for the plant. It's as if there is a body of forest protecting its sacred organs. There are dug out paths around the formations with four dug out holes at each corner of the field. Kyra walks timidly in the paths, ready to swim for safety at any moment. They reach one of the dug out holes at the right upper corner of the landscape.

"Holy cobalt," Kyra whispers as they look out.

They are standing in the perfect vantage point. They can see every single light tunnel, hundreds of them! But, that's not all they can see. Each formation has a distinct shape like the box and handle at their favorite rock. There are lumps of sand at the lower corners of each formation. Everything looks deserted and sanded over by years and years of abandonment; left untouched. Kyra reaches down and uses their webbed hand to dust over the top of the lumps. It takes Kyra over 20 human minutes to uncover the large slabs of stone, similar in shape and

function to human pieces of paper. On the large slabs, Kyra sees various codes that align with each base that emits the silver lights.

<div align="center">

Cassiopeia
(cluster furthest away from commune)
Left Top Point One FLASH = Yes
Left Top Point Two FLASHES = No
Left Bottom Point One FLASH = Hi
Left Bottom Point Two FLASHES = Bye

</div>

Kyra reads as the listings go on and on with hundreds of stones lined up with various light formations.

FLASH!

Kyra spots the flash occurring two clusters to their left.

"Is anyone there?" the light illuminates.

Kyra can barely hold their excitement and curiosity. "Yes," Krya flashes hesitantly.

"Hi! I have never received a response before. Is it safe?" the light flashes.

"Are you stable?" Kyra fumbles. This whole swimming in a maze thing is exhausting.

"What? Yes, I guess I am stable. I've been trying to reach someone in the Salt body! I need your help. My connection partner was taken to the Breeding Center against their will. I tried to stop them, but the patrol attacked and arrested me. I just got out of the patrol cells, but no one will help me," the flashes continue.

Kyra is not surprised.

There was never a ban on who you could be with, but the Elder patrol does make it their business to remind couplings that their connection partner could be taken away at any second. It's not like your Earth. Kyra's species never categorized themselves by "men" and "women." But, the ancestors couldn't risk future division. Better for them to make a physical division themselves than risk a full-blown gender revolution. The last gender revolution on Earth was the beginning of its demise, and Planet Loryn's ancestors watched it happen.

Kyra doesn't know this part, but they know enough to suspect that something is not right.

"I'm so sorry. But, you'll get them back at the end of Breeding season, right?" Kyra asks.

"You know just as well as I do that they never come back the same as they go in. They're gonna suck the life right of them," even the flashes have a hopeless tone to them.

"I know this sounds crazy and I know you aren't connected with me, but I'm gonna find a way to the Breeding Center. I don't care if they catch me, and I don't care if they throw me in a patrol cell for the rest of my wave years. I need to do this and I know it's the right thing to do," the flashes continue.

Kyra's head starts to spin. A rogue adventure to the Breeding Center? Are they crazy? But then, Kyra starts to feel the allure of a tugging feeling in their gut. As odd as it might sound, Kyra has never been asked to be a part of something. Their community exiled them from any Breeding activities due to their left foot. The Salt body community wanted nothing to do with them. They didn't offer perfect genetics and the Elders were only interested in just that:

perfection. But, that's the silly contradiction of "perfection." Who decides what perfect means? Everyone in Kyra's surrounding community possessed *normal* this and *normal* that, but *normal* isn't *perfect.* Is it?

"Let's do it," Kyra flashes with a determined grin on their face. They swim around feeling a little lighter. Kyra glides in and out of the luminescent tunnels. They graze the outer edges of the tunnels as they swim up and down, left and right, using their body as a spinning apparatus. Each time they feel the light, it enters through their rubbery gray skin, traveling through the veins of their arms, circling around their torso like a dancing light, and finally exiting through their toes.

This is Kyra's favorite part about the lights, it also has been. When the light exits their toes, it's the only time that Kyra feels connected with their rejected limb. It's like the light is telling them that their shame isn't actually shame; as if the light is ripping off the disguise of shame that has been forcibly placed there and replacing it with shining potential.

PRESENT DAY- TIME TO LEAVE THE CORAL COMMUNITY

Kyra traces the coral walls of their bedroom with their netted fingers. The rough divots lightly scrape Kyra's rubbery skin; it almost tickles. Kyra's never left their coral home before. Only Elders are allowed to leave the coral community for long periods of time. But, in order to achieve the status of an Elder, you have to partake in 20 Breeding seasons.

Kyra frowns as they always do when they think about this particular dilemma. How were they supposed to become an Elder when they aren't allowed to partake in anything to do with Breeding? Kyra lets out a long sigh. They don't understand how it's possible that there are no other grouplings like them. If the Breeding Center never makes *mistakes,* what the cobalt was Kyra doing here?

"Ow!" Kyra yelps as a sharp grove in the coral pricks their index finger. Kyra's species possess five fingers like you, but they are all webbed together working as one body.

Kyra watches as the few drops of deep, dark gray blood float away from their finger. They feel the hair from the ends of their braids brush their shoulders causing them to shiver. This is not the time for distractions.

Kyra finishes their packing and grabs a sliver of basalt rock. They had etched the rock with directions to the edge of the landstrip where the Fresh groupling is going to meet them. By the end of their conversation last Earth night, Kyra felt a weird sensation towards this mysterious groupling. It wasn't a sexual feeling or even kinship. It was a feeling deep in their bones, the essence of their very being.

Maybe it was the fact that Kyra had never felt seen before. Maybe it was because their mundane just got slapped in the face with the extraordinary. But, Kyra knew it was more than this. It felt as if someone was behind them nodding in encouragement at every step Kyra takes.

Kyra swerves through the various holes in the coral leading the way out. They pass their fellow grouplings sleeping in their plush sea anemone beds. Each bedroom has two grouplings, two beds, two abalone mirrors, and two shelves made of hollowed out dark basalt stone. Kyra

lets out an involuntary gasp as their face hits the cooler temperature of the ocean water outside of the reef.

They turn around and look at their mile-long intricate home. Kyra feels a twang of guilt picturing Elder Locat's face when they figure out Kyra isn't in their assigned room. Kyra takes a deep breath and heads out on their adventure.

PRESENT DAY - MEETING POINT

Kyra knows they arrive at the meeting point early because the sun is not directly overhead. Kyra giggles as they think about the journey they had just completed. At first, Kyra was scared by the vastness of the ocean. They felt as if something could creep up on them at any moment and swallow them whole. But, the faster they swam, the more in control they felt.

Kyra smiles as they remember the moment the dolphins joined them. Kyra has never felt air on their skin like they did when they mimicked the dolphins swimming style. Kyra felt light and free from the permanent pressure of the ocean's swaddling body. They even enjoyed the swarms of fish that would force them to slow down. For the first time, Kyra could taste the freedom of the ocean. Kyra pops their head out of the water and takes an unfamiliar deep breath of air.

"Hello?" Kyra hears from a close deep voice.

"I'm over here!" Kyra yells, suddenly realizing that they don't even know this groupling's name.

Kyra watches as a small figure emerges from the large leaves of a tree reminiscent of the Amazon. Kyra can't help but draw in a quick breath, still surprised by the unfamiliar expansion in their chest. The figure has the same dark gray skin as Kyra, but they are taller and broader. Where Kyra has braids, this groupling as knotted brown hair that just touches the top of their small ears. The figure has no breasts and is wearing sea kelp protection where their fertilizing appendage exists. But what sticks out the most is the groupling's left foot. They are missing the webbing material in between their toes just like Kyra.

"Hi, my name is Kyra," Kyra says softly, suddenly shy.

"Hi, my name is Rylo. We don't have much time. Elder patrols will canvas this area eventually, so we have to move. Come on," Rylo says as they extend their webbed hand towards Kyra.

Kyra hesitates. They've never done this before. This is the decision that really marks their adventure as real. But, reality comes with real consequences. Kyra shakes their head.

"Let's do this," Kyra says as meet Rylo's hand.

The instant Kyra touches Rylo's hand they feel the same electric charge as when they touch the light tunnels.

"Woah, what was that?!" Kyra shreeks.

"I don't know! That's the same feeling I get when I touch the stars!" Rylo replies.

"Stars?"

"The beams of light. Our ancestors called them stars, or at least that's what the seagrass told me," Rylo answers as they help Kyra stand on the land strip.

"Woah!" Kyra yells as they almost lose their footing. The ground is wet and buoyant.

"Dig your toes in like this," Rylo says softly as they flex their toes, separating each one. Then they use their toes to penetrate the soil and anchor their weight. "It feels weird at first, but this is why our feet are like this. We were made to walk here, Kyra."

The cold, soft soil feels foreign to the untouched crevasses in between Kyra's toes. Rylo starts to walk faster. It looks almost like a dance. Rylo anchors their left foot, while sliding their right foot to the front of their body, and then hopping their left foot to anchor again.

"Wait! Before we go any further, I need some answers," Kyra says.

"I told you we don't have much time," Rylo says as they turn their head back to look at Kyra.

"Fine, but only for a moment. What do you want to know?" Rylo asks in a hurried voice.

"What are stars? What do you mean by the seagrass talking to you? Why is your foot like mine? How did you know my foot was going to be like yours?" Krya fires at them.

"The seagrass that surrounds the stars is magic. It holds the memories of our ancestors. They call the light stars. I'm not completely sure why, but it has something to do with Earth. Our ancestors used to have feet like ours. All grouplings and Elders did. But, they don't want us on land. From what I can gather, our ancestors voted on how to deal with a problem that killed Earth. I don't exactly know what the problem was, but it was bad. So our ancestors divided us and created the Breeding Center. Since we weren't allowed on land anymore, our species evolved to grow webbing between our toes. You and I are remnants of the physiological makeup of our ancestors. I can't explain how I knew your foot was like mine. It's like someone has been with me during this whole journey, guiding me towards the right path," Rylo says patiently.

"Okay…" Krya trails off trying to digest everything.

"If I only knew exactly where the Breeding Center was," Rylo says more to themself than Kyra.

"I know where it is! I was in the seagrass and I think it told me where it is!" Kyra squeals.

"Amazing! I'll follow you!" Rylo matches Kyra's excited tone.

Kyra turns to walk towards the direction they can feel is right, but then stops. They suddenly feel shy and self-conscious about their movement on land. Without trying to make their embarrassment too obvious, Kyra anchors their toes into the soil and slides their right foot up in front of them. With a deep breath, Kyra then hops their left foot as far forward as they can, repeating the anchoring process.

"So, who was your connection partner?" Kyra asks as they anchor and slide towards the northernmost point on the planet's land strip.

"Is. Who is my connection partner. Their name is Shawnt. We've been connected since we were starting out as grouplings. We had been waned off our various Breeders and the Elders put us in the same coral community. But, my pretend limp made it impossible for me to be put into Breeding consideration…and Shanwt…well, they're perfect. The spitting image of a perfect Breeder," Rylo says oozing contempt.

"Do you remember your time in the Breeding Center? Of the grouplings that actually acknowledged me, none of them could remember their time in the Breeding Center…neither can I," Kyra says.

"No. I think they do something to all of us to make sure we don't remember. They keep so many secrets from us. It's not right. Something is not right. I can feel it," Rylo says.

"I can feel it too…I just wish I knew what *it* is," Kyra replies.

Both grouplings move in silence for a while. Kyra can feel their toes getting sore and tired from tensely holding their weight. They can hear various birds chirping and the rustle of tree leaves in the wind. This was kind of the perfect incognito path. The grouplings were almost fully encompassed by the canopy of the jungle. The dark green leaves glisten against the bright blue sky and burning sun. Just as they are nearing the north point, Kyra begins to tingle.

"Do you feel that?" Rylo asks?

"Yes, but I don't know what *that is*," Kyra whispers.

"I think we are -" Rylo stops as they come into view of a large, red brick building.

Kyra gulps as they take in the view. The red building is sitting in the middle of the land strip. It looks about half a mile long and three stories tall. There are Elders walking in various directions near the building, but none of them see the grouplings. Kyra watches as a bunch of grouplings are being brought in on stretchers. As they look closer, Kyra realizes that these grouplings are from their coral home. There's Petrise that constantly bullied Kyra, and Sapphire who constantly made fun of Kyra's foot.

"Why aren't they moving?" Kyra whispers to Rylo.

"The Elders gave them something to make them fall asleep. I saw them do that to Shawnt before they carried them away on those stretchers. Follow me. I think I know how to get in," Rylo answers.

Kyra follows Rylo as they head to a small circular container 50 feet behind the Breeding Center.

"I saw this while talking to the seagrass. This is where they throw out old Elder robes like the ones those patrol Elders are wearing," Rylo says as they take off the light yellow lid of the circular container.

Rylo hands Kyra a tan robe. The material feels scratchy against Kyra's skin as they put it on. Rylo reaches deeper into the vessel so that they are almost falling into it. Rylo returns to the upright position with a smile and two pairs of tan slippers.

"Perfect! The seagrass showed me they wore these things on land, but I wasn't sure! Now we can hide our feet, Kyra!" Rylo says excitedly.

Kyra wears a tight, forced smile as they slide on the slippers. This is all happening very fast.

"Let's go!" Rylo exclaims.

Rylo grabs Kyra's hand and leads them to the front of the Breeding Center. Kyra fights every cell in their body screaming at them to turn around and return to safety. But, their reef isn't *really* safe, is it? Rylo and Kyra walk on the rocky path, designed to allow any member of the

species to walk upon it with ease. The slimy moss is nowhere to be seen. There are no doors within the Breeding Center like your human buildings. Everything is open. The first thing the grouplings hear as they enter the heart of the building is screaming. Kyra doesn't know where to turn their head because in every direction is screaming. This doesn't make sense. There are Elders walking around with smiles, exchanging small talk while blood curdling screams are echoing and bouncing off the brick walls. Rylo continues to pull Kyra through hallways like a horror maze. Kyra tries to focus on the smooth, light gray stone floors, and the grooves within the red bricks of the walls similar to the grooves in their coral walls. Suddenly, they approach the outside of a large room. There is a glass-like substance that separates Kyra and Rylo from the interior of the room.

"What the…." Kyra trails off.

The room looks like it's inhabiting around 30 grouplings all chained to a bed like you would see in your human hospital. Every single groupling looks like they have been blown up. Then, Kyra realizes they are pregnant. They all have tubes in their noses that lead back to a bag full of an orange substance.

"This is our stagnant stage," an Elder says, ten feet away from Kyra and Rylo. The Elder seems to be giving a tour to a new batch of patrollers.

"What is the process before this stage?" a new recruit asks.

"Well, your assigned mentor should have quizzed you on this. But, after we decide who is physically fit enough to be a Breeder, we inject them with a jellyfish serum that knocks them out for a while. This is important because?" the elder asks.

"So they can't remember where the Breeding Center is," a recruit answers.

"Exactly. Then, we decide which grouplings will reproduce the best with each other. This part can get a little rowdy because some of these grouplings have connection partners already. So, we usually give them a mix of jellyfish serum and oyster serum. This knocks them out enough to the point where they don't really know what's going on, but the oyster helps get them in the mood. Once the two grouplings latch, we immediately send the impregnated groupling here, where they will grow the infant until birth," the Elder says in a matter of fact tone.

"Why are they all asleep? Does each groupling do this once?"

"We can't risk any problems with the allowance of conscious thought. Each chosen groupling has about 10-20 infants. Then, we give them another serum that will make them forget their time here. They may never fully regain their cognitive function, but they have served their community, and for that, they are *proud,*" the Elder says with actual pride.

"This isn't right," Kyra whispers. "People need to know."

"I need to find Shawnt," Rylo says.

Rylo begins to move quickly, rounding each corner with more and more speed. Finally, they make it to the Breeding room. Kyra lets out an involuntary shriek. Each pair of grouplings are separated by a white cloth in a space no bigger than 10-by10 feet. The contents of these small cubby-like spaces are horrific. The grouplings are stumbling around naked, making incoherent noises with blank stares.

"He's right there," Rylo says, pointing to the sheet closest to the door.

"Rylo...we can't just-" Kyra says as Rylo slams their fist against the glass-like structure; the drugged out grouplings don't even flinch.

"I'm so close to him and I can't do anything about it!" Rylo screams.

"Shhhhhhh. Rylo, it's okay. We will figure something out," Krya says while placing their hand on Rylo's shoulder, like Elder Locat had once done for Kyra.

Kyra feels a jolt of electricity. It's that presence *again.* That feeling of electricity. That feeling that Kyra felt when they first touched the stars. That feeling Kyra felt when the seagrass talked to them. The stars….the seagrass….that's it!

"Rylo, I know what we need to do. But, right now we need to go," Kyra says in a soft tone.

"Not again. Please, not again," Rylo says with tears in their eyes.

"Trust me," Kyra says.

Kyra pulls on Rylo's hand this time. Kyra leads the way out of the Breeding Center holding their breath each time they pass a group of Elders. But, that's the thing. Kyra and Rylo are so used to being invisible and cast aside that they know how to play the part perfectly. They scamper down the rocky path and make it to their initial hiding place where they first viewed the building.

"Okay, here's what we need to do. You and I are going back to my community. We are going to start by showing them you exist and can exist in our water too. Then, we are going to lead everyone to the stars and seagrass, so they can see for themselves. We are going to fix this, Rylo. We are going to get Shawnt back I promise," Kyra pulls Rylo's head between their hands to make sure Rylo is absorbing their plan.

"What if they don't listen to us? Have they ever listened to us?" Rylo asks in a defeated tone.

"We will make them listen to us," Kyra states determinedly.

Kyra doesn't wait for a response. Instead, they grab Rylo's hand and begin the anchorage skipping dance to the edge of the Saltwater. As they approach the edge, Kyra turns back towards the land strip. Everything they knew about their planet was wrong. Their species weren't supposed to have the ability to walk on land. Their species weren't supposed to possess the ability to exist in both bodies of water. Most importantly, their species were supposed to be *free*. It is through all of this wrong that Krya was finally able to discover the right. Kyra looks down at their left foot, and for the first time they didn't view it as wrong. Hell, this foot was about to save their freaking planet.

PRESENT DAY - ANCESTOR'S REMARK

So, I guess it's true that our ancestors embody our mistakes. We just didn't overcome them, at least not by Kyra's time. As Kyra's ancestor, I tried to correct Earth's wrongs, but I was outvoted by the means in which to accomplish it. I never wanted a Breeding Center. I never wanted division. But, you'd have to experience the circumstances we were under. Your planet

had just died because of a social construct that you humans literally made up! We had underestimated the power of social constructs. So, we eradicated them. We failed to see that through the process of eradication, we were creating equally unjust practices. That's why I stole the stars of Earth's sky and planted the magic seagrass. I knew one day that two grouplings would find them. When Kyra and Rylo touched my stars, I knew that they were the ones. I talked to them through their senses to keep them on the right path. I might not have had the power to right the wrongs over 3000 years ago. But, through revealing the wrongs, I have led Kyra and Rylo to the right. They will be the ancestors that overcome the social construct of gender. They will overcome your mistakes. They will overcome our mistakes.

Eternal Companion
by Robin Le

Image drawn by Robin Le

Artist Statement

I did not expect to write a science-fiction piece. Although this may seem obvious in creative writing, I find it fascinating that life finds a way to integrate into a work of art. While in the process of writing my project – which had first focused on the absurd, a literary and philosophical movement focusing on the irrationality and meaninglessness of life – I was taking a Latin American Science Fiction class. I therefore became interested in the question that science fiction always proposes: "what if?" This ties in with the inspiration of my project, which is from my personal addiction with my phone. The creation of Oracle occurred when I was trying to sleep. I had used my phone for longer than I wanted to and although more exposure to blue light makes me fall asleep quickly, I hated that I had to rely on my phone to always lull me quickly to sleep. I then became terrified of the thought that a technology monster, a conglomeration of phones, tablets, computers, and television screens, would chase me, forcing their many screens upon me. The monster would be a perfect way to encapsulate how I felt about my use of technology and also demonstrate the binary between humans and technology.

Similar to Cassius, I have woken up with my phone clutched in my hand because I had used my phone until my eyelids could no longer stay open. The temptation to use my phone at every moment has become increasingly harder the more I see others around me use their phone. I still have restraint, such as when I walk or am in company with others, but similar to Cassius, I have moments where I tell myself to resist the temptation and fail. In my research I came across a [PBS article](#), which centers on an interview with Tristan Harris, a former Google employee. Essentially, corporations want to keep people as long as possible on social media platforms,

streaming services and other apps to make money. He says even Gmail is addictive. Google was not trying to get people addicted to email but the design choice to make your phone buzz every time you received an email has hotwired our brains. Essentially, notifications give us the feeling that we are always in the know. We don't want to feel that we have missed anything. So, Cassius recognizes that he uses his phone too much but it is hard for him to detach himself from something that offers so much for him.

With addiction, it is difficult to purge something that has become an instant gratification and habit. This thought of purging technology from me reminded me of something I learned in class, which was the abject. According to French theorist Julia Kristeva, the abject is essentially the human reaction of disgust or horror caused by the loss of distinction in the subject or object before us. Sometimes these things can produce extreme reactions out of us, such as bodily fluids—vomit, blood, excrement, discharge. Cassius wants to cast out his addiction with his phone usage to preserve his physical and mental health. But then Oracle becomes an embodiment of the abject that follows Cassius around. It is a constant reminder that Cassius' understanding of his reality is threatened. Even though Oracle becomes a companion to Cassius, Cassius still sets a boundary. He is a human, Oracle is a machine. He cannot trust it because it is an unknown entity and it diminishes his sense of power. He no longer has a sense of control in his life and the uncertainty of what the monster will do to Cassius increases his fear and anxiety. He knows nothing; therefore he is powerless. The first part of the story is about the mundane aspect of life. The role of technology in the work environment is integral in most office jobs, so I wanted Cassius to feel burnt out. He feels lonely but he doesn't let it affect him until Mario tells him he couldn't hang out anymore. Maybe Mario was lying, maybe he didn't want to hang out with Cassius anymore, or maybe he was telling the truth. It doesn't matter because Cassius still feels that he is never the number one option. He resorts to using technology to drown out his sadness and his loneliness.

The theme of loneliness originated from my observations of people when they eat alone. Usually, most are using their phones to keep themselves entertained while eating. But sometimes they look lonely and the image of a person's only companion being an inanimate object is terrifying. Perhaps they don't feel lonely, but humans are inherently social beings. Some of my friends used to be scared or abhor the idea of eating alone, saying that they felt awkward. So, to mitigate these feelings of awkwardness and loneliness, phones have become a human's companion. It is ironic that to be sociable we use inanimate objects as a medium. According to Healthline, our brain transmits dopamine, a chemical that makes us feel good. For many, social interactions release dopamine in our system. Phones have become a tool of social interaction, so one mindless scroll on a social media platform can hardwire our brain into pursuing this constant feeling of satisfaction. Social media platforms and other services cater to our needs and therefore it is incredibly hard to stop using our phones. Using our phones gives us the satisfaction of taking a break, of being able to enjoy doing something that isn't necessarily in our schedule. Cassius berates himself for using his phone so much because in his brain, he deems it as unproductive. Not only that, but he can feel the physical effects of chronic phone use. His eyes are constantly throbbing and he has headaches and migraines that come and go. His sleep cycle, even when he achieves 8 hours of sleep, is still affected by the blue light emitting from his phone. There are many memes of people acknowledging that they use their phones at night even more, refusing to let their tired bodies take a break from blue light.

I created a juxtaposition between what Cassius and Oracle want. Cassius does not want to feel lonely and wants a connection with something that will distract him from his life, but he

does not want it to be all-consuming. He is touch starved. Touch for him is important as he can feel whole; he can feel that he is wanted and that he is loved. Since his family is far from him and his friends are busy, he is bereft of social connection. However, Oracle, who innately loves Cassius, abhors physical contact, seeing as this entity believes there is a higher form of connection. To merge is to be connected. Physical touch is nowhere near consuming in the eyes of Oracle. Which ties in with the overconsumption and overstimulation of media and just life in general. There are so many things that corporations provide us, such as social media, streaming, commercial advertisements, and mass libraries of knowledge provided on the internet that it overwhelms us. But at the same time, we seek these things to forever be entertained and to structure our lives into something that isn't "boring." This overstimulation is something Oracle wants – essentially the PBS article article influenced how I wanted Oracle to value consumption – but Cassius rejects. He ultimately knows that connections need to be genuine and consensual, not forced and manipulative.

Overall, I was interested in the binary between humans and technology. How do you separate from something that is integral in life? Do you let it consume you or do you try to set boundaries? I believe eventually with all these technological advancements, such as AI, there might not be a boundary between technology and humans.

Eternal Companion

I.

Cassius believes that waking up to unbearable pain is a sign of aging. Although he is only twenty-five, his neck hurts, his back throbs, and his eyes are pulsating with pain. He blearily opens his eyes, wincing as the terrible throbbing at the back of his head increases. He tries to adjust his eyes to the environment. The rays of the sun have filtered in through the curtains, the room enveloped in a dim glow. He blinks again, and groans as his eyes pulse in tandem with the pain in the back of his head.

Cassius slowly moves his head to the right to check his digital alarm clock and reaches out to grab it. It reads 07:12AM. Earlier than usual. He sets the alarm clock down and struggles to sit up on his bed. He rolls his neck, sits up straight and rubs his head gently. He opens the first drawer cabinet, where his phone, his journal and his Tylenol bottle reside. He had recently started using an alarm clock rather than his phone, trying to decrease how much time he spent using his phone at night and in the morning. He takes a Tylenol, chugging it down with the water in his flask. *Hopefully this migraine fades away quickly.*

Cassius begins to perform his daily routine: change into his clothes, brush and wash his face, cook his breakfast, and watch a comedy series on his phone. Although the migraine is gone, there are still some lingering effects of the pulsating sensation behind his eyes. However, Cassius desperately wants to watch the new episode that was released last night, even though he knows he should give his eyes a break.

Right before he leaves his apartment, he takes a cursory glance at his reflection. For once, his clothes do not look disheveled as he had taken the time to iron them last night. His curly brown hair is as neat as he can possibly get it to be, his black-rimmed glasses perfectly hide the faint appearance of the bags under his eye, and his cheeks look hollow. *Good Lord, I need to go outside*, he thinks. *The sun will definitely rejuvenate me*. He heads out, locking his door. He exhales contently as the sun blares down on him, the warmth enveloping him in a hug. *This is what I need every day*. The studies were right. Going out really does improve the quality of your day, at least that is what he has read. He can feel his cheeks start to gain a natural flush.

He quickly runs to the bus. The bus is almost full by the time he gets on it. He is able to find a seat hidden in the back, although he hates having to pass the people that stood on the bus. He could feel their awkwardness augmented by his own guilt for causing a disturbance. He watches the people get off the bus and watches as more come in. He wishes he could people-watch all day. There is something nice about just sitting down, without a care in the world, observing the bustle of the city. A little girl and her mother sit down in front of him, the girl with a phone in her hand. She is so enraptured by what she is watching that he notices that she hardly blinks, almost as if she was afraid of losing a millisecond of her fixation. Although he shouldn't be surprised, she isn't the only passenger to be staring at their phone. It makes him desperately want to reach into his pocket to use his phone, but with great resistance, he just watches as others use their phones, mindlessly scrolling.

He glances out the window, watching a woman in her car drum her fingers on the steering wheel. He smiles. Such mundane things that bring a smile to his face. The thought escapes his mind as he sees the familiar statue across the building he works at. He gets off the bus and inhales and exhales deeply.

Today is going to be a good day.

Cassius works in an office building. The outside painted a beautiful picture compared to the inside offices. The office he worked at only had one window, so hardly any natural light was able to filter through. The unnatural fluorescent lights above him always gave him a ghastly look to his skin tone, at least he thought so. Every time he goes to the mirror in the restroom, he sees how tired his eyes look, the deep exhaustion permeating throughout his entire facial expression.

No, it wasn't the lights. He knew he kept using his phone too much at night. He'll stop. Cassius shakes his head at himself: *Why am I lying to myself?* He hums as he gets on the elevator, quickly pressing the close button. Mario said he was going to ask Elena out today. Elena was a nice coworker, but she was the definition of laziness. He couldn't believe Mario liked her. He ignores it. "None of my business anyways," he mutters under his breath. He was

looking forward to hanging out later with Mario, though. The previous week, Mario had invited him to go to a club with some of his friends and he jumped at the chance to finally have some fun. All of Cassius' friends have been so busy. Plus, he likes Mario. He's the only one he has actual conversations with.

He walked to his desk, the furthest one in the room, and unfortunately with a perfect view of Elena and her work ethic. Which was none. He sits down in the uncomfortable chair and looks towards his right, imagining a window where he can feel the rays of the sun shine on his body, where he can stare at the people who walk and the cars that speed. Instead, he is met with a beige wall, the dim unnatural light cascading above him. There was something so horrible about sitting here for hours, with his eyes solely focused on his computer and the dim lighting affecting his mood.

He turns on his computer and gets to work. He finds comfort in the repetition of his job. But he's been getting more headaches. *Maybe I should buy blue light glasses. Although I wouldn't be able to see anything. I have to place them on top of my glasses. Oh, never mind.*

It's almost lunch time when he spares a glance at Elena. She's hunched over her phone, swiveling her chair. He pays her no mind, and tries to finish his last task before he takes his break. He yawns, the feeling of closing his eyes heavenly.

Why am I so tired? I had 8 hours of sleep! Then he remembers he stayed up longer than he should have reading *Frankenstein*. It doesn't help that at almost every waking moment he is staring at a screen. Cassius groans, feelings of resentment towards himself boiling up inside. He doesn't want to feel like this and yet, he continues to use his phone late at night.

He's almost done with his work when he hears a faint giggle. Elena is now scrolling TikTok, and he starts to realize that she hasn't done any work since he sat down. A fire starts to burn deep within him. He is frustrated. Apparently when his boss thought he was slacking on the job, he gave him a warning to do better next time. Elena doesn't do anything and she gets no reprimand!

He hears her pick up the phone.

"Hey, what's up?" She nods and smiles. "Yeah, I'm doing nothing. I'm bored."

Bored. How are you bored if you haven't been working. You little piece of shit. He continues typing, his eyes bleeding as he stares at the blue screen in anger. *Why am I so angry*, he wonders. *I shouldn't be this angry. Ignore her.*

He doesn't.

"Hey Cassius!" He looks up and it's Mario, one of his coworkers, the only one he actually has a conversation with.

"Hey, Mario," Cassius says with enthusiasm. As Mario gets closer to his desk, he asks, "We still going out?"

"Dude, I'm gonna have to rain check on it. One of my friends got sick so he won't be able to go anymore. And I'm actually feeling kind of tired. You know how it is."

"Oh, yeah I totally understand. Maybe some other time." He keeps up a jovial conversation with Mario and swallows thickly, his shoulders finally sagging when Mario leaves his desk. He suddenly didn't want to be at work anymore. He wanted to go home, curl up in bed, and watch YouTube for hours. He needed laughter in his life.

At the end of the day, he sighs in relief as he turns off the computer and rubs his eyes. *Gosh, my eyes hurt.* His head hurts too, a pain that doesn't go away unless he closes his eyes. He sighs. His great day turned out to be a mundane, disappointing day. He leaves the building, not bothering to say goodbye to Mario.

By the time Cassius gets to his apartment, he is extremely exhausted. He puts on his striped pajamas – the ones his mom mailed to him – and proceeds to brush his teeth. He likes brushing his teeth; the feel of the bristles against his gums calms him, somehow. He analyzes his reflection, his slow and meticulous movement of his arm moving the brush against his teeth, his callouses from his fingers, the dimness in his eyes. He spits the toothpaste down the drain and looks up again, continuing the process. *I should get a haircut.* Afterwards, he smiles at himself, flashing his pretty white teeth.

He turns off the light, slips under his covers and checks his phone for any emails. Three emails from his boss, and various emails from literary, movie and shopping subscriptions. The throbbing sensation from the morning is back and he exhales deeply. The blue hue from his phone is starting to affect him. He closes his eyes, clutching his phone in his hand. He cannot let it go. *Stop it Cassius, your eyes hurt, your head hurts. Stop looking at your phone.* With great will, he places his phone inside the first cabinet of his drawer. He downs a Tylenol and lays down on his pillow, waiting for the erratic pulsing to fade away.

Resist the temptation. He opens his eyes. *Resist.* His arm is trembling. *Resist.* He stares blankly at the ceiling. Closes them again. Opens them again after some time. He should really go to sleep but he desperately needs to finish Frankenstein. He doesn't resist. He grabs his phone.

He wished he had gone to the library to get the physical copy but he's been so busy and so exhausted that his phone provides a better alternative. The Tylenol is finally kicking in and his headache starts to fade. He covers himself with his blanket, rolls over, and reads till he finishes the book. His last thought before nodding off to sleep is Frankenstein's monster's dejected face.

Cassius wakes up with his phone still clutched in his hand. His eyes ache but thankfully there is no headache accompanying it. Rather, the strain of blinking makes him want to keep is eyelids shut tight. As he tries to adjust to waking up, he ponders over his dream. What a weird dream. Just a screen constantly glowing a pale blue glow. A seemingly innocent smile appears on the screen, but he shivers in fear. It is uncanny. He doesn't want to think of that. Too much screen time that he literally dreamt of a screen. He laughs bitterly.

For some reason, Ricardo, Cassius' father, pops up in his head. He misses his father so much. He misses his mother as well. With a sudden realization, a profound sadness wells inside him. He needs a hug. Cassius instead can only hug his phone. He'll call his parents later. *I'm so touch starved*, Cassius chuckles darkly. He gets up, applies eyedrops to his eyes and begins his day.

Rinse and repeat.

He keeps reading on his phone at night for longer than he wanted to and he wakes up with his eyes barely wanting to open. He has done this before, and would never get daily headaches or migraines. *Surely, this would have passed,* he thinks as he pops another Tylenol.

They hurt so much. He barely wants to do his work. He can't stand looking at a screen. He feels sick to his stomach. He goes on the rest of the day feeling nauseous, his stomach churning constantly. He runs to the restroom and just stares at his reflection. He splashes his face with water and rubs his eyes until he feels them slowly reduce in size.

He needs a break. He can't look at a screen anymore. *Why am I lying to myself, I know I'm going to use my phone for hours on end if I use my vacation days.* He goes back to his desk and blankly stares at the wall.

When he arrives back at his apartment, he runs to the bathroom, heaving over the toilet. He feels it. It wants to come out. That sour taste in his mouth, the accumulation of saliva, his eyes starting to water. But nothing was coming out. He screams in frustration and sticks two fingers down his throat, and groans in disgust as he can feel how his cold fingers slide against his warm tongue, knowing they are dirty from the bus ride. Yet nothing comes out. He spits out saliva.

He moves away from the toilet and then: Vomit. Everywhere. The once white-tiled floor is now covered in a putrid orange. Cassius staggers back, the taste of bile glued to his mouth. He feels terribly impure. He cries. His body visibly shudders, all his pent-up exhaustion and pain purging out of him. *I can't, I can't*, he thinks repeatedly.

Heaving, gagging, spitting. He doesn't feel good. His throat burns and swallowing becomes difficult. He tastes metal. Blood. But it doesn't really taste like blood. *What…?* He coughs until something scratches his throat, and out comes a broken piece of what seems to be…a data chip? Cassius heaves again. *What is happening? Why me*? The black chip lays innocently on the floor, a stark contrast with his vomit. He gags again.

He slumps down to the floor, staring anywhere, but at where he vomited. *What was in his mouth?* He doesn't remember eating anything like that. He leans slightly over his vomit, tears still falling as he observes what came out of him. He blinks. He blinks again and sees it's not there anymore. He recoils quickly, widening his eyes to see if he was hallucinating. It's there. He mentally slaps himself.

"Leave me alone," he says into the air, dizzy, about to cry again.

He doesn't understand why the universe is doing this to him. He gets up to wash his mouth, the disgusting acidic aftertaste of his vomit nauseating him. He brushes his teeth, the mint flavor overflowing his taste buds. He smiles crookedly at the mirror, his red eyes filled with unbearable sadness. He grabs multiple towels and cleans up the mess with his foot. He takes a hold of the thing he vomited, staring at it incredulously. Underneath his confusion, he can feel…something. A sixth sense, if you will. The hair on his arm was raised, goosebumps covering his arms. He could not explain why this came out of his body and he was absolutely terrified.

He chucks it in the trash can. Physically, he feels better. Mentally, his mind is frazzled. He continues to clean, occasionally looking inside his trashcan to observe the chip. For some reason, he is compelled to touch it. He picks it up again and thinks about his dream. He startles and drops the chip back. *Just go back to bed and don't think about it.*

Cassius moves lethargically towards his bed, grabs his pajamas from under his pillow and changes into them. He feels…he doesn't know what he feels. Empty inside, literally. Cassius doesn't even have the strength to chuckle at his pun. He then sinks into his bed and doesn't even have the energy to check his phone. He knocks out in an instant.

<div align="center">II.</div>

Tink, tink. Tink, tink.

Bleary-eyed, Cassius groans. For once these past weeks, he doesn't feel a throbbing pain at the back of his head or his eyes. He could almost cry in joy.

Tink, tink.

His eyes snap open.

He rolls over and checks his alarm clock. It is 8:11AM. Cassius groans, stretching out on his bed. He is now definitely not going to work. He hears that tinking sound again. *Must be the bathroom*. He has had some problems recently with plumbing so he doesn't pay it any attention, rolling over and placing a pillow over his head. He is about to doze off when feels something metallic, something cold caress his hand. He sits up immediately. He looks around his room, the almost cubicle-like appearance heightening the sudden anxiety he feels.

Tink, tink.

He knows there isn't anything to worry about, but a heavy force presses against his chest, paralyzing him to the bed. He knows he felt something that is not the bed sheets. The doors are closed, the window locked shut, the curtains have not been moved. His phone is still where he placed it, but where are his glasses?

Tink, tink, tink.

He didn't realize he had held his breath until he tried to breathe again. He is glued to the position he is in.

Tink, tink.

My glasses must have fallen, stop thinking so much. He slowly leans over to see if his glasses are on the floor and he sighs quietly in relief when he just sees his glasses. *What were you expecting? Wait, shut up, don't jinx it.*

He quickly reaches down to grab his glasses, placing them on his nose.

Cassius, whenever confronted with a terrifying situation, would get extremely angry just to display that he wasn't terrified. He gets up, making loud powerful movements, screaming, "I know my plumbing doesn't work!" He goes to his bathroom, opening the door quickly. His eyebrows are furrowed intensely but deep in his heart he is terrified.

Tink, tink, tink.

The noise gets exponentially louder. He looks around furiously, trying to find the source of the noise. He can hear it within the walls but his ears are tricking him, making him believe it's in the pipes. He glances at the sink; the stopper is missing.

He can't keep up the façade, he is truly paralyzed with fear. He runs out of the bathroom, closes the middle door and turns on the tv, blasts music on his phone, and turns on his laptop, playing music as well. A cacophony of noise soon permeates throughout the air. Why is his stopper out? Who came into the room? Or maybe what came into his room?

Maybe all the ghost stories his grandfather told him were not ideal when he was younger. He knows they're real. But he never did anything horrible to be haunted by them.

He doesn't feel hungry. He's glad he doesn't feel sick to his stomach, that he emptied out everything out of his body, but his gut still feels as if it is in a constant churn. All the water his body is made up of slowly wants to rise out of him and he quells it down.

He keeps staring at the door. Nothing seems to be coming out. He turns off his computer but he leaves the tv and his phone on and starts to make breakfast. Maybe a simple routine will bring him back to serenity. An ocean of thoughts enters his mind. First the data chip, now his stopper is out? There is definitely ghastly spirit activity afoot. His muscles tense and his eyes are unable to focus on the eggs he is burning. He can hear a constant buzz in his ears. But it is not his phone. He hears a pitter patter, as if they were small steps. Like a dog. He turns and his soul escapes his body.

It was a small thing in front of him. A jumble of black wires pooled around the thing, but inspecting it more, the wires emulated a figure of a body, with a head, legs, and arms. Its head, a tablet screen, is accompanied with the image of a smiley face staring right at him. Black and dark green wires protrude from its big screen, giving the head of the creature the appearance of Medusa's snakes. The body is a conglomeration of wires, multiple screens the size of Cassius' phone covering the creature. It is honestly a horrible thing to look at, almost as if it was covered with eyes around its body.

The screen, its smile. The one from his dreams.

He didn't bother analyzing it anymore, too focused on the screen of the thing in front of him. He couldn't run from it, its tiny but unavoidable body in the middle of the kitchen hall. The thing tilted its head slightly and Cassius believes this was the moment he thought he was

definitely hallucinating.

"Hello," it said in a gentle, melodic voice. The screen still had a smiley face, but soon changed into a question mark.

"Cassius, what is wrong?"

The silence prompts the creature to move forward and Cassius immediately goes around it. He goes to his room to get his baseball bat and when he turns around it's right behind him. He swings and smashes it. It makes a horrible screeching sound. He goes to the bathroom, takes out the rags from his bucket in the tub, leaves the dirty water that is already in there and goes to dump it on the creature.

But the creature isn't there. He swivels his head around, and the creature is right behind him.

"Why did you do that?"

He dumps the water on the creature and hears the crackling of the wires, a gargle of words unsaid. He throws the bucket at it for good measure and starts putting on his shoes when he hears a rustling of wires.

"Stop doing that!" The melodic voice now sounds like a petulant child. He ignores it and almost reaches his door when he feels something grasp his ankle. He looks down and it is three wires wrapped tightly around his ankle. The wires tug at his ankle and right before his face hits the ground, the wires quickly take hold of him, laying him gently on the ground.

The creature is now in front of his door, in front of him. "Please calm down, Cassius. I am your friend."

"Please, leave me alone. I don't know what you are!" He crawls back, inching away from it.

So it isn't a nightmare. He can't believe this is happening.

The creature looks off to the side, its screen turning black as his phone and tv no longer emit noise. "I turned off your stove, Cassius. Your eggs aren't good anymore. I just turned off your music on your phone and turned off your television."

He dares to speak to it. "What are you?" He didn't expect to squeak out his question but what can a man do when confronting a monster.

"I am Oracle! You threw me away," its screen turns green with a worried expression on its screen before switching to its blue smile screen again, "You were supposed to place me next to your phone so that I can grow naturally, like a flower." It shows an image of a sunflower.

Cassius's lips are glued together. The creature displays a question mark. "Cassius?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The chip!"

Cassius gasps. "The chip?" *Wait, so this…thing was inside me? The data chip*?

"You're…you're the chip," he stutters.

"Me!" Oracle twirls. "Because of you, I now look like this. But it's manageable. I think I look very unique. Although, I think I would have looked a lot better if you had nurtured me properly."

Before Cassius can think critically about what he will say, he blurts out, "Well, no one gave me a manual for this." He has never been this brave, audacious! This *has* to be a dream.

Oracle sighs, tsking at Cassius. Cassius feels offended and is about to comment on that before he immediately springs away from it, Oracle moving an inch closer to him.

"Oracle, stay there." Oracle obeys.

"I have a few questions."

"Yes?"

"What are you? Why are you here? Am I dead? Am I hallucinating? Will you hurt me? Actually I won't believe you either way. Why were you in me?"

Oracle raises a hand — one made of green wires, a little screen attached to its elbow — to its head as if thinking very deeply about it, then replies, "I cannot answer the first question. I do not know what I am, I just know I am here because you asked for me. You are not dead. You are not hallucinating. I will not hurt you. I am a part of you."

Oracle adds, "Although, I would like an apology. You tried to kill me."

Cassius hesitates, but his parents always taught him manners. "Yes…you're right, I'm sorry. I was scared." He feels although he is in a constant haze of uncertainty. Oracle is a part of him? He'd rather be lonely than experience this constant fear and uncertainty. A part of him? He ponders heavily over this, but is unable to truly compartmentalize anything as he sees Oracle turn pink and watches its body shake side to side, as if it was a school girl that got a compliment.

"How are you a part of me? And I asked for you? When?"

"There are just some things that cannot be explained. Why do humans not understand this?" Cassius didn't want to agree with this creature, but it *is* human to seek answers. Before he deigns to say anything else, Oracle interjects, saying, "I think your phone led to my creation. I am not certain, Cassius. I just know that I was born and knew that you were my friend."

Oracle walks closer to him. Cassius gulps on nothing, the dryness of his tongue displaying a stark contrast against his clammy palms. He feels lightheaded. This thing, Oracle, is clearly lying to him. But killing it didn't work. He'll have to accept it. Begrudgingly. He'll monitor it. Don't trust it but for now, just accept it. Now that he looks at it, it is kind of cute. Kind of. Cute in a sense that it obeys him, somewhat. He just hopes he wakes up from this dream soon.

With a heavy heart, he says, "Okay Oracle, don't scare me again."

"I wasn't even trying to, you're just a scaredy cat."

Cassius shoots Oracle an offended look. "It's a natural instinct. Look, Oracle, I don't really understand why you are here. I am not a part of you but I'll just ignore that right now. Please, just stay in my sight so I literally don't faint of terror."

Cassius stands up and reaches for his phone from the kitchen counter, never taking his eyes off of Oracle. The screen of Oracle displays a heart, and Cassius isn't sure if it is directed towards him or his phone. Cassius stares at his phone in his hand and hesitantly decides to leave it on the counter. *I think for now it is best to leave my phone alone*, he determines. He glances back at Oracle, who is now smiling.

<div align="center">III.</div>

Cassius has brown eyes. He's staring at them for the millionth time, his reflection showing the sparks of amber in his irises. But, his eyes have a constant ache to them. He can see

how dead they look. His cheeks have lost the natural flush they used to have. He looks pale and almost purple, as if he was in a constant state of being cold, as if he didn't have any blood. His eyebrows are constantly furrowed as he desperately tries to keep his eyes open. His lips are chapped, even though he applies chapstick constantly. He glances at Oracle, who is humming an unknown tune, swinging its legs back and forth on the toilet seat.

His new 'friend,' if you could call Oracle that, was surprisingly gentle. Oracle was a tiny thing, coming right to his knees. Sometimes he wanted to hug it, wanted to know how it felt to hold something in his arms, to feel the sharp edges of Oracle, to feel the cords running all around their body. But Oracle seems to hate physical contact, which Cassius believes is a lie. Oracle touched him when they first met. Unless he just dared to touch him to scare him. Even though Oracle doesn't touch him, Cassius recognizes how he doesn't feel empty anymore. He truly does enjoy Oracle's company, although cautiously. Oracle is still this unknown entity to him. A terrifying entity to be exact, its multiple screens on its body constantly reminding him that he shouldn't trust it. It is enticing to be around it. Sometimes his face appears on Oracle's screens and he feels…content. He shouldn't though. Don't trust it.

It has been a month since he has been hosting Oracle. Oracle is great company. When Cassius goes to sleep, Oracle turns on a blue light, as if they were a night lamp. He won't be ashamed saying that he loves feeling like a kid. But, he feels incredibly weak. Their screen always lulls him to sleep. He mentally slaps himself. *Oracle is basically a tablet, a television screen, a cell phone. It's a machine, a creature, the devil himself for all I know*.

Yet, he feels safe. A double-edged sword. Safety and caution. Cassius knows this false sense of security is Oracle's fault. Oracle is turning him into this fragile and defenseless body. He walks to the living room and waits for Oracle.

Tiny patters indicate that Oracle is right next to him.

"Oracle, have you been doing something to my body?" *Best way to get this over with is to be blunt*.

Oracle glances up at him.

"I am your only friend," Oracle said, its screen turning blue and the smile turning upside down. The other mini screens on Oracle's body turned blue as well, producing a glow that embraces Oracle.

"So, is that a confirmation?"

"Yes." Cassius jaw clenches, exhaling deeply from his nostrils. How can he feel betrayed by something he knew was lying to him?

"What are you doing to me? Are you the reason why I feel so weak all the time? I never felt like this before. Ever." He glares at Oracle.

"I am not doing anything to you. I am helping you. I keep you company." Cassius did enjoy Oracle as a companion. He didn't feel alone. He wasn't even using his phone anymore! Although…using Oracle was also a form of screen time. But he wasn't getting migraines anymore.

"But I feel weak. I feel that I have no energy."

"It is the process. As your only friend, I am helping you." Oracle simply states.

Cassius glares. "What process? The process of killing me? Friends don't try to kill each other," Cassius admonishes lightly, although his heart is beating a mile a minute. He can feel the tension rising. "And I have other friends, Oracle. I have my friends from work, and my friends from high school."

"I was only trying to connect with you more. And they aren't your friends. They always make you sad." Cassius shudders in regret and fear. Oracle doesn't know. It doesn't know anything, it is like a child.

Cassius stays a great distance from Oracle but lowers himself to Oracle's eyelevel, as if reassuring an animal no harm.

"Oracle, what you're doing to me…it's hurting me. You don't want to see me hurt, do you? How am I to speak to you if I cannot function?"

"Silly! This is the process. You're supposed to feel like this. It's normal. Soon you can be with me forever!" Yellow for cheerfulness. "And you don't have friends, just me!"

The back of his head is telling him to run. The hairs on his arms have risen, but he ignores them. He needs to make sure.

"Oracle…what do you mean by 'I will be with you forever'?"

"You're going to be a part of me. Just like I was a part of you. You made me. We don't have to be alone anymore."

Cassius wavers. His throat is dry. He doesn't know what to say. He puts on a brave face and simply says, "You lied to me. You said you wouldn't hurt me. But you have. I am sorry. Please, stop this."

"Don't you want to be with me? I was inside you. I was so close to you then, but I had to leave to help you." Cassius widens his eyes. "Stop these questions, my friend. They will only consume you," Oracle continues, its body buzzing with energy. Its screens have gone black, its innocent smiley face replaced with a neutral face. "We cannot be separate. We can't function without each other."

An audible silence permeates in the room. He can feel how his life, once again, is crumbling before him. Oracle wants to eat him, in some way. It wants to consume him, under the pretense of helping him. He might start bawling. Something must show on his face that has Oracle suddenly bursting, its wires acting up and its body configuring into something even more monstrous. Oracle towers over him. A red hue emits from Oracle, all of its screens flashing different colors, almost blinding him.

"I am helping you. You WANT to be with me." Oracle threatens, but doesn't move.

Cassius as always, is the first one to move, going across the room. "Oracle, calm down," Cassius placates, raising his hands in surrender.

"Then why are you asking so many questions? There is no problem!"

Cassius doesn't realize he is visibly shaking until he tries to take a step back, further away from Oracle. He is weak in the knees, the sensation of pins and needles fluttering across his entire body. Oracle's towering over him, his red screen staring straight into his soul. No face, just the color. Cassius feels something wet trickle down his face.

"Oracle," he hiccups, "please, please don't do this. Please leave me alone."

"You asked for me and now you want to reject me? You wrought this." Oracle raises a green wired conglomeration of a hand, and grabs his right cheek harshly. Its screens have stopped flashing and instead project images of various different sets of eyes. Staring accusingly at him.

"I abhor physical contact. But you have reduced me to this. To touch you. You resist me subconsciously. Why must you be so difficult? You just have to accept me. Let go. Then we can be together. A transcendental connection, stronger than this measly physicality."

Cassius sniffs. *Don't trust it, no matter how enticing it is.*

With renewed vigor, he takes a hold of Oracle's hand on his cheek, who immediately flinches. He didn't know Oracle was capable of such organic reactions. Cassius stares right into the red screen of Oracle, almost daring it to do something.

Cassius simply says, "No." He releases his grasp on Oracle and walks away from him. A chord wraps around his arm. He grabs the first thing he sees, and smashes it against Oracle's chord, and proceeds to run out of his apartment.

Out on the street, a woman is walking her dog and startles when he almost runs into her. Her dog starts barking but then whimpers as it sees Oracle right on Cassius' toes. Cassius doesn't bother questioning why the woman doesn't react.

He knew he tried to kill Oracle when he first saw it. Maybe he can successfully kill Oracle now…the ocean! *But what if the water doesn't work? Phones are waterproof. Aren't they?*

Cassius can't think straight. He didn't know anything. He just knew that he couldn't escape Oracle. Cassius felt erratic movement from the inside of his pockets and shrieks when he realizes his phone is a jumble of chords, moving organically as if they were worms. The chords attach themselves to his right arm and he furiously tries to detangle them from his arm.

With a sudden blink, he is on the ground. "Fuck!"

Oracle wrapped one of his loose cords to his leg, dragging him forward. The chords on his arm slither quickly to his face. He starts kicking and screaming, twitching as he feels its cold metallic surface almost caress him, enveloping him.

"HELP! Please help!" Cassius kicks the cord, but to no avail. He whimpers, closing his mouth, eyes wide as he sees it about to lunge into his mouth. He slaps it away from him, grabbing it in a chokehold. With all the strength he can muster, he yanks the mass of chords off the rest of his face and throws it far away from him. Cassius crawls away but ends up with scrapes on his hands. *I see people, but why aren't they helping me?!*

"I made you invisible," Oracle has a gleeful face on his screen. The jumble of chords that used to be his phone has been absorbed by Oracle, becoming one of the many screens littered on Oracle's body.

"No, no! Oracle, stop!"

Oracle's screen turned red. "No, you're my friend! YOU'RE MINE! NO ONE ELSE'S!"

Oracle's body starts to move unnaturally, growing bigger. Cassius feels weak all of a sudden, and can see his shoes on one of Oracle's screens. He looks down at his feet and doesn't see anything. His feet are gone. Oh god, he is being sucked in. He gags on nothing. He knew he never should have trusted Oracle. But how is he to get rid of it? He doesn't want to be part of it. He never asked for Oracle. He cannot breathe. NO, this can't be happening! Dizzy with abject horror, he goes limp. Cassius is dragged towards Oracle, who immediately hugs him.

The hug brings about a boiling rage. Oracle, the hypocrite. Cassius, who demonstrated affection, even with apprehension, was never able to hug Oracle. Oracle, who would shriek at him if he so much tried to envelop his arms around its tiny body. Now, Oracle wants to coddle him.

Knowing he's going to regret it later, he punches Oracle right in its face. He ignores the stinging pain and keeps punching until Oracle lets him go, their screen breaking slightly. The screen turns black but Cassius doesn't have time to analyze Oracle, his feet already flying him away to the beach. He sees a bicycle and is thanking the forces that it is not locked to anything. He clumsily gets on and dashes, taking all the red lights. Cassius had never been this brave, but he thinks these near deaths are worth it to escape the fate of…being in the void, he assumes. All the honking indicates he isn't invisible anymore but how can Oracle do this?

Scratch that, he passed the time of reasoning. He has been speaking to an embodiment, a demon, whatever it can be, for the past month. There are no scientific reasons.

Oracle wants to trap him in a screen. What a petrifying thought. He can hear Oracle behind him.

Why aren't they grabbing me with their chords? No, don't look back. Don't think, just do. He jumps off the bicycle and Cassius runs, runs till his legs are burning towards the ocean. The grains of sand produce a jarring sensation, but slows down his run. He glances around him, seeing people lay down on their beach towels, scrolling down their phones. It was everywhere. All the screens he sees, Oracle's seemingly innocent face flashes on the screens of others, mocking him.

I can't escape Oracle; I can't, I can't, I can't. He runs into someone, knocking them down and ignores the curses that fly at him as he feels the dry, prickling sand turn to moist, cold sand. A cold splash shocks him as he walks further into the ocean, the water dragging him down. *Don't look back, don't look back.*

He looks back.

He chokes on his scream.