

# *POMPA: Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association*

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Editor, Lorie Watkins  
Assistant Editor, Pam Shearer

**Volume 35  
2018**

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# Editor's Note

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*By Lorie Watkins*

It is with much pride that I write the editor's note for this, the thirty-fifth volume of the *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association (POMPA)*. Jackson State University hosted the 2018 conference from March 2-3. Conference organizer Monica Flippin Wynn moved the conference to the University's e-Center campus for the first time. Of special note was an entertaining banquet which included live music and even a bit of dancing.



Another first was a book display by University Press of Mississippi. Please accept my thanks for coordinating another wonderful conference in the state's capital city.

Lorie Watkins



# 2018 Program

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**Mississippi Philological Association Meeting and Conference  
Mississippi eCenter at Jackson State University  
March 2-3, 2018**

**Friday, March 2, 2018**

**10:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.**

**Registration, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor Lobby, outside California Room**

**11:45 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.**

**Annual Business Meeting**

**Concurrent Sessions**

**1:00-2:20 p.m.**

**Room A**

**Panel 1: Creative Musings, Part I**

Facilitator: James Fowler, University of Central Arkansas

Mary Roberson Wiygul, New Hope High School (Lowndes County, MS)

“Things Moms Say”

“Life Lessons”

“The Debutant”

Thomas B. Richardson, Miss. University for Women/New Hope High School

“Grading School”

“Eupora High School Gym, 2002”

“Reading Shakespeare with Teenagers”

C. Liegh McInnis, Jackson State University

“Kaeperneeling”

“Why Bo Jackson Does not Watch Football”

“The End Result of Marriage”

“Code Switching”

**Room B**

**Panel 2: The Relationship Between Listening to Rap Music with Misogynistic Lyrics or Empowering Rhymes and Self-Esteem, Anxiety, Depression, Mindfulness, and Aggression**

Facilitators: Taunjah Bell Neasman and Julie Schweitzer, Jackson State University

Jesse Anderson, Jackson State University

Briana Frizell, Jackson State University

Anthony Jones, Jackson State University

Garrett Watson, Jackson State University  
D'Erica Williams, Jackson State University

### **Room C**

#### **Panel 3: State of Mind, State of Being**

Facilitator: Allison Chesnutt, William Carey University

James Potts, Mississippi College

“Darker and Darker Gothic: Fallen Angels”

Nancy Kerns, Blue Mountain College

“She’ll Make You Lose Your Mind: Dragontina and the Re-imagining of Homer’s Sirens in Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato*”

Ben F. Fisher, University of Mississippi

“Ella D’Arcy Revisited”

Cassandra Hawkins-Wilder, Jackson State University

“An Examination of Colorism in the Darkest Child”

### **Room D**

#### **Panel 4: Teaching Composition at an HBCU: Can we Make Writing Real for Students?**

Facilitator: Monica Flippin Wynn, Lindenwood University

Kathi R. Griffin, Jackson State University

Tatiana Glushko, Jackson State University

Shanna Smith, Jackson State University

**2:30-3:50 p.m.**

### **Room A**

#### **Panel 5: Creative Musings, Part II**

Facilitator: Katie Ginn, William Carey University

James Fowler, University of Central Arkansas

“The Ants and the Grasshopper”

“The Cat and the Dog”

“Bed of Nails”

“Company Town”

“Twinkle”

“We Might Be Forgiven”

“ABC of Grief”

“Vincible”

John J. Han, Missouri Baptist University

“Autumn Dreams”

“Easier to Control Others”

“In the Quiet of Empty Nest”

“Ringing Sounds”

“The Tables Turned”

“Senior Poetry Critique Sessions”

“A Certain Week”

Steve Bellin-Oka, Eastern New Mexico University  
“Hattiesburg Etudes’: A Poetic Sequence”

## **Room B**

### **Panel 6: Caribbean Literary Studies**

Facilitator: C. Ian Foster, Jackson State University  
Shameelah Abdullah, Jackson State University  
Natasha Arrington, Jackson State University  
Joshua Myrick, Jackson State University  
Erika Velazquez, Jackson State University  
Keiann Williams, Jackson State University

## **Room C**

### **Panel 7: Civil Rights and Revolution**

Facilitator: Tomaz Cunningham, Jackson State University  
C. Liegh McInnis, Jackson State University  
“Prince as a Post-Civil Rights Archetype”  
Andrew Nelson, University of Arkansas at Monticello  
“Black Lives Matter, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and the Rhetoric of Empathy”  
Leticia Pérez Alonso, Jackson State University  
“Federico García Lorca and New York African American Communities: On the Call for Revolution in ‘Oda al rey de Harlem’”

## **Room D**

### **Panel 8: Queer Analyses**

Facilitator: helen crump, Jackson State University  
Rico Self, Louisiana State University  
“The ‘Morehouse Man’ and the ‘Morehouse Fag’: A Queer of Color Critique”  
Marietta Kosma, Jackson State University  
“Queer subversion of Identity in Shailja Patel’s *Migritude*”  
Nicholas Brush, University of Central Oklahoma  
“‘I eat root’: Queering Masculinity through the Language of Veganism in *Timon of Athens*”  
Emily Turner, Mississippi State University  
“Anxiety Much? Transracial and Transgender Passing”

**4:00-5:20 p.m.**

## **Room A**

### **Panel 9: On the Subject of Women**

Facilitator: C. Liegh McInnis, Jackson State University  
helen crump, Jackson State University  
“Diasporic Interrogations of Alternative Mothering: Other Mothers and Black Women’s Diaspora Fiction”  
Kendall Morgan, William Carey University  
“The Bridge and the Gap: Black and White Feminist Readings of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*”

Candis Pizzetta, Jackson State University

“Morality and Money: The Economic Value of Virtue in ‘The Story of Margareta’”

Katie E. Ginn, William Carey University

“Neo-Burlesque and the Feminine Art Form: Third Wave Feminism and Phenomenology ‘

## **Room B**

### **Panel 10: Partial Presence & the Palimpsest of Global History**

Facilitator: Christy Audriana Cannon, Mississippi State University

Amber Morgan, Mississippi State University

“The Solitude and Solidarity of Négritude”

Tiffany Carroll, Mississippi State University

“Mimicry and The Crisis of Identity in Teju Cole’s *Open City*”

Kayla Mattox, Mississippi State University

“The Opaque Mind: Memory and Detachment in Teju Cole’s *Open City*”

Georgeann Kenney, Mississippi State University

“Fragmentation, Fluid Temporality and the Palimpsest in Teju Cole’s *Open City*”

## **Room C**

### **Panel 11: Topics in American Literature**

Facilitator: Andrew Nelson, University of Arkansas at Monticello

Kate Stewart, University of Arkansas at Monticello

“Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Sherburne Hardy: A Collision of Algebra and Detection ‘

Alan Brown, University of West Alabama

“Lord Byron’s Influence on Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Ligeia’”

Allison Chestnut, William Carey University

“Poetic Pastiche”

Dana Davenport Jones, William Carey University

“Author Becomes Savior”

## **Room D**

### **Panel 12: Creative Musings, Part III**

Facilitator: Tatiana Glushko, Jackson State University

Jessica Hylton, University of Arkansas at Monticello

“Homecoming”

Shanna L. Smith, Jackson State University

“Deep and Lasting Root: A Mississippi Chapbook”

DaNecia Washington, Jackson State University

“Golden Goddess”

“Seasonal”

“Place Called Home”

**5:30-7:30 p.m.**

**Room: California**

**Banquet and Entertainment**



**Saturday, March 3, 2018**

**8:00 – 10:30 a.m.**

**Registration, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor Lobby, outside California Room**

**Concurrent Sessions**

**8:30-9:50 a.m.**

**Room A**

**Panel 13: Inspired Expressions, Part I**

Facilitator: Monica Flippin Wynn

Jeanna Graves, William Carey University

“The Religion of Food or Only Heathens put Giblets in Their Dressing”

Peter Malik, Alcorn State University

“Wash Day”

Jared Lemus, Mississippi State University

“Family Tradition”

**Room B**

**Panel 14: Examining Social Institutions**

Facilitator: Mario Azevedo, Jackson State University

Terry L. Nugent, University of Arkansas at Monticello

“The ‘True American’: Rhetorically Constructing American Identity in the Works of Theodore Roosevelt and William Dean Howells”

Mikki Galliher, Blue Mountain College

“White Male Authority and Disabled Veterans in *Forrest Gump* and *Born on the Fourth of July*”

Susan Maneck, Jackson State University

“For the Betterment of the World: The Meaning of an Ever-Advancing Civilization in the Baha’i Writings”

**Room C**

**Panel 15: Lauren Beukes & the Inhuman of History I**

Facilitator: Andrea Spain, Mississippi State University

Allison Wiltshire, Mississippi State University

“Self-Colonization: Disfigured bodies and Broken Surroundings in Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City*”

Abby Sweeney, Mississippi State University

“Criminals: Normalizing Effects of True-Crime Dramas”

Em Ferguson, Mississippi State University

“News Coverage of Animalled Bodies: Media's Stigmatization in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*”

**10:00-11:20 a.m.**

**Room A**

**Panel 16: Inspired Expressions, Part II**

Facilitator: Leticia Perez Alonzo, Jackson State University

RaShell R. Smith-Spears, Jackson State University

“Stay out of the Gingerbread House”

Jeffrey Condran, University of Arkansas, Little Rock

“In Costume”

Kathy Root Pitts, Jackson State University

From *Camp on the Wolf*:

Chapter One: “The Dream”

Chapter Two: “The Lost Portrait”

Rusty Rogers, University of Central Arkansas

“Dublin Assurance”

**Room B**

**Session 17: Language and Writing Considerations**

Facilitator: Kathi Griffin, Jackson State University

Farida Myrzakhanova, Mississippi Valley State University

“A Contrastive Study of Grammar Translation Method and Communicative Language

Teaching at Kazakh State Women Teacher Training University”

Tomaz Cunningham, Jackson State University

““So, You’re Really Black?”: L2 Motivation, Teaching and Research Implications for Minority Students”

Lawrence Sledge, Jackson State University

“Relating Meaning, Form and Purpose: The Need for Technical Writing/Communication to Be for the People with the Public’s Best Interest at Heart”

**Room C**

**Panel 18: Lauren Beukes & the Inhuman of History II**

Facilitator: Rachel Worthy, Mississippi State University

Jill McNeece, Mississippi State University

“The Criminalization of the Animalled Other in Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City*”

Andrea Spain, Mississippi State University

“Infrastructural Unconscious & Crisis of Masculinity in Lauren Beukes’ *Broken Monsters*”

Anna Bills, Mississippi State University

“Echoed Violence and Dehumanization in Lauren Beukes’ *The Shining Girls*”

**11:30 a.m.-12:50 p.m.**

**Room A**

**Panel 19: Inspired Expressions, Part III**

Facilitator: Shanna Smith, Jackson State University

Julie L. Whitehead, Mississippi College

“Too Quiet”

Lawrence Sledge

“Ms. Zene’s Flowers”

Sarah Bloom, University of Arkansas at Monticello

“Turning”

John Zheng, Mississippi Valley State University

“One Sunday Morning”

“Side View”

“Getting Lost in a Small Delta Town in 1997”

“House Dieting”

“Viewing the Delta Sky from the Roof of the Sutton Building in `7 Bena, Mississippi”

“Delta Rain”

**Room B**

**Panel 20: Examinations of Race and Masculinity**

Facilitator: Lorie Watkins, William Carey University

Breana Miller, University of Memphis

“Fetish and Phallic Imagery in Baldwin’s ‘Going to Meet the Man’”

Ayman Mahmoud Nafee, Jackson State University

“Easy Rawlins’s Journey towards Agency: Creating an Archetype of Black Masculinity in  
Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*”

Felicia Cosey, Jackson State University

“Visions of the Yellow Peril: The Whitewashing of Asian Identity in Hollywood Cinema”

**Room C**

**Panel 21: Social Suicide: Stigma, Revenge, and Resistance**

Facilitator: John Han, Missouri Baptist University

Taylor Johnson, Mississippi State University

“‘The Barbie Complex’: Sexualization of Young Girls in Contemporary US Culture”

Hannah Childers, Mississippi State University

“‘That’s social suicide!’: Power Structures in Tina Fey’s *Mean Girls*”

Johnny Allen, Mississippi State University

“Time is Not on My Side: Biopolitics and Inscription of the Body in the Film *In Time*”

Isaac Huckaby, Mississippi State University

“Marion’s Revenge: Gender in *Psycho*, *Halloween*, and Their Imitators”

## **Room D**

### **Panel 22: Double Consciousness: The Complex of an Antihero**

Facilitator: Preselfannie W. McDaniels, Jackson State University  
Arrison Martin, Jackson State University  
Tiffanie Herron, Jackson State University  
Eshe Perkins, Jackson State University  
Samuel Owens, Jackson State University

**1:00-2:20 p.m.**

## **Room A**

### **Panel 23: Inspired Expressions, Part IV**

Facilitator: RaShell Smith Spears, Jackson State University  
Jeanna Graves, William Carey University  
“Anywhere but Here and as Fast as Possible”  
Katrina Byrd, Mississippi University for Women  
“Saving Grace”  
Bethani England, Jackson State University  
“The Talk and Its Mountains”  
C. Leigh McInnis, Jackson State University  
“Rich Man”

## **Room B**

### **Panel 24: Topics in Southern Literature**

Facilitator: Felicia Cosey, Jackson State University  
LaTonzia N. Evans, Mississippi Valley State University  
“Communication in the Grey Area”  
John J. Han, Missouri Baptist University  
“Death and Dying in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction: A Thanatological Perspective”  
Lorie Watkins, William Carey University  
“‘The Robber Bridegroom’: Eudora Welty’s Historical Fairy Tale”

## **Room C**

### **Panel 25: Palestine—the Question of our Time?**

Facilitator: Anna Bills, Mississippi State University  
Lindsay Pace, Mississippi State University  
“Controlling the Narrative: Nationalist Representations in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*”  
Christy Audriana Cannon, Mississippi State University  
“The Bearers of Palestine: A Woman’s Character Hidden within the Frame of Gender and Nationalism in Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*”  
Hayley Hampton, Mississippi State University  
“‘Someone’s Gotta Pay’: Representation and the Commodification of Suffering in Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*”  
Michael Spears, Mississippi State University  
“At the Intersection of Film and web: Techniques of Cinematography in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*”

Rachel Worthy, Mississippi State University

“‘Either you’re with us, or you’re with the terrorists:’ The Palestinian Question of our Time”

# Creative Poetic Works

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# “Autumn Dreams” and Other Poems

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*By John J. Han*

## **Autumn Dreams**

(Etheree and Reverse Etheree)

At  
three in  
the morning,  
I wake up from  
a dream about my  
mom seven thousand miles  
away—they said she is dead.  
Listening to the cold rain, I  
wonder how many weeks I haven't called  
her while wracking my brain to write poems.

Tears stream down my mom's roughened face as I  
say goodbye to her. She looks thin like  
a dry twig; she can't stand without  
a cane. I promise to come  
back soon. After taking  
our photo, we part....  
Awake, I come  
back to my  
Western  
world.



## **Harbingers of Spring**

(A minute poem)

Atop the mount white ice becomes  
soft slush, succumbs  
to nature's swing.  
At last it's spring!

In grassland prairie dogs unfreeze  
to feel the breeze  
that fills the air.

It's time to blare!

Backwoods and bushes wrens apprise,  
collect supplies  
for nesting needs.  
It's time for breeds!



### **The Tables Turned**

(Free verse with a salute to William Wordsworth)

Years ago, a scholar I didn't know contacted me  
to beg for my rare articles.  
Happily obliging, I rummaged through a myriad  
of files in my office, found the articles,  
walked to the copy area, lined up waiting for my turn,  
made copies, scanned them, sent them to my inbox,  
downloaded them, named each of them,  
attached them to my e-mail, and then sent them to the requester  
along with my best wishes.  
It took a big whopping hour out of my busy schedule.

I didn't hear from her again, which was OK.  
What was not OK was I didn't know she was using  
my articles against me in her article  
newly submitted to a journal.  
She doesn't know I am now serving as a peer reviewer  
of the article in which she argues  
I am erroneous.



### **Easier to Control Others**

(Free verse)

Professors prohibit the use  
of electronics in the classroom.  
Some even confiscate the devices  
until the end of class.  
Their stern voices carry a tone



that persuades students to focus  
on learning, to fear the possibility  
of temporary banishment from class.

At a faculty meeting,  
the same professors fight each other  
to take a back seat. Those who're fortunate  
enough to sit in the back amuse themselves  
with laptops and smartphones,  
disregarding the presider's constant plea  
to focus on the agenda—  
some with a mysterious smile,  
others with a subdued giggle,  
still others casting sly glances at the presider,  
who knows what everyone is doing  
during the meeting.



### **A Subversive Reading**

(A cherita)

The back of the school bus warns,

“State Law Stop While Bus Is Loading & Unloading.”  
Lacking punctuation, it is hard to interpret.

One wonders if the sign is meant to say,  
“State Law, Stop While Bus Is  
Loading & Unloading.”



### **In the Quiet of an Empty Nest**

(A haibun)

Ancient sages said life was sad. A boundless sea of suffering. Short of days filled with  
trouble. Four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, three legs in the evening. Yet, in the  
stillness of a house bereft of children, free of mortgage, pleasant memories sometimes  
flicker: thousands of wild flowers in my native village, the day Grandma held me in her  
arms and crossed a river before it was covered with tidal waves, the first time I saw a neon

sign, the wedding night my shy bride and I were left alone, the births of our two daughters, the day my doctor said I was cancer-free, the day I published my first article, the day my first poem was published, the days my daughters graduated from college.

autumn dream  
my daughters return  
as babies

My wife and I have learned to get along. We have only each other in the twilight of our lives; passion has been replaced by compassion. The silence of our house is often broken by the meows of a neighbor's cat, the chattering of cardinals, a telemarketer's fake friendliness, all of which are welcome and remind us we remain alive.

first snow  
a visitor in the yard  
neighbor's cat

When young, I wondered what life would be like after sixty. Now I know: people my age retain pleasant memories while discarding unpleasant ones. Ancient sages were half right: life is sad but not too bad.

before the journey...  
releasing souvenirs,  
burning letters



### **Ringing Sounds** (Free verse)

An eighty-four-year-old woman says  
she hears streams of sound in her ears.  
She sometimes hears a wind blowing.  
Other times a train rumbles,  
a bird chirps,  
someone whistles,  
or a snake hisses in her ears.  
Her doctor tells her there is no cure.

When I reach eighty-four, will I hear  
those sounds, too? If ringing ears  
are inevitable, I wish to hear  
something soothing,  
such as a balmy breeze,

a northern cardinal,  
a Korean bamboo flute,  
and a spring brook where  
melting snow turns into clear water.  
It would be good to hear without end  
the Carter Family's Appalachian folk songs.  
But please no train sounds, which rupture an ear drum,  
no hissing sounds, which lead to a nightmare.

The question is, will I be able to choose the sounds  
I want to hear? Probably not, but I pray to hear the sounds  
that rock me gently in their arms.



### **Changing Dreams** (Free verse)

As a young boy, I wanted to leave home  
to live like a seagull flying over the ocean.  
As a young man, I wanted to establish myself,  
building a nest as a swallow does.  
Until the mid-forties, I pursued great minds  
as bees follow the honey.  
As a middle-aged man, I wanted to excel in life,  
soaring like a dragon.

Having tasted life for more than sixty years,  
I now have two simple dreams:  
to live out my days like still water  
that seems to stay still but still flows  
and to live out my days with memory intact  
so that I do not say something odd  
that makes people shake their heads  
and try not to laugh in my face.

# “Kaperneeling” and Other Poems

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*By C. Liegh McInnis*

## **Kaepeneeling**

by C. Liegh McInnis

If love is a verb,  
then should I Fannie Lou Hamer you?  
I tried to MLK you,  
but you James Earl Rayed, Oswalded, and Beckwithed me  
and wonder why all I want to do  
is Malcolm X you,  
which is actually better than if I wanted to  
Shaka Zulu you.  
Of course, you effed-up the boogie and Trumped me  
even after I tried to Obama Care for you  
Then, I simply Kaeperknelt  
to get your attention  
but you Big Bossed Jerry Jones from the Big Housed me  
creating cloudy cataracts with your counterfeit claim of loving your country  
that excretes green from digesting chocolate bodies.  
Now, I gotta Jesus you,  
as in what He did to the moneychangers in His Father's Temple  
Then, I'll be able to Medgar Evers me some fields  
so that freedom can finally flower

## **Why Bo Jackson Doesn't Watch Football (For Writers Who Stop Writing)**

by C. Liegh McInnis

Because birds don't fight for scenic branches  
to watch other birds fly  
Fish don't wrangle for better spaces  
to watch other fish swim  
Lions don't purchase tickets  
to see other predators stalk prey  
Water is always in a state of being if not doing  
and butterflies don't give each other fashion tips  
Taking a tiger's teeth doesn't make him a vegetarian  
He'll still have the urge to gum you to death  
Achilles could never begrudge Odysseus  
Yet, neither warrior's playbook fits the skills of Okonkwo

## **Code Switching**

by C. Liegh McInnis

Will my DD214  
painted with the red, white, and blue  
discharge of honor  
keep cobalt 5-0 eyes  
from playing 187 laser tag  
on my black and blue behind?

## **The End Result of Marriage**

by C. Liegh McInnis

I don't care about the mountainous messy ass kitchen  
that I'm unable to see from the dining room  
The pots and pans that are tattooed with sauces and gravy  
I don't care about the uncountable number of times  
the cooks have been burned by small pellets of grease  
attacking arms like bees seeking revenge for stolen honey  
Who really needs to mention the thousand times  
the cooks have sliced slits of skin just to get the right  
cut of meat, or cheese, or onion, or celery, or  
whatever it is that makes relationships work?  
We all hope to God that that's brownie batter on the floor.  
Ain't nobody asking if the cooks need a massage  
from bending over a fire-breathing stove  
with neck being held in the most unnatural position  
To the cooks and the eaters it's all worth it—  
the meals that fill more than bellies

Presentation is the entire ballgame

That Thanksgiving, Christmas, 4<sup>th</sup> of the Lie banquet  
is the wedding photo that we'll keep forever 'cause  
nobody cares that the bride was crying waterfalls  
moments before the I do's  
as the groom couldn't be found for cold feet  
ain't something that can be cured with a warm blanket  
Yet, as always, dinner was served with a smile  
because it ain't the grease-covered countertops that we remember;  
it's the purring of our souls as we slip into the after-meal snuggle.

# “Inside and Out” and Other Poems

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*By Thomas B. Richardson*

## **Inside and Out**

It starts like this:  
You break the buckle,  
slip leather through loop,  
and I drift,

hurtle really,  
like  
what was his name?  
that orbiter—  
Cassini—  
that six ton  
sweet soul,  
who plunged through  
Saturn’s rings and  
debris fields  
and mystery,  
for us,  
snapped photos  
for us  
to lead us star people  
back to our origins.  
How do you thank  
a machine that  
dies for you?

Now hands and mouth and straddle,

and what of the Big Bang—  
dense heat and  
burst,  
dark matter  
and microwaves?  
When I get older,  
I will get smaller,  
but the universe  
only expands.

And thrusts and claps,  
and the God Particle

is not really God,  
so where will I  
find the father?  
And why that metaphor  
when no dad  
worth the title  
gets another chance  
after a Katrina,  
and a Middle Passage,  
and boxcars,  
and plague,  
and Sand Creek  
& Sandy Hook.

*Oh, God,  
Oh, God.*

### **Red-Letter Bible**

*Fly or fry*, Grandma chanted at me  
all those years, before she found herself  
on judgment's doorstep.  
I never saw it so clearly.

Packing up her worldlies, I browse her  
leather-bound Bible—creased, faded—  
to find Jesus's lines in red letters.

A moving symbol, perhaps?  
Holy words, colored by blood shed for all?

I trace garnet gospel,  
reaching for revelation,  
to know—know!—  
as plain as it's printed before me.

But Red-Letter Bibles are  
American inventions, carry my  
red-blooded American values:  
simple, efficient—  
reduce Divine to hue,  
prune story to rosy talking points.

Instead, Truth hides in the white spaces  
between red letters, where I hunt for meaning  
and wait for fiery red tongues to rest on me.

## Grad School Rag: Novel Discussion

We're ready to  
challenge the hegemony,  
plumb intertextuality,  
suspicious hermeneutics  
set to trouble our reality.

Our class is subversive,  
a little bit discursive,  
but we're solid on our theory,  
you can write that down in cursive.

We talk Foucault, Fanon,  
Marx, Barthes, and Derrida,  
and if you have no use for Freud,  
we suggest you call your Ma.

We move from meta to praxis,  
turn the canon on its axis.  
problematize, categorize,  
behind our black-rimmed glasses.

We've got our buzzwords at the ready,  
our own voices are so heady.  
Let's start class already!  
Did anyone read the book?  
longer than two words.



# Creative Prose Works

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# *Saving Grace, Chapter One*

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*By Katrina Byrd*

## *Saving Grace Chapter One*

The news of Porky's death came on a day when all hell was about to break loose. The seven-year-old girl sat in the back seat of a speeding car eyeing the wooden bat on the floor behind the passenger seat. She struggled to control the blinding surge of rage boiling inside her. The Bible said it was wrong to hate, but Felicia did it anyway.

"Mama," she said

"What?" her mother, who everyone called OooWee, said. She wasn't speaking to Felicia. OooWee was on the phone with Aunt Grace.

"Mama, I gotta talk to you." Her anger was no match for the cold air circulating throughout the car. Felicia glared at the back of the driver's seat. Her small arms rested on her chest. Today was her time to be the class helper.

"Grace, that don't make sense." OooWee's voice cracked like it did six months ago when she found out people wanted to kill her—at least that's what the letters said. "How could he up and die for no reason?"

"I hate you," Felicia said under her breath.

Felicia turned her attention to the city that whizzed past her in flashes of colors and shapes. Houses, trees, and cars passed as quick as they appeared. OooWee said the city of Jackson was a mess. Empty fire hydrants. Water leaks. Tore up streets. But to Felicia, everything looked fine. The sky was blue as the ocean Miss Jones says the fish live in, spread far and wide. The sun, yellow as the ducks painted on the wall in the art center in her second-grade classroom, cast a hot bright light on everything Felicia's eyes could see. The

only problem she noticed was a fluffy white cloud which reminded her of someone she knew.

“Mama,” Felicia said pointing at a large cloud in her view. The cloud had a large shapely afro and a pointed nose. “That cloud looks like Miss Jones!”

“Hell, no!” OooWee said. “Grace, you know I got to work!”

The cloud followed the car pointing an accusing fluffy white finger at Felicia for leaving school. “Not my fault,” Felicia mumbled. “Mama? Mama?” Felicia drug the last Mama out holding it as if she were holding a long note in a song as she slapped her hands against her thighs. The car came to a sudden stop with the screech of the brakes at the red light at the corner of Northside Dr. and State St.

“You wanna tell her?” OooWee handed the phone to Felicia.

“Hey, Aunt Grace!” Felicia said after putting the phone to her ear. Felicia removed a Hershey’s kiss she had hidden in her pocket, then unwrapped it.

“You didn’t have to go to school today?” Aunt Grace sounded like she’d been crying. Felicia heard water running in the background. She assumed Aunt Grace was rinsing breakfast dishes.

“I went for a little while.” Felicia’s words were crisp like the snap of a piece of colored sidewalk chalk. “Then Mama picked me up.” Felicia popped the smooth brown chocolate into her mouth then chewed it fast as she tucked the silver foil into the back of the seat cushion with the others.

“I see.” Aunt Grace cleared her throat. The car jolted forward as Felicia waited for Aunt Grace to speak again. “I have some sad news about Porky,” she said. Her voice was

soft and smooth like the voice of the animal doctor who told Felicia that Porky had a heart problem a few months earlier. “He went to be with Jesus.”

Aunt Grace’s words fell like the building blocks fell onto the floor after Tirrell Taylor knocked them over the other day after nap time. Tears slid down both of Felicia’s cheeks.

“Can I see him?”

“Saturday.” OooWee wheeled the car into the Krystal parking Lot.

“We can have a memorial service on Saturday.” Aunt Grace’s words competed with the scratchy voice at the drive-thru window and the speakers which bumped with the sounds of the blues. “...WMPR!” the D. J. said as “Honey Your Husband is Cheatin’ on Us” finished and “Hit and Quit It” started.

“But I want to see him.” Felicia hadn’t seen Porky since Aunt Grace took him back to Delta Pride months ago. “Mama, please.”

When there was no response from OooWee, Aunt Grace said, “Saturday then.”

“Bye, Aunt Grace.” After she ended the call, Felicia searched for her cloud. Like everything else good in her life, it disappeared.

###

It was a hot sunny day in Delta Pride. A hundred and five in the shade according to the channel nine weather girl. In Grace’s kitchen, it was cooler, but she was sweating as she stood beside the counter nearest the stove staring at the phone. The body was on the floor near the refrigerator. Grace had big plans for that morning that didn’t include telling her seven-year-old niece about the death of her black and white kitty.

Grace left the phone she’d held minutes earlier and moved toward her utility closet which was a space large enough for a broom, a dustpan and a stack of boxes that Grace had

saved for packing. She chose one of the smaller boxes near the top. Porky was almost six months old, and even though the vet said he had a heart problem, he was doing just fine.

*How could OooWee keep playing fast and loose with Felicia's education?* The thought whipped back and forth in Grace's mind like Porky's tail used to do when he spotted an intruder. Grace closed the utility closet door harder than she'd intended. The sound echoed throughout the compact kitchen with a small table and white tiled floor. She crossed to Porky's stiff body. His front paws stretched toward her like he was reaching for something. He looked almost as if he were asleep except his round belly was still, and his green eyes were wide open.

Grace scooped up Porky's seven-pound body and searched once more for any signs of what killed him. Aside from a small puddle of vomit near his feed bowl, there was no sign of any distress. Grace placed him in the box and closed it before she rose to her full five feet six inches. With Porky under her left arm, she moved toward the back door. Her soft-soled shoes moved across the floor with light wisps that reminded Grace of her years in nursing school. The smooth sounds of Whitney Houston's voice singing "I Love the Lord" streamed through the small radio on the counter. Grace stepped out onto her wooden porch, closed the door then stared into the eyes of the man who had stalked her since she was a child. He was at the back of the yard behind the chain link fence watching her.

With her free hand, Grace grabbed the shovel propped on the porch railing near the door. She took the five steps as fast as she could without falling. Her heart beat quicker as she moved toward the big oak at the back of her property. Grace knew what it was like to lose a pet. Her black lab Hope died when she was twelve. Grace cried for weeks.

The shade of the oak was no protection from the scorching heat. Grace's face was wet with sweat as she searched for just the right spot for Porky's final resting place. Sammy Gram's watchful eyes studied her every move. He looked like he wanted to say something. He didn't. Grace placed the box on the ground under the oak. He'd better not, Grace thought as she jammed the shovel into the dry ground. She'd gotten a restraining order against him a few months ago.

After placing Porky into the small hole, Grace took out her rosary beads and whispered a prayer then covered him with the dry, hard dirt. Each shovel full sounded like a single drumstick against a snare drum as it landed on the box. It broke Grace's heart. She wondered how a woman could kill her child. Grace could barely make it through the death of a kitten. She couldn't understand how OooWee could support the murder of innocent children.

She took one last look at Sammy before returning to the house. His dark chocolate skin glistened under the light of the sun peeking through the oak leaves. His brown eyes stared at her like a dog's wanting eyes at a juicy steak in his feed bowl. If things went the way she'd planned, she wouldn't have to deal with him much longer. Grace had applied for a new job in Gulfport which was far enough away from her mother and OooWee.

In the car on the way to Delta Pride Primary Care Clinic, Grace wheeled the car over the city's smooth roads. Felicia's sobs echoed in her head. Maybe Grace shouldn't have told her about Porky. Maybe Grace shouldn't have brought Porky to Delta Pride. What choice did she have? OooWee was in no shape to take care of him after the death threats started. She could barely take care of Felicia. Grace came to a stop at the red light at

the corner of Atkins and Lamar. She wished she'd brought Felicia to Delta Pride too, but OooWee insisted she knew best.

The light turned green. Grace drove the next two blocks ten miles over the speed limit. She turned into the parking lot, whipped her car into a spot near the back entrance, then grabbed her purse.

"You're late," Melinda, the receptionist said as soon as Grace entered the clinic.

"Dr. Hemphill been around?" Grace said.

"Dancing on one foot then the other." The phone at Melinda's desk rang. "Message for you," Melinda answered the phone with one hand and extended a yellow slip of paper toward Grace with the other. "Delta Pride Medical Center..."

Grace took the note then slipped around the corner to her office and closed the door behind her. She stared at the yellow paper in her hand and took in a deep breath. "Gulf Coast Health," Grace's fingers trembled as she dialed the number.

"Gulf Coast Health," a female voice said on the other end of the phone. If Grace had to guess, she would say the woman was white.

"This is Grace Collins," Grace said. "I received a message from this number."

"Ah, Grace," the woman said as if saying Grace's name gave her a sense of relief. "I was calling to let you know the job is yours if you want it. Can you start next week?"

Grace gripped the phone tight. It was time for a change. All her life she'd been OooWee's caretaker and her mother's whipping boy. She could get on the road Saturday after Porky's funeral. She wouldn't tell her mother or OooWee. She'd just get in her car, throw caution to the wind and go. Grace took in an audible breath, glanced at her rosary beads on the desk near her keyboard, then said, "Yes."

###

After OooWee took the bag from the lady at the drive-thru at Krystal, she wheeled her 1999 Impala into a parking space. It was her daddy's old car, but it still did the job. The lot was empty. It wasn't time for the lunch rush.

"I want to see Porky." Felicia's voice filled the car, working OooWee's nerves worse than the water company hounding her to pay the bill. OooWee swore the girl could make a preacher cuss.

"We'll go Saturday." OooWee put the car in park. She reached into the bag. It was hard for OooWee to believe Grace wanted her to come running up to Delta Pride just to bury a cat. Grace was spoiled. She wouldn't know the real world if it bit her on the ass.

"I want to go now!" Felicia spoke to OooWee like they were the same age.

OooWee's head snapped around. The girl had her hands on her small hips rolling her eyes at OooWee like she was about to whoop her ass. "You better straighten up, girl."

OooWee turned her attention back to the bag of food on the front seat beside her. The A. C. was wide open, blasting cold air on her hot, tired body. She lifted two hamburgers and a carton of fries from the greasy paper bag. All the things she had to do flooded her mind like the busted water heater flooded half of her small house last night. First off, she was late. Patches and Michele were already at the clinic. Next, she had to figure out how to pay this month's bills. She'd spent her last on a couple of gallons of gas and hamburgers. OooWee turned to face Felicia. She couldn't believe her eyes. The child's eyes were like daggers slicing into OooWee like a freshly baked ham sliced for Easter dinner. Felicia had OooWee's cellphone lifted high above her dark brown coarse hair.



Before OooWee uttered a word, the phone flew across the front seat and hit OooWee on the forehead with a thud before landing on the seat.

“Dammit!” OooWee dropped the burgers and fries back into the bag. The driver’s door creaked as she pushed it open. It sounded like a distressed cat’s meow. The hot sun spat its wrath upon her as she stepped out into the August heat. OooWee snatched the back door open. She had a hard time focusing on the forty pound girl sitting on the gray upholstered seat like she owned the world. Her arms crossed and her lip poked out like she was mad as hell and didn’t give a damn. With one tug of Felicia’s left arm, OooWee had the child out of the car.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” OooWee heard the anger in her voice, but she couldn’t stop herself. Her temper had her by a string, and like a kite, OooWee floated far and high on the winds of anger. Beads of sweat popped out on her face. She kept a strong grip on the girl’s arm. “You’re getting’ too grown!” OooWee spun her around. Felicia’s too little skater skirt lifted from the wind of the spin revealing a pair of torn Hello Kitty panties

The first blow from the palm of OooWee’s hand sent Felicia’s entire lower body forward. The child’s knees buckled from the second blow. When OooWee dealt the third blow, she was out of control, and she knew it. The blows came one after the other. OooWee struggled to maintain her balance as she gripped the girl’s arm like a vice. Felicia’s body swung back and forth like a pendulum. The whipping ended with OooWee yanking Felicia to her feet. Guilt overtook OooWee like a high tide on a deserted beach when she spun the girl around and stared at her distorted face – her mouth open in mid-scream, her breath coming quick and fast. Felicia’s almond butter complexion glistened with sweat, tears, and

snot in the sunlight. Then the girl opened her eyes. She stared at OooWee with deep brown pools of hate.

“Don’t ever do that again!” OooWee placed both hands on Felicia’s shoulders.

“I hate you!” Felicia’s words came forth with anger and hurt OooWee hadn’t noticed in her daughter before. “I wanna go live with Aunt Grace.”

OooWee loosened her grip on the girl’s bony shoulders and took a step back in disbelief. OooWee examined the child’s tear-stained face. It was as if her hate for OooWee had taken root and grew within her small body like a sturdy oak.

“Get back in the car!” OooWee’s tone was softer. Keith would’ve known what to do, but he was dead.

“No!”

“You’d betta’ get your little ass back in that car.” The words slipped from her lips before she knew it. In another time OooWee wouldn’t have taken that tone with Felicia, but that world included Keith, a real job, and family meals. Now with the stress of being a single mother trying to make ends meet on a nightclub singer’s salary, OooWee was at her wit’s end. Felicia folded her arms across her small chest. She tilted her head like a woman ready to take on another woman in a fight over a man or money. Her eyes were defiant, brown pools of stubbornness planted on OooWee. She saw guilt reflected in the girl’s eyes then looked away.

For two minutes, they stared at each other in the broiling sun. Nothing between them but honking horns and buzzing car engines on the street behind them. The scratchy drive-thru mic cut in with a static female voice. OooWee saw a car full of teenage boys at the drive-thru window. She wondered why they weren’t in school. The boys laughed and

threw empty beer cans from the open windows. Something inside OooWee wanted to pick up the cans, but she didn't. She was too afraid to leave Felicia alone for a second in that neighborhood. The bat was on the floorboard behind the passenger seat. If trouble broke out, OooWee would use it. OooWee's head snapped around when she heard an angry male voice from across the street yelling into his cell phone.

"Hell, naw, motha' fucka'," the man said. "You betta' have my money today!"

OooWee turned her attention back to Felicia who looked as if she was ready to throw a punch. "Fine." OooWee slid back into the driver's seat. Before she closed the door, Felicia crawled into the back seat. OooWee had put the car in reverse and was about to take her foot off the brake when she felt Felicia's thin arms around her neck. OooWee breathed a sigh of relief as the car full of boys left the lot. She put the car back into park.

"I ain't gonna be mean no more, Mama." Felicia's breath smelled like chocolate. If OooWee had to guess, she would say Hershey's Kisses, the Hershey's Kisses OooWee had hidden at the bottom of her dresser drawer in her room.

"Just like you not gonna steal mama's candy anymore?" OooWee lifted the girl's small frame over the seat and held her close.

"I ain't got no candy," Felicia said with a tiny grin.

"Mmmm Hmmm." OooWee held the child close to her

OooWee's cellphone beeped from the vicinity of the passenger seat. Felicia handed it to her then crawled into the backseat.

"Dammit!" OooWee looked at the phone then dropped it onto the passenger seat.

"What is it, mama?" Felicia asked as she fastened her seatbelt.

“Shaniqua can’t keep you today.” OooWee handed the bag to Felicia then put the car in reverse.

“I can take care of myself, mama.”

“You’ve done enough taking care of yourself already.” OooWee backed out of the parking space then wheeled the car toward North State Street. It was time for a change, OooWee thought. She pressed the gas and turned right when the street was clear.

###

Felicia had almost finished her French fries when they pulled up to the pink house. It was more crowded than usual. People stood on the sidewalk yelling and holding signs. Felicia couldn’t make out the words. People yelled at each other. Women were covering their faces and trying to enter the pink house through the crowd. Horns honked, and people yelled from cars. It was chaotic. Felicia couldn’t make out what everybody was saying.

“Get down low, baby,” OooWee said.

Felicia unfastened her seatbelt and crouched in the floorboard at the back of the driver’s seat. She eyed the bat that lay next to her. Felicia flinched when she heard someone bang on the car window.

“What the hell?” OooWee let the window down.

“We got to keep the entrance clear,” a female voice Felicia recognized as belonging to OooWee’s friend Patches said. “Where’s Michele?” OooWee asked.

“Inside.” Patches leaned into the car.

Felicia heard a woman scream from somewhere near the pink house. She knew not to move. She kept her eye on the bat lying across from her.

“Oh, shit!” Patches yelled before she left the car.

OooWee rolled her window up as she wheeled the car forward a few feet. She put the car into park, set the emergency brake, then said, "I'll be right back, baby." OooWee left before Felicia could respond.

"Get back! Get back!" OooWee's voice rose above the crowd of angry voices that swirled around the car. "...baby killers..." "...let me show you how to love your baby..."

Felicia tried to cover her ears, but the voices were louder than those at the club where OooWee sang and danced. Felicia thought her eardrums would split. She heard more of the crowd and less of OooWee. Somebody screamed. Felicia wanted to cover her ears but she was too scared. There were punches and lots of cursing. Underneath it all were distant police sirens and car horns.

"Abortion is murder!" The words rang out from a single voice. It didn't take long for it to morph into a unified chant by many. The words pressed hard against Felicia's ears making her heart beat so fast she thought it would beat right out of her chest.

"Women have the right to choose!" The chant cut through the other voices, but the words weren't as audible or as powerful.

The opposing groups of voices collided, exploding into a jumbled indistinguishable mass of raised voices in a variety of different pitches. Felicia couldn't hear OooWee anymore. She was about to rise from her hiding place, but the car door opened and slammed. Felicia thought OooWee was back, but this driver was taller and unfamiliar with the car. Felicia almost cried out when the driver slid the seat back almost pinning her. Felicia heard OooWee's voice again.

"My baby!"

The car went backward with a jolt. “Shit!” the man behind the wheel said. He sounded like a real young man to Felicia. Felicia heard a shift in the crowd’s voices. It seemed as if everyone was at war as they moved toward the car.

“My baby is in that car!” OooWee’s voice sounded like a loud whisper under the chaotic voices pelting Felicia’s ears like a split bag of Hershey’s Kisses on the wooden floor of her mother’s bedroom.

Felicia heard fists pounding on the trunk. The driver put the car in drive. Someone grabbed the back door handle.

“Embryos before ho’s!” a man said. He sounded like he was against the car. His voice sent chills up Felicia’s spine.

“Get the hell outta my face!” OooWee said.

“You’ll never see the light!” a woman said. She sounded close to the car.

“My baby...” The car moved forward. Felicia heard the door handle snap as it slipped through a hand. The driver let down the window.

“Oh, God! No!” OooWee said just before Felicia heard the gunshot.

The car sped away leaving the voices of the crowd and her mother’s silence behind like they left her daddy at the cemetery on that warm rainy day. Felicia stayed low like OooWee told her to. She eyed the baseball bat on the floor next to her wondering when she should use it. OooWee wasn’t there to give the signal.

Felicia knew OooWee kept the child lock set so she wouldn’t be able to open the back door and jump out. She had to use the bat.

The car bounced along the Jackson streets. It felt like Felicia was on a roller coaster at the fair. Her fingers curled around the narrow end of the cool hardwood. A surge of

power rose in her. All she could hear were OooWee's words in her head. "Hit 'em where it hurts, baby."

"Shit!" the man yelled when he saw Felicia rise from her hiding place. She didn't have much swing room. Her goal was to make use of what she had. Cars passed as the driver swerved all over the road. Horns honked when he crossed over into the lanes of oncoming traffic. Felicia got the heavy end of the bat into the front seat. One partial swing. She hit his right hand which rested on the steering wheel.

"I'm gonna kill you, you little bitch," he said trying to keep control of the car.

Felicia flipped over the front seat and landed in the passenger seat. Her hand found the door handle. She heard a loud pop. Pain exploded in her arm then moved throughout her whole body like a bolt of lightning. It felt as if her entire upper body was on fire.

Death is hard chile. Those were old Sammy's words during one of their secret meetings on one of Felicia's visits to Aunt Grace's house. She could see his brown eyes looking at her.

POW!

Another shot exploded in Felicia's ear. She cried out. Red, warm blood soaked her Hello Kitty shirt that Aunt Grace bought her for Christmas like the warm pee that soaked her thighs that sunny day in the woods at the back of Aunt Grace's house. The acrid smell of gunfire burned her nose. "Mama," Felicia whispered as she felt her consciousness slip away.

# “Wash Day”

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*By Peter Malik*

There is a part of the altar in the church where I work that no one ever sees. It's back behind the tabernacle. For some reason there is a lip about midway up. No one can see the little shelf the lip makes. No one would ever know if I didn't clean it, so I only wash it once a year.

This is the day I clean it, the first Saturday in June when no one much comes in, especially here in Southern California. I use a stepladder, one of the old ones like my father had in his garage. It's not too big, not too small, perfect for the job. It just takes soap and water and a little scrubbing. I scrub a lot because it's once a year.

Imagine being sent into the jungle on patrol at night, almost certain death at that time in Vietnam, yet I did it, over and over, until I stepped on the mine. But I didn't die or even get hurt, that's the funny part. "You were blown to Kingdom come but no Kingdom came," the nurse at the hospital said. I guess she was used to seeing a lot of death so she made jokes about it. When I asked her again, she said, "You know those people in tornados that get spit out of the cloud and land safely? That was you." I never asked about it again.

What were the 70s, 80s, 90s to me? I should have stayed in the service, I would be retired by now but everybody said, "Get out" so I got out. I sold cars, good cars, Cadillacs, and they told me to mention my service but not Vietnam and I lost about as many sales with that line as I made. But then I drank too much one day and came in late for the 8:30 sales meeting and the sales manager made me stand in front of everybody and fined me \$20 and I had to give it to him right then and after that I got the worst shift of all, the one on Sunday



when all of the football games are on, and the rule at the dealership was that you stand the whole time even if no one came in. And the guys who worked the lot would offer me a drink from their flasks and I would say, “No” and they would say, “Suit yourself” and go back out and drink cheap brandy in the lot shack. But one time a lady came in and paid full price cash for an Eldorado and said her husband died and left her money and on that one day no one laughed at me.

Stop giving vets parades. It is just as embarrassing for us as it is for you. You abandon us every other day but then suddenly it's parade time and we have to show up in our old uniforms and the fat shows through and we get some barbecue off a paper plate and then it's night again. If you are going to forget us, then do a good job of it and completely forget.

I remember breakups more than the sex. They were more intense anyway. It's good that I never married, very good. I couldn't take the screaming. My little brother screamed for his first three years, and they never could figure out what was wrong, but he just kept screaming. A woman meant children and children meant screaming in my mind so I never married. I started out with every woman knowing it would end with a breakup, not me in a suit at a chapel.

I did do the sex thing, but it frightened me and it got so I couldn't take it. Sex has power, terrible power. Think of what people do to get it and what they do after they get it. Priests don't ever know sex (some of them anyway), and you got to hand it to them for that, I guess.

Between the side altar and the main altar, we display a little doll of Jesus in what looks like a purple dress. I make sure the dress is always starched and clean. Those eyes will

always get you, the eyes of Jesus. He's looking at me right now, washing the place that is never seen. Better scrub harder. Scrub, scrub, scrub.

My mother used to say, "There is always something to wash." She was right. I never saw her take a nap, she was always cleaning that little house in Southern California with lemon trees in the back yard, only a few miles from here. I wish Dad hadn't sold it. He had a good job for a long time, came home for lunch like people did then, and Mother would have a nice meal cooked, light but nice. I waited for the sound of his '59 Chrysler shutting off, the car door opening, the door closing, the footsteps on the walkway, the push of the front door opening, then the "anybody home?" though of course he knew Mom and I were already there.

*Mom, Dad, where are you? I need you more now than when I was little. Dad, we went to the ballpark, I remember, the cigar smoke, the wooden stands, our team never won when we went and you said I was a jinx but you said it like father teasing son, and you taught me how to keep score and what a fielder's choice was and I found out that Cracker Jack was really good. Everybody in the family was alive and healthy then and the country called South Vietnam wasn't even on the globe in my school library.*

Night. That's when I want to drink. There is no place to go around here after 9 p.m. except bars. I had an AA buddy for awhile that I could call at night but he fell off the wagon and they never gave me another one. I love the summer and fear the winter for its nights, even here in California. Sunday night, that's the worst for some reason.

It's straight up 11 a.m. I know because there goes the church bell which sounds like a gong: bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong and then the last one,

bong, the one that tells you what time it is if you think about it. Then nothing. Quiet. Rung out until noon.

I know where the altar wine is stored. Father Kent doesn't keep it locked like some pastors. I have never touched it but the last guy who worked here said, "Sure, I drink it. Just put the same amount of water back in as the wine you took out. They'll never know." Once I had to move all of the bottles and one of the opened bottles splashed a little and a drop got on my hand. White wine, at the end of my thumb, one drop. I licked it off and it tasted good but not that big of a deal. So I didn't count it against my sobriety, 868 days and counting. But I know where that wine is and it's not locked up.

OK, it's finished, it's washed. I look once more at the shelf and then back at the Jesus doll and then me and Jesus look at that part of the altar that nobody else can see or will ever see. We look at it, the clean place, and we smile together. Clean till next year, 364 nights away.

# “Rich Man”

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*By C. Leigh McInnis*

“If I only had land enough, I wouldn’t fear the Devil, himself.”  
—Pahom in Leo Tolstoy’s “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”

Jacob Brown is rich. The young sun peeks through the tightly closed curtains, an invitation to live. His office is a book-filled Batcave, lined with everything from Hazard Adams’ *Critical Theory Since Plato* to Ahmos Zu-Bolton’s *Ain’t No Spring Chicken*. Its walls are decorated with plaques and certificates from some of the most prestigious awarding bodies and speaking engagements at universities, social organizations, and libraries throughout the country. And what’s not on the walls are letters and more awards and plaques stuffed in file cabinets and the closet. So many awards and letters that his office almost appears as a suit that has become too small for its person, bursting at the seams. Yet, all these reminders of his success do a great deal to drive him to write more as they dull the lingering sting of years of rejection letters that leave a writer famished to publish.

Banging away on his computer, the sound of a heavy rain or a rapid fire rifle, this is the moment of Jacob’s joy. When writing, he is a mechanic inside an engine, his fingers wrapped around nuts and bolts, hoses, belts, pistons, alternator, starter, with oil soaking his hands and sweat down his arms, back, and brow, his arms up to his elbows in the engine, his head and entire torso submerged under the hood—this is how one writes, the ink-stained fingers of the mind wrapped around words, kneading them into images, metaphors, stretching them into settings or characters being molded from the clay of one’s memories—

the sound of the motor revving and purring, the pace of a poem or story, the satisfaction of being a mechanical word engineer, of building worlds and the things of that world. Every work is a piece of Jacob being birthed and etched into the world, his way of being fruitful and multiplying.

Deja-boo, six going on thirty-six, stands on the outside of the office door, her little belly poking through her *Princess and the Frog* t-shirt, her head of barrettes a Jacob Lawrence painting of dancing colors, her eyes two big ole bo' dollars, waiting in anticipation for the door to open. The muffled sound of keyboard banging is steady, a rhythm that Deja-boo knows well. Denise, her mother, a flat-bellied bigger version of her, appears behind her.

“Daddy banging on the computer.”

“Daddy always banging on the computer”

“Daddy play airplane with Deja?”

“Daddy a ‘flyby night,’ if that’s what you mean?”

That isn’t what Deja means, but Deja knows that it means that the door isn’t opening soon. Denise takes Deja-boo’s hand, and Deja-boo, reluctantly but with little resistance, is led from the door, the keyboard banging playing a tune that marches them down the hall, out of the house, and into the day of girls gone shopping.

The banging slows to a pitter-patter like the end of a rain. Jacob’s eyes fix on a point. The car has stopped moving, stalled on the side of the road. It’s the pistons, err, characters again. They get to a certain point of the way—the crossroad of the story—and stall, not knowing whether to turn right or left. He eyes them for a moment, quickly flashing over the words that got them to where they are. “Well, go on,” he says to them, but they simply eye him back, fold their arms, and sit on this spot of indecision. Jacob has a multitude of

problems with this story, including *I wonder if they would eat yams?* His head falls slowly back onto the chair, his eyes close, he blows air—heavily but slowly, and sinks even further inward—looking for more fields to mine. After endless empty caves, fields, and rocks with nothing under them, he opens his eyes, allowing them to slide across the treasures on his bookshelf: Achebe, Bambara, Baraka, Dumas, Hayes, Ellison, Finney, Hurston, Martin, Morrison, Pushkin, Salaam, Sanchez, Tolstoy, Trethewey, Ward, Walker, Wright—all medicine for what ails him. And in a moment, he is reading, a starving man devouring a buffet, words beginning as a drizzle becoming a down pour, the legs of his mind racing to consume every word until his run becomes flight; he’s a rocket shooting into the mind’s outer atmosphere where ideas and actions converge into fully plotted universes. The book slides from his lap onto the floor, and those same fingers that were just furiously following words on a page are now pounding words onto a screen. The storm of his words has returned, and he is in ecstasy in the cocoon of his mind flowering with the sweetest fruits of Logos.

As his banging echoes into the atmosphere, the old sun is making room for the young moon. They greet each other in passing, a cordial arrangement of dueling landlords of one space. Denise and Deja-boo return to the house, weary warriors of a day filled with fighting traffic and lines, yet happy with the battle which has bonded them with smiles, ice cream, songs from the radio, trying on clothes, making funny faces, and learning the difference between a fairy and a princess.

As Denise approaches the porch, she collects the mail. It includes a SASE, and it’s thin. *Damn, another rejection letter. He’s already self-sequestered in that damn cave. This letter means that he won’t leave that hole for months.* Tucking the letter in her pocket, she opens the

front door, and Deja-boo dashes toward the back of the house, making a beeline to the closed office door. There is no banging. Denise, stopping in the kitchen before following her bumblebee to the back of the house, stops behind Deja-boo. Her eyes illuminate a question; Denise nods an answer, and Deja-boo knocks. No answer. Deja-boo knocks again. The door opens, and a stone-face Jacob appears, looking down on his little intruder.

“We back!” Her face is an entire smile with missing teeth.

“I see that.”

“Mommy brought you back some food!”

“Well, isn’t this day getting better.” A smile creeps across his face.

“It was good! You missed it!”

“Really?” His eyebrows rise to accent his inquiry.

“We went to the mall, and the park, and we saw a homeless man and gave him some food.”

With a dry tone, Denise chimes, “That’s when I remembered we needed to bring you something to eat.”

With a smirk, Jacob responds, “God takes care of babies and fools.”

“Yeah,” Denise retorts, “and you ain’t no baby.” The smirk disappears from Jacob’s face. Turning her attention to Deja-boo, “Come on baby, let’s go change clothes so we can watch our movie.” Turning half of her attention to Jacob, “Your food is in the kitchen. You cannot bring it back here into this office, but you are welcome to eat it outside on the corner bench.” And before Jacob can respond, they stroll down the hall, Deja-boo’s smile lighting the hallway as an invitation to join them.

By the time Jacob finishes editing and eating, Deja-boo is asleep. Looking out the kitchen window, he realizes that it is dark. *I wanted to see the sunset.* It always gives him ideas. He missed it. The movie that Denise and Deja-boo began watching is now watching them. Her little head is in Denise's lap. She looks like a nymph child with her Iridessa pajamas. They are a Frank Morrison painting: the light of the television splashing on their bodies, the dark of the room enclosing them into a cocoon, the hazelnut and milk chocolate of their faces framed by the yellows, and pinks, and greens of their sleeping clothes for their slumber party. Jacob stops short of the couch, taking them in like an exhibit at a museum. He is good with art. It can be appreciated. It doesn't awake and need to be diapered. Once a smile is painted on a canvas, it remains a painted smile. Deja-boo's smile is a timeless brushstroke framed in shimmering canary yellow pajamas. He leans to remove Deja-boo from Denise's lap. Denise awakes, cradles Deja-boo, moving her from Jacob's reach, and states "I got her. You missed it again."

"I know that you are tired..."

Cutting him off, "Yeah, I'm tired alright," and she rises and takes Deja-boo to bed.

Initially surprised by Denise's irritation, he waves the thought from his head and turns his attention to the television. "*Tinker Bell: Secret of the Wings!* Oh, hell n'all. Why didn't they rent the movie starring Tinker Bell's black friend? They probably don't even make a movie starring Tinker Bell's black friend." Click! He grabs the book on the table and reads for a while before heading to bed.

As he enters the bedroom, Denise is reading. When he catches her at these moments—reading, writing, caring for Deja-boo, and any other child on whom she can get her hands—he realizes that he has married his mother, aunt, and grandmother. Her glasses



sit on the edge of her nose like his grandmother, and when she reads deep thought frames the fire of her face like his mother and aunts. Of course, it's physical at first; it's always physical at first, but the physical without character has always been empty for Jacob. A beautiful woman with no character is merely art for art's sake. He's always been attracted to utilitarian beauty. And right now, her working brain combining with her radiant face is looking real sexy. Simultaneously sliding from his clothes and into bed, he attempts to mold his body next to hers, but she continues reading.

“You are so pretty.”

“You are so horny”

“That too.”

“And, I am so tired.”

“Well, since you are tired, just lay back, and I'll do all the work.”

Ignoring his proposition, “Are you still taking Deja-boo to the zoo tomorrow?”

Feeling his sexual buzz escaping the room, he offers: “Tomorrow is Sunday; is the zoo open on Sunday? I mean, the animals ain't got to get their pray or rest on?”

“Don't be stupid man, and you promised her that you would.”

“Yeah, I did...” In mid-sentence a chilled realization covers him. “Baby, I got this deadline Monday, and I really need to finish this work.”

Closing her eyes and the book, a funnel cloud begins to form on her face.

Attempting to calm her undercurrent storm, she continues “So, you not gon' take her?”

“I got this deadline, baby. This is major...”

“They are all major. They are all always major. Everything is major except us.”

“That’s not tr...” He stops himself because he knows that it is true and that their life is not built on the lie that they are first. Yet, still horny, he leaves bed to return to the office to write. It’s going to be a long night of banging the keyboard. And if that doesn’t work, he’ll jog an extra mile in the morning.

Deja-boo was three the first time Jacob took her to the zoo. It was Spring Break, and Denise was working on the “Schoolhouse to Jailhouse” campaign to prevent schools from criminalizing children for adolescent behavior. Jacob had some down time after having just won an award with a nice prize—the size that allows one not to work for a year if one desires. Standing in the kitchen pouring milk over Fruit Loops, he told Deja-boo, “We’re going to the zoo today.”

Immediately, she combusted into joyful sunshine. Her face was bright with happiness. “We gon’ see the animals and everything!” her voice and face illuminated like a brand new sun.

That moment never left Jacob. He had never given anyone that kind of joy before. Denise cried on their wedding day, but even that seemed to pale to Deja-boo’s eruption of ecstasy. In a rare moment, Jacob’s heart had room for something other than writing, and from March until August they visited the zoo ten times. In fact, they visited the zoo so much that one of the two lazy gorillas that never moved from their raised platform actually sat up and said: “Damn, cuz, I’m captured; I gots to be here. Your life is more pitiful than mine if you ain’t got nowhere else to go.” And, in truth, Jacob had nowhere else to go with Deja-boo. Thank God she loves the zoo.

But, like a summer shower, that room for something other than writing is soon gone, demolished by the lingering sting of needing to be published, and what follows are three

years of hurry up and wait for Deja-boo, which includes this Sunday with Deja-boo and Denise alone at the zoo. As they pass the lazy gorillas, the talking one sits up again and says to Deja-boo, “My man still too busy to join us?!? Man, that’s messed up! Well, don’t worry. That just means he’s gon’ miss seeing the look on the people’s faces when they realize just how far the chimpanzee can throw his poop.”

Deja-boo laughs, and Denise, distracted by grown people thoughts, turns to Deja-boo and asks, “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, but let’s not get too close to the monkeys today.”

“Okay,” Denise agrees, frowning to that odd request as Deja-boo gives one last wink and smile to the gorilla as it winks back.

Six months have passed since Jacob’s work was submitted to the National Writers Award. During that time Bruce Wayne has spent most of his days in the Batcave because that’s where this Batman can flourish. Now, he decides to make some final edits to a new work before he goes to today’s scheduled event. Working for three hours, having lost track of time, he rushes to leave, but, before he can leave the house, the phone rings.

“Hello.”

“Hello, is this Jacob Brown?”

“Yes, it is.”

“This is Dr. Murray, Chair of the National Writers Award Committee. I’m calling to inform you that you have been named winner of the National Writer’s Award.”

After hearing “Award,” time, for Jacob, stops. At this moment, he seems suspended in a third dimensional bottleneck where every moment of his life has all arrived at this point. The voice is still talking, but Jacob’s eyes are closed, watching every day of his life

freefalling from space to this moment. *I did it*, he thinks to himself. *I'm certified. I'm real. I'm not just a writer, but a major award winning writer. I'm a writer. No one can take this from me. I'm a writer.* It's moments like this that the lingering sting leaves.

“Mr. Brown, are you still there?”

“Oh, yes...I'm here. I'm very much here.” They talk for forty more minutes. Dr. Murray giving Jacob the general information of the upcoming award ceremony, when he will receive his prize money, and other engagements he must fulfill. When the call finally ends, Jacob allows the moment to consume him.

This is a new joy; this is going to the zoo for the first time joy. This is paying off the house joy. This is sending a copy of the award letter with the prize money highlighted to all those editors who rejected his work joy. This is “Give me my damn tenure, and what took y'all so damn long to give me my tenure?” joy. This is, “No, I only teach upper level creative writing classes” joy. This is “my name will forever been engraved in all anthologies forever more” joy. This is “call my agent and tell him to secure the three-book distribution deal because I'm big enough to publish the books myself” joy. This is, *Oh, shit, I should have been at Deja-boo's end of the year program! Damn, damn, damn!* As Jacob grabs his coat to rush out the door, Denise and a dejected Deja-boo enter.

“Baby, I'm sorry. I know that I missed it and how important it was, but I just got the news of my life!” Denise stands there, her face a blank chalkboard, Deja-boo wiping dry tears from her cheeks.

“Deja-boo got four awards today. I took her to Bully's to celebrate.”

Stuttering to shift some of his excitement to Deja-boo, “Baby, that’s wonderful...and...and...it fits right in with my news.” No reaction from Denise. “Baby, I won! Did you hear me! I won! I won the National Writer’s Award!”

There is a hollowness in the air when he tells them the news. It seems to hover over them, a thing in the room. Not a bad thing, but more of another thing to deal with, another thing that intrudes into the life. Finally, Denise responds, “Very good, good job as usual.”

“Very good? Good job? Baby, you’re acting like you don’t realize how important this is, how this will change our lives?!?”

“You have a file cabinet, a closet, and an office full of awards. I’m not surprised that you won an award. That’s what you do. And, that’s all you do.”

“Yes, of course, that’s what I do. And this also is what sustains our life, keeps the lights on, makes us who we are. And, finally we’ve arrived at a place where we can enjoy that climb.”

“Man, this ain’t the mountain top for you. There will always be another contest or award or event. Besides, you couldn’t have gotten this news while you were with us at Deja-boo’s event?”

“Baby, I’m sorry for missing her event, but, come on now, she’s six.”

“I’ll be seven next month.”

“Deja-boo, please!” Jacob snaps.

“Don’t yell at her!”

“I’m not yelling at her!” Taking a moment to compose himself, “I can’t believe you’re not happy about this news?!?”

“How happy were you for Deja-boo’s honor roll report card? How happy were you when she was in those school plays? How happy were you the first time she called you daddy? Hell, how happy were you when you missed my birthday and our anniversary? How happy were you then? Because I was miserable as hell!”

The night ends in a silence that seems to smother them all to sleep. As Jacob sleeps, he dreams of being at the computer with his hands embedded into the screen of the computer as wires from the cpu are embedded through his skull into his brain. Writing is a process of being milked, and he is flooding the screen with his juices. Drenched in sweat, his mouth becomes dry as brittle sandpaper. Feeling thirsty and faint, he dislodges himself from the computer, unsnaps the wires from his head, goes to the kitchen, and opens the refrigerator to locate a liquid. He drinks a glass of lemonade, returns to the computer, and reconnects himself to the computer. After another short fury of writing, he is thirsty again. He notices that his skin has become dry and withered. He returns to the refrigerator, this time drinking grape juice. After an even shorter flaming fury of writing, his fingernails and hair have become brittle and flaking, and he returns to the refrigerator, this time drinking soda. Returning to the computer, he becomes shrouded with thirst even before he can begin typing. His throat is stinging with the prickling of a thousand stickpins; staggering, barely making it to the refrigerator, he is panicked because the only thing left to drink is water. He reaches for the water but is so weak that he begins to fall forward, his face crashing through the plastic shelves slicing his skin until his forehead thuds against the base of the refrigerator. Jacob awakes sweating. *That was a strange ass dream. I need to get something to drink.*

A few minutes later, Jacob is jogging the track circling the Cloverton Park. There is usually a good mixture of people there: black, white, young, old, in shape, not so in shape, serious, and not so serious joggers and walkers. Lately, about two months now, an older gentleman has been watching Jacob as if he's trying to get his attention. Normally, Jacob would welcome the opportunity to converse with an older black male, but he hates exercising so much that he also hates anything that may extend his exercise time. The man walks with a walker so it's difficult for him to catch Jacob, who can leave the track and take the countryside trail to avoid the old man. However, this morning, the old man proves that wisdom is always better than youth as he is able to corner Jacob before he begins his run. "I don't mean to bother you son, but I was wondering if I could speak with you for a moment."

"Well, usually...err...I don't have much time...as soon as I finish my jog I've got to get back to my computer."

"I promise it won't take me long to say what I have to say, son."

"Yea...yes...yes sir."

"I see you jogging here a lot. And, I see you in the paper...a lot! You getting to be very big. But, what I also noticed is that the more your name is in the paper, the less you are here jogging." The old man's face becomes a portrait of seriousness. "I've worked hard my entire life. That big ole Lincoln outside, that's just one of the many cars I own. I know you've seen my Cadillac that takes two spaces. I've made enough money that my grandchildren's grandchildren will not have to work. Yes, sir, son, I've done alright for myself. But, I'll tell you now that I'd give all that money back if I could walk one day without this damn walker. Just one day. You don't know what you got son, but I know

that if you start neglecting your health and your family for the pursuit of your career, you'll regret it in the end."

"Sir, no disrespect, but I'm not neglecting my family."

"It's only a matter of time youngblood. If your health ain't important to you, your family will not be far behind. Oh, you won't mean to neglect them. A missed dinner here, a birthday there, next thing you know you'll be a stranger in your own home."

That last statement hits the mark, a dart to the center of his heart, but his external façade remains an unfazed marble mountain. "I appreciate the words of advice sir; I really do."

"I hope you do, son." The old man turns and allows his walker to carry him slowly to the park bench where he spends most of his Saturdays.

A couple of days later, Jacob, Denise, and Deja-boo fly to New York for the awards ceremony. Jacob meets a few new people but realizes that he has already met most of his literary heroes before tonight. Trying desperately to climb the mountain with his eyes focusing only on the peak, he never realizes how much distance is between him and the ground before tonight's ceremony. He is excited. They are excited. It is a big deal. They have all been a part of this narrative. Denise has been there from the beginning before Jacob had been published and she fried chicken in a bowtie or flipped burgers in a hat to pay the bills while he attended class during the day and wrote at night. This is her night as much as his. She returned to school only after he could feed himself with his words. Yet, this is not her ship coming to harbor. Her ship had come to harbor long ago when she met a man who encouraged her community work. Her ship was given new life three years ago when they adopted Deja-boo. Tonight, this award ceremony is St. Paul's letter of gain and loss to the



Church of Philippi. It seems that she's been docked at the harbor while Jacob has been constantly looking for the third bank of the river. Yet unlike Rosa's unnamed character, Jacob's canoe is threatening to sail out of sight.

After the cheers, handshakes, pats on the back, an acceptance speech, being swallowed by an ocean of smiling teeth, exchanging business cards, highbrow literary jokes, taking pictures with everyone on the earth, and sleeping on the greatest mattress ever in a room that's more expensive than their house, it is time to leave. But the night before they return to Mississippi, Jacob's agent informs him that Big Ass Book Company has agreed to a three-book distribution deal that will allow Jacob to retain the rights to his work. It is the ultimate offer that cannot be passed.

"Baby, we gotta get home," Denise implores. "Deja-boo has her recital the day after we return. She's been practicing all year for this."

"I know, baby, but this is a once in a life time opportunity."

"Deja-boo will never have another first recital either."

"I tell you what. Y'all just take the flight home, and I'll be home in three days."

Turning to Deja-boo, "Deja-boo, you do a good job, and when I get home I'll...we can do whatever you want to do." She shakes her head yes, but her face does not share or affirm that sentiment.

The next day, Denise and Deja-boo have left, and Jacob is alone in the hotel room. He realizes just how big the room is. On his bed, he feels as if he is on a raft in the middle of an ocean, drifting without a paddle. The television light flickers, and for a moment the room is dark. His prize plaque lies with him in the raft, but he'd gladly trade it for a paddle. As the water begins to rise a faint but familiar tune plays in his head and causes him to

remember being a child locked in a room with books and albums covering his bed and floor, becoming impregnated with that same fire that caused him to know he was alive. The water begins to recede and the volume of the song increases. It is Prince's "S.S.T.," which was inspired by Hurricane Katrina, and it is playing right outside his door: "Who will be a guest in your tent?/ Are you gonna be happy with how your life has been spent?/ Did you have open arms for each and everybody you met,/ Or did you let them die in the rain? Endless war, Poverty or hurricane..."

The last line is a punch in the chest, striking Jacob in the exact spot of the old man's words. Seeming to float toward the door on the wave of the music, he opens the door to see two maids, two young sisters who look to be in their early thirties. They are caramel and chocolate, sculpted from marble, with not an ounce of fat on their bodies. Each is a perfectly crafted poem. The sweat from their daily work has caused their curls to droop and flatten, and their clothes are clinging to their exhausted bodies held upright only by a joy that is emanating from the inside.

"Girl, look at you, smiling from ear to ear."

"Honey, my baby is graduating and going to college."

"Girl, I know you proud, working two or three jobs just to keep that boy out them streets, spending your last just to keep him safe."

The chocolate beauty grabs her sister by the shoulders, looks deeply into her eyes, and says, "Girl, I'm broke but I'm happy."

The sister's words implode Jacob's chest, fully waking him from his daze. The chip created in his heart by the old man with the walker is growing into a crack that is traveling through Jacob's entire heart. What at first feels like his heart is breaking is the realization

that his heart is being remolding and reformed like a muscle growing tighter and stronger from crunches or pushups. The young woman's words—the purity in her tone like a perfectly played flute—liberates Jacob. His heart now pumps more vigorously. It is now capable of carrying the greater weight or enduring even more disappointment and is wide enough to house something other than writing. Immediately, he returns to his room and calls his agent.

“I'm not going to the meeting tomorrow.”

“Say, what!?”

“I gotta go home and see Deja-boo's recital.”

“But, this is it—the biggest deal you'll ever make. You gon' just walk away from this?!?”

“How much money and accomplishment is enough?”

“You have been struggling your whole life for this moment. It's finally here. Don't blow it...Don't miss it.”

“If I don't go home, I'll miss so much more.” Before his agent can speak, Jacob ends, “It's time for me to realize that I *yam* what I am.”

Jacob calls Denise to tell her that he's coming home tomorrow. When she answers the phone, he can hear the cold disappointment in her voice—disappointment that he's not home and disappointment that she's not there with him. But, when he tells her he's coming home, the ice in her tone begins to thaw—it's like an unexpected early spring in which the gray haze of winter slowly evaporates, revealing the hope of buds of new life blossoming.

“Let me speak to Deja-boo.”

“She's sleep...been sleep for a while now.”

Suddenly he remembers the pajamas. “Did she wear her Iridessa pajamas?”

“Yes, and that’s the first time you’ve ever said Iridessa; you always say Tinker Bell’s black friend.”

There’s a warmness that connects them through the phone and a revelation to Denise that Jacob is seeing them and life with new eyes. After a short pause, Jacob answers, “I’ll see y’all soon.”

“We’ll be here waiting.”

By noon the next day, Jacob is in the airplane, cruising above the clouds; the sun that was drenching the sky in gold is now hiding from the angry clouds. Having climbed to avoid the storm, the airplane is a ride at Space Mountain. It begins to shake violently, the rattling of the passengers’ personals in their laps and within the above compartments causes them to think of the nuts and bolts of the airplane. There is a flash of light that consumes the entire plane in blindness, followed by a clap of thunder that shatters every eardrum, leaving them all with the hearing of a failed car speaker. Once rendered blind and deaf, the plane fills with smoke as their lungs heave for air while their bodies become bathed in flames. Another jerk of the plane, and they are all ragdolls hurled through the belly of this iron beast, the plane plunging, nose first, gravity playing ping pong with their bodies, their skin being sliced from their bones, their bones becoming discarded toothpicks. In this moment, Jacob experiences another bottleneck of memories, the moments of his life in Technicolor with *Princess and the Frog* t-shirts and Iridessa pajamas flooding his vision. Jacob Brown is rich. He simply realizes it too late.

# From *Camp on the Wolf*

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*By Kathy R. Pitts*

## ***Camp on the Wolf: "The Lost Photographs"***

Kit remembered her first dream, but she was not comfortable telling it. Still, she pressed on: "I notice that—in my brother's room—it is becoming blindingly bright; although it is nighttime. A searing white brilliance comes from the face of the open door itself. There, in the uppermost outer corner, a childish picture of a smiling sun beams at us. Junior is in the bed with me, and he is on the side closest to the door. He is in a child's one-piece pajamas with feet. He is face down in the bed with his head under the pillow, and his legs are pulled up beneath him. I wonder at this and look at the door again. The sun has begun to leer, quake, and burn in a sinister way. It is not comforting; its face is cruel. It no longer belongs in a child's bedroom. There is no softness in the room—just dark and light—as the sun's brimming glare washes out any other color.

In the dream, I am uneasy, but of what I'm not sure. Junior is very afraid, yet he is five years older than I. At the foot of our bed a lightning bolt cuts diagonally across a blackened TV screen, but the set has not been turned on. Neither of our parents is in the room, and my greatest insecurity lies in the fact that they will have to pass in front of the door with that sun before Junior and I can be safe again. This does not seem likely, and I don't think our parents know that anything is wrong. I hear my mother's muted, matter-of-fact voice speaking from somewhere out of the room: "It's just the weather."

I hear my father, whose been taking a shower, speak scientifically and detachedly "Lightning will do that; we'd better unplug the set," but no one comes in. We can't call out. A seismic noiselessness envelopes all else, and I ball myself up tightly against the antique headboard from which the paint has been battered for a century.

On the ride home, Kit thinks about the past. She thinks about the present, the house, and she thinks about the people, both the people she can remember—the great reactors, and the people she didn't know who had somehow involved themselves into her reality, but even more so, into her imagination, and there took form, like gods that we do not see who are always watching, but who are not always assuring: Great Grandma Smith, whose aged head had expired against the headboard—true, she had not died in the children's room—became a silent specter, existing as a rumor of someone who disapproved and played the piano. All of her old music sits on top of the piano still.

Kit is no longer a child. She's an adult woman occupying the house that her parents had lived in when they were alive. The piano still sits in Kit's living room, and the bed with the iron headboard still occupies her southeast bedroom, the bedroom of the dream.

Great Grandma Smith: a ghost whose likeness was only felt—there was no photograph. Kit's mother, Flora, had hoped for decades to find just one photograph of Great Grandma, but though a grown woman, Flora wasn't allowed to explore the back of her mother's house when the Lady was alive. Kit spoke the family line while waiting at a light: "Counting me, we are four generations of women. There's Great Grandma Smith; I don't recall her at all. Lady Tessier is Grandma Smith's daughter and my grandmother. Lady Tessier's daughter is my mother, Flora."

A few days after the Lady's funeral, Flora and Kit took the long-forbidden opportunity to look through the Lady's things. When the two came up the stairs from the carport, past the lead-lined fall-out-shelter, the security alarm began blasting in the hallway. Kit almost tore back down the stairs, certain for a second that the Lady was wailing out of the wall when she realized that it was just the siren. She unplugged it, and she and her mother, Flora, moved on in the back of the house to the cedar chest. The box put Kit in mind of a coffin. "I was sure we'd find it in here," Flora grumbled, searching for a third time through "Lady" Tessier's belongings.

Cautiously, as if the Lady might still be able to catch her misbehaving, Flora pulled out diaries and discolored ladies' handkerchiefs with embroidery, withered flowers and *photographs*--fistfuls of them, but none the desired one:

You see, your Great Grandma Smith always said that she didn't want her picture taken; she never thought she was dressed up enough. So, Mother believed her, and if someone were ever about to take a snapshot of Grandma, Mother would say, "No, don't take a picture of your grandma. She wouldn't like that!" Well, one time after a wedding, your great grandmother *was* dressed up, and a picture *was* taken, and now I can't *find* it!

Flora searched hard for the face—a map—reconnaissance of old territory lost now in a missing portrait. How impolite to dematerialize that way without proof. But there is evidence. The headboard, for one, the paintless metal now exposed in places, yet bearing a realistic oil rendering of what appears to be chrysanthemums, grayed with age, in the center. Junior had claimed the bed for himself and festooned it instead with several Audubon stickers of birds.

Kit returned her attention to her dream. She would finish telling it during her next session:

The sun's size and virulence intensifies. It quavers, especially at its radiant points, like the air surrounding a fire looks wavy where it is hottest. It crawls and spreads like tentacles past the edges of the door. It is alive, watching Junior and me with its features hidden in a swollen face. We feel the heat. Junior has not changed his position, but he is trembling and seems smaller. The scorching brightness makes it hard to see the outline of his pajamas now. The west side of the room is almost impossible to look at. This is the first dream that I can recall as a child.

At nine Kit can no longer kiss her father on the mouth. "We mustn't share germs." Afraid, even when no one was looking. Abysmally afraid for the reputations of Young Ladies. Kit recalled how when she had been sick one night as a small child, he fell asleep at the foot of her bed. The

morning light exposed his transgression. "Fathers don't sleep in the room with their daughters," he had preached.

"But you sleep in the room with Junior?"

"That's different."

"Why doesn't mommy clear the towels and clothes off your bed in her room so you can sleep in there again, anyway?"

He responded by clearing his throat. Kit sensed that she may have said something wrong, but it was *just* a question.

"I feel better now," she said as he slunk out of the room, mysteriously ashamed for having been a comfort late at night when Kit was nauseous, caught there at the foot of her bed, having been too tired to go back to his own room. "Don't touch that fallen bird," the Lady had spoken. "He might have a disease. Don't touch."

### *Camp on the Wolf: "Mother's Slide Show"*

"It costs so much less to spend the evening videotaping slides instead of having them reprinted, and Shelley enjoys the show." Flora spoke, while beaming at a large, sullen cat who had wedged himself between a radio-meant only, and constantly-to receive local weather broadcasts, and a dusty Nativity scene that July sunlight was now searing. This was a choice spot among Shelley's many favorites; fat as he was, he was never comfortable climbing higher than the wide back of a chair. During one of this cat's rare playful moments around New Year's, he had lost the baby Jesus behind a heavy couch, and someone had since replaced the figure in the trough with one of the adoring goats. Each time Shelley shifted his bulk, a different Divinity hit the floor.

It was around this time that the dejected condition of Kit's family's photographic archives came under inspection. The holidays had no doubt aggravated sentimental feelings in someone, so her father backed a collapsible projection screen into the leafy green drapes of a badly cluttered



living room, a living room that had once been tastefully rendered in '50s showcase style by Flora's architect father. When Flora's parents moved from Greenville to that mossy plot north of Jackson, her father had envisioned a *Southern Homes* centerfold: "Streamlined furniture and rough masonry harmonizing with rustic landscapes and uniquely complemented by expanses of unbroken and colorful Formica surfaces." This, he felt, might appeal to the Lady's genteel ambitions while still preserving something of the untamed outdoors for himself. The room was an attractive mongrel.

Now though, the old man's artistic efforts were buried under what mostly appeared to be magazines, newspapers, and unopened mail. Kit's parents had moved in after the Lady died, and Flora's capricious housekeeping humbled the stylish effect that her father had so thoughtfully planned. Alpine summits of shifting trash gave the impression that the outdoors could truly be at home inside, if walls and windows weren't there to apportion space. Chaos ruled. A vulnerable slide projector teetered on the hearth of a cheerless fireplace which Flora's father had recessed, clammy and cave-like, into a stone wall. There was a sticky coldness in that room, and Kit suspected that her grandpa's fashionable fireplace would have produced damp smoke if it had ever been lit. But that would never be, as this uninviting cavity had hoarded the same oak log since the room was first built, and there was now a multi-generational family of swallows in its chimney.

Kit's eye was drawn up to where termite infested faux timbers, ornamenting a fiberboard ceiling, spanned beyond the top of her father's, Aaron's, projection screen, and there oozed sawdust onto the sill of a picture window that used to look out onto a carefully maintained front lawn, and beyond, into thick woods past a traffickless gravel road. The lawn was yet unchanged, but Fontaine Park Drive, which had been rechristened such by Kit's grandma--Lady Tessier--in fawning tribute to both some garden neighborhood in New Orleans and her own eager notion of herself, was now marked to be paved, and those woods that had once obscured both sight and

sound of other vulgar habitations was beginning to disclose developing neighborhoods through thinning trees. The inhospitable and obese cat, Shelley, was presently blocking that view.

Kit held a deteriorating slide to the window, turned it until the figures were standing upright, and then generously offered it to the cat for inspection as if he were a person with feelings. "Some of these are more than thirty years old."

Insensitive Shelley scrubbed his wet nose against the already damaged slide, and in a wild clawed assault flung the fragile memory deep into the decaying refuse of a soggy, overburdened planter. Kit remarked, as she fished the slide out of the mulch and backed away from the touchy animal. "Well, you *do* want to make some effort to preserve them. Where'd I leave my coffee?"

Flora waved her hand behind her without turning around. "Look on the mantel. You had it there. Thirty years ago we were probably only taking prints."

Flora was picking through the contents of a flat, green strong box: "These are more like forty years old."

"So, Shelley enjoys the show." Kit stated, flatly, doubtful that Shelley enjoyed anything much, while wiping muddy water and blood off the damaged slide and watching the cat adjust himself in Flora's lap. "Does he recognize any old pictures of you?"

"Mostly he likes to watch the pictures change," Flora tuned. The one you're holding—that's with Mickey at the camp?—was taken when I was carrying you."

The room had dimmed. Peeking through the curtains, Kit observed: "It's about dark outside now; let's see it."

"*We-ull . . .*" Flora has never been impulsive. Several minutes of hesitancy, followed by faltering seating arrangements and unprecedented tidying of only two uncomfortable square feet of hearth ushered in the showing. Flora finally started the projector, coyly, and with great conservation of personal energy and contact. It hummed. Impressive quantities of floating dust specks sparkled in front of a glaring white screen. A dry scraping sound, and a giggle, came from

the direction of the projector, and out of the brightness a boy of four, dressed as Davy Crockett in a coon skin cap and fringed shorts, stands in the foreground. Like the hellish dream, the immediacy of the past is striking. It is twilight in the picture *and* on Fontaine Park. On the screen, Kit's mother, a pretty woman—though nervous and skinny—stands to the far left, smiling at a frolicking fox terrier. There is a small trash fire lit, and in the background the rough-hewn building itself, the family's vacation cabin, is silhouetted against its own brilliant interior, a violent orange light in the near dusk, creating the illusion that the camp itself is burning inside, while the small family, untroubled by heat or mosquitoes, poses for Aaron's camera.

Shelley situated himself in front of the projector and stared hard at a small blue moth that quivered against a bright area on the screen. Blackness, then another scraping noise, and we are viewing two young women wearing plaid, obviously homemade dresses and sitting in lawn chairs. This had been a picnic, shortly before Kit's parents were married. Aaron would accompany Flora's family to this aforementioned camp just outside of Pass Christian and sleep virtuously on an army cot in the front room. The woman reclining is my Aunt Louise; she is never relaxed like that except in photographs. The other, Flora, leans forward—elbows on her knees—sighting with a rifle somewhere upstream of the Wolf River which flows perpetually in the background.

# “Ms. Zene’s Flowers”

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*By Lawrence Sledge*

Grand Momma Laura had warned us kids many times over with a powerful emphasis about Ms. Zene whose formal name was Zenith Domost. My grandmother, who said Ms Zene’s last name should be “Doeverything,” would carry out these potent warnings with her left hand balancing an arm on that hip and the right hand moving side to side with a pointed finger that went side to side and back and forward simultaneously as if she were painting the empty space in front of her. We kids watched her like members of an audience at Wimbledon.

I began paying close attention to my grandmother a year earlier when I had been in the second grade and seven years old. That was the year that she protected me and kept my mother from whipping me with the switch I had been ordered to go get for leaving home without permission.

“Leave that chil’ alone, Cora Mae. You know I don’ wanna hear all that whopping noise. Anyhow you know he was just followin’ Big Tom them. They a’ his cousins an’ way older than he is and always leadin’ him into the wrong and you know it. Boo Boo is the best chile you got and you know it.” My grandmother smiled at me.

“This boy has got to obey me and do what I say Mamma!” My mother looked at me with a warning-filled raising of her eyebrows and widening of her eyes and reluctantly put down the switch I had gotten. It was really too small to actually hurt as much as the ones we would usually have to get. “Next time you leave here like that you won’t be able to sit down Boo Boo and I mean it.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said, looking up at her very carefully and leaning toward my grandmother.

My grandmother put her hand on my shoulder and gave me another warning. “You betta mind yo momma son. You know how hard she can hit and yo big mouth can go wa’ up and folk can hear you two miles away.”

My mother and her seven children lived next door to Ms. Zene in Grenada, Mississippi on Pearl Street in a house previously owned by my grandmother who had moved into a new house across town on Leigh Avenue. Our house had a sandy brown nailed-on covering with black strips that formed rectangles and had three bedrooms and a backyard with an apple tree and no other plants growing. It would become dusty dry in the spring and summer when rain hadn't fallen. I loved to sweep it after raking and piling up the leaves from the pecan tree next door. It often seemed as smooth as the linoleum covering the floors of the rooms inside of a house. We kids enjoyed playing on that smooth surface, especially during the spring and summer—marbles, jacks, hopscotch, jump rope, volley ball and partial hide- and- seek. When found during partial hide-and-seek, if you held one foot off of the ground long enough before the person who was the hunter could tag you, the hunter had to let you find a new place to hide.

Ms Zene lived in a white, two- bedroom house with a front porch that required the climbing of six steps to reach. Flowers of all kinds, including red, purple and white touch-me-nots were in her front yard and some in pots on her porch—tulips, ferns and red roses. She had a large black metal pot in her back yard and an apple tree that bore sweet green apples much sweeter than our semi-sweet apples. Some people called her the flower lady, but some said she should be the Cat Lady because of all the cats—at least twenty. Still others, like my grandmother, said she was a “hoo doo witch lady” and to stay away from her.

Ms Zene's house in the back was high like ours because in the 1930s, 40s and 50s Grenada Lake would often rise above its banks and people living along Pearl and others nearby who couldn't swim would drown. Ms Zene's husband's father had built her house for safety and my grandmother's dad had built the house we lived in.

Ms Zene would often sit on her front porch after taking down her long, black hair which reached below her back. We would sometimes watch her comb and part her hair greasing it with Royal Crown Hair Dressing. Some people said that she was half white, but Ms Johnson, the only person known to visit her regularly other than Ms Zene's school teacher sister, had told my grandmother

that Ms Zene was part black and part Blackhawk Indian from a small town of blacks called Hawk City near Greenwood. Sometimes when I spoke to her, she looked at me hard and said nothing. One Saturday it seemed as if she were holding her breath getting ready to attack, and this made me so afraid that my stomach tightened and I quickly went inside our house. My grandmother told us that her being mean drove her husband away and he never came back. She could still be heard late some nights cussing him out as if he were still there even after he had been dead for over 30 years.

One day when I was eight, my grandmother reminded us for the thousandth time of the purpose of the upside-down horseshoe nailed above the front door inside of my mother's living room. My grandmother's mother had placed it there to keep out evil spirits called "haints" and bad women who stole other peoples' men. I didn't at that age understand how that worked or why my grandmother would often say that her next door neighbor on Leigh Avenue, Ms Verda Bowdry, had been coming over into her yard at night sprinkling "brown itch" as if she were seasoning a big pot of greens.

As she told us this, my grandmother had fury and a mountain's worth of admonishment in her face and space-painting hands – her eyes bucked as wide as I had ever seen them. "I knew she 'as up to devilment. Um watchin' Verda from my livin' room window. She takin' somethin' from a cup or can and throwin' it all 'round my yard fast and sneaky like. I din' say nothin' 'cause I wanted to see what she was doin'. That's why my arms been itchin' ever since I moved hea' next to her."

My mother had gone to work and we were left with her first cousin Sally. Cousin Sally would let us have a good time, especially when she was talking to her boyfriend "Too Fine" Jake on the phone and drinking her "scow" as she called it – not having much interest in what was happening outside. "Sugar Baby..." the voice of Aretha Franklin would sing from the record player and Cousin Sally popped her fingers while failing at the same vocalization.

As I saw Big Tom and his friend Rod coming from up the street, I knew we would have unsupervised fun playing volleyball.

"Where did you all come from?" I asked them.

“We jus’ coming from the Sand Pile and I got a new ball for us,” Big Tom said with a sense of special pride.

The Sand Pile was where we would go to play. The sand had been dumped there years earlier by some rich folks who had changed their minds about building some apartments on the spot which was down the hill from the railroad track.

We played volleyball most of that April day as the sun was intensely bright above us. Things were great until the blue volleyball went over the fence into Ms Zene’s yard landing just beyond her yellow tulips and some pink four o’clocks.

I tried to climb over the fence at Big Tom’s urging and had fallen face forward barely protecting my face by landing on my hands. He was supposed to have been holding me to keep me from falling into the yard.

There I was, finally sitting upright on too many pretty flowers to count. When I looked up, Ms Zene was standing toward the edge of her front porch. Her face, surrounded by the red headscarf, seemed to glow with fury. She appeared to have willed all of the horizontal and semi-vertical wrinkles on her face to reaffirm themselves.

I didn’t know what was going to happen. Then the frown-induced wrinkles on her ninety-year-old face reconfigured themselves as part of an artificial smile. It was a smile, but her eyes seemed not to be a part of it. They seemed not to ever blink and they seemed to become a darker shade. “Take this hanger to Cora Mae. I got some mo’ of them to give her” she said.

I didn’t want to take the clothes hanger, but I was glad to get out of her yard with my life. She didn’t even mention her flowers.

My grandmother was livid and in a state of panic upon hearing about Ms Zene giving me the clothes hanger. “You a hard-headed youngin and I don’ know how to save ya. Ms Della is on the way over. You need a good whopin’ hard head.”

My grandmother had put on brown leather gloves and taken the clothes hanger off of our front porch where I had left it. She then had placed it flat in a small brown paper box and covered it with an entire box of sulfur before giving the box to one of her church decons, Mr. Davis to burn at the Big Trash Pile near the railroad. “Be sho’ to burn the whole box up. I thank ya.”

She had already ordered me with a stern hand into the house where I had to bathe with lye soap in water that contained 5 table spoons of white vinegar before putting on my night clothes and getting immediately into bed. “You betta hope Ms Della can save you from that thang.”

I wondered what thing my grandmother was talking about and I felt suddenly like my stomach was vibrating inside.

I was in bed and everyone else was asleep. Something moved slowly behind me; of this fact I was aware, too afraid to look right at it, but I knew something was there giving off some strange, low tone fluorescent yellow, and then it seemed to turn pink, then lavender. I dared not move as I felt a mildly cool touch and it didn’t tickle all the way, but suddenly it rushed breezily beside me. I screamed as it came toward my shoulder appearing as and moving like a cartoon spider whose legs were yellow glowing bananas.

I moved frantically in my bed trying to get away from the glowing monstrosity and I rolled onto the floor screaming trying to get away from it—my head felt larger and heavy like a concrete mass, but I felt that I was floating faster and more fast becoming dizzy and closed my eyes to keep from seeing the invader.

I became weaker. I was up trying to run, but was stuck in slow motion as it came after me. Suddenly I was outside somewhere in a rural place.

My mouth tasted sour, sweet and bitter as I fell down a big tree stump hole and saw a girl who looked like Alice in the book that my teacher had us read. I knew she had fallen down the same way



that I did, and she gave me a cup of water and told me to sit down at her table and have some tea. She was the only one at the table and I didn't see the rabbit or the other characters from the book. Alice wore purple gloves, purple patent leather shoes and a purple dress. She made me put on a pair of purple gloves before I could have some tea. All of the dishes and food were purple and on a purple tablecloth.

My shirt and pants were suddenly purple after I drank the tea out of a purple cup. I became light headed and began to float up like a balloon filled with helium.

"Come back down Boo Boo. That thing will get you!" Alice yelled as she tried to grab my feet. But I continued to float upward, too light to force myself back down. I began to scream again— it was getting closer.

I could still taste the mixture of turpentine, apple cider vinegar, honey and catnip that Grand Momma Laura had gotten from Ms Della, a really tall, dark skinned lady known for helping people in the hood rid themselves of evil spells. Miss Della charged ten dollars for each spell case.

I moved frantically in my bed trying to get away from the glowing monstrosity and I rolled onto the floor screaming trying to get away from it, thinking I had floated up into its grasp—my head felt like heavier concrete, but I felt that I was floating faster and more fast and closed my eyes to keep from seeing the invader.

I looked up and saw my grandmother reaching to help me off of the floor. "I told you to stay away from Ms Zene. You look like you gittin' betta. Ms Della is on her way here wit' some mo' a her potion. Drink this water baby and get back in bed 'til I call you in for breakfast." "Neva' let yo' body touch Ms Zene or it'll all come back even stronger no matta how long from now."

"Yes ma'am," I said to my grandmother.

Although my grandmother sometimes protected me from deserved punishments, I knew that my mother loved me as well due to the many times that she cooked my favorite foods, let me stay up to watch my favorite shows and had Santa to come every Christmas. She stayed out of my grandmother's dealings with Ms. Zene.

I was never to have Ms Zene near me again. She was a bad, ubiquitous, gargantuan, powerful force that could penetrate the protective ideal of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny and even Grandmama Laura if I didn't follow instructions exactly as told.

My grandmother left me for a few minutes and called from the kitchen. "Breakfast is ready Boo Boo. Get up now and wash your hands and face!"

# Lessons for a Good Girl

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*By RaShell R. Smith-Spears*

The sun had been playing hide-and-seek with gray clouds all day. Mrs. Anthony's sixth grade class had been anxious, worried that they might not get to go outside for recess. First, light gray clouds sprayed a steady drizzle when the morning bell rang. Then the sun started peeking from behind the clouds like somebody's little brother afraid of meeting new people. During math, though, Derek Leonard and Bobby Bailey threw paper at each other which made the entire class crack up, so Mrs. Anthony said she didn't think they deserved to go outside. But by recess time, the sun had tired of its game with the clouds and came out to play with the children so Mrs. Anthony, who looked like she could use a break, let them go outside.

Lanie Jackson sat on the edge of the blacktop with her best friend Courtney Smith. With no shade, the sun streamed down on the two girls like the bright ribbons of gymnasts, but they welcomed its warm hug around their dark brown skin. The girls exchanged grape and sour apple Now & Laters as they watched the boys play Catch-a-Girl-Get-a-Girl. Whenever an unlucky girl crossed their line of vision, the boys would take off after them like a lizard after its prey.

"Why are boys so stupid?" Lanie asked, puckering her lips from the sour of the apple candy. The sun made her squint her eyes.

"Their mamas must have dropped them on their heads," Courtney offered, thoughtfully.

"All of them?"

“Naw; some of them drank while they were pregnant.”

The girls looked at each other, and their laughter erupted like soda spilling over a glass’s edge.

“They’re just so strange. They act so crazy sometimes.”

“Look, there’s one you don’t think is crazy,” Courtney teased, pointing to Kirby Edwards.

The short, stocky boy who was only an inch or two taller than Lanie’s 4’11” was across the blacktop shooting hoops with his three best friends. Lanie liked his golden-brown skin which reminded her of the smooth feel of Werther’s candies. She liked how his low-cut black hair strongly contrasted with the caramel of his skin. She also liked how he always smelled fresh like soap, except one time after a game of football. He came in from recess sweating and stinking; he chased Lanie inside by trying to rub his sweat on her. Mrs. Anthony gave them both a disapproving look, but nothing more because they were her good students. Lanie liked that about him, too. She liked that he was smart and tried to act right. Most of all, she liked that she had never seen him play Catch-a-Girl.

“He’s alright,” Lanie answered her best friend. She had never come out and admitted to anyone that she liked Kirby, but Courtney had known her practically all of her life. She knew when Lanie liked a boy.

“Alright? You know you like him. You better do something before Piper gets him.”

Piper Plato was not so much Lanie’s friend as her secret enemy. Lanie would never tell Piper to her face that she hated her, but telling her in clear terms would be the only way Piper would believe that anyone disliked her. She thought everyone loved her. Why wouldn’t they? She was tall and pretty with china white skin and shoulder-length curly gold

and brown hair. Unlike Lanie whose long black hair was tamed in four fat braids, Piper almost always wore her hair loose and free. It framed her angel-shaped face and highlighted her hazel green eyes.

Piper was right that everyone liked her (except Lanie and, out of sheer loyalty, Courtney); Lanie was convinced it was only because of three reasons. First, she was sort of fast. Lanie heard that she had kissed several boys in their class. Obviously, the boys liked that, but even some of the girls seemed to have a reluctant respect for her rumored experience. Second, she was different from the rest of them. She was the only one who had one white parent and one black parent. That made her unique in their small Memphis community. And then there were her connections. Piper swore on the King James Bible that Mrs. Anthony kept in the classroom that Dana Plato from *Diff'rent Strokes* was her second cousin, and she was going to Hollywood to visit her when school got out for the summer. That kind of celebrity had a strong pull. It even seemed to pull Kirby.

Lanie had watched Kirby and Piper passing notes between each other for the past week. It was like lemon juice in a mouth sore that she sat between Piper and Kirby, and therefore, she was commissioned to be the go-between. Once the note, folded into eights, fell open at the half, and she saw a heart drawn in red. Her stomach hurt the rest of that day.

“Lanie, Courtney.” Piper came over to the girls from the swings as if she’d heard them mention her name. “Do you have any more candy?”

“No,” Lanie said, quickly putting the last purple piece in her mouth.

“That’s okay. I don’t want my tongue to be purple when I talk to Kirby today anyway.”

Lanie grunted, angry with herself.

“I bet we’ll be going together by the end of the day,” she lowered her voice conspiratorially. “We really like each other.”

“Did he tell you he likes you?” Courtney challenged her, sucking on a green Now & Later and not caring one bit what color her tongue was.

“He said he thinks I’m pretty. He asked me if I had a boyfriend. What do you think? I know he likes me.” She smiled at them and touched her hair. “Lanie, you know who you would be good with?”

“Who?”

“Derek Leonard. I heard he likes you.”

“Ugh. I don’t like him.”

“Why not? He’s cute. Y’all would make a cute couple. Like me and Kirby.” She was smiling again and wearing a far-away look in her green eyes.

Lanie wanted to hit her in her pink, lip-glossed mouth. Derek Leonard was cute, but he was bad—he had failed the third grade, and he was always in trouble.

The bell rang for them to go inside and prohibited Lanie from following through on her wish. The three girls started toward the school building when out of the corner of her eye, Lanie saw Kirby running up behind them. Her breath caught in her throat, and her stomach dipped like it did the time she rode the Zippin’ Pippin’ roller coaster. Before she could fully gather her thoughts, Kirby was right beside her, gently poking her in the side with his elbow.

“Hey, pumpkin heads,” he teased.

Lanie tried to think of something clever to say, but before she could get anything out, Piper turned and hit at Kirby. “I told you to stop teasing me!”

He was talking to *her*? Lanie's skin grew hot with embarrassment and anger. Piper's pink lips glowed red in her mind like a bull's eye target. Again resisting the urge to hit her, Lanie looked down and noticed her black Reeboks were untied. Piper and Kirby had gone off on their own, but Courtney stopped to wait when she stopped. Lanie told her to go on to class and save her place in line at the bathroom.

Bending over instead of squatting down, Lanie's guard was down when she felt a hand squeeze her butt cheek like it was an overripe orange. Startled, she sat up and saw Derek running past her toward the building. She yelled at him to stop, but he was already inside, his laughter still taunting her like barking seals.

Over the fading barks, Lanie heard her Big Mama's voice tell her that fast girls let boys touch their private parts. *You be a good girl, Lanie, and carry yourself like a lady.* But she hadn't done that, had she? A lady would never have bent over so that Derek had such an easy chance to feel on her. But, she argued with herself, she didn't even realize that he was still outside.

This wasn't the first time Derek had felt her butt in spite of her loud protests. Sometimes it was just a slight slide, like a feather, making Lanie question if it had even happened once it was over. At other times it was a full-grab like he was using his hands to bob for apples. Every time it made her feel cold and soiled, like dirty snow pushed up against the side of the road, unworthy and unwanted. After Derek did it, even if no one else saw it, which wasn't often since his friends were always around, she felt like she had somehow done something wrong, dirty. She didn't want to tell on him because she didn't want to be a tattletale, and she hoped that it would just stop. But it never did. He always seemed to show up out of the blue, touching her like he had a right to do it.

Now feeling even worse than she did after the conversation with Piper, she walked into the building alone and got in line in front of Courtney. Before she even went into the stall, she washed her hands.

“Mrs. Anthony,” the garbled voice came through the intercom loudly after the class had come back from lunch later that day, “you need to come to the office and pick up a package.”

“Now?” She had just instructed the class to take out their Health books to begin the lesson on hygiene.

“It’s pretty important,” the voice insisted.

“Apparently, class, I have to go to the office. I’ll be right back but take this worksheet and finish it while I’m gone. And class, remember to act right. Kirby, you’re in charge.”

When the door closed with Mrs. Anthony on the other side of it, the class grew even quieter with only the sound of soft lead pencils scratching across paper. Someone sneezed, and half the class said, “Bless you.” It was the only way to talk with Kirby in charge. He always wrote down everyone who talked; nobody slid by, not even his best friends. If their names were on the list when Mrs. Anthony came back, that would mean eating lunch the next day in the office with the Assistant Principal or writing a 500-line declaration that they would not behave like noisy barnyard animals when the teacher left the room.

Lanie was almost done with the worksheet when her pencil lead broke. She went into the pink and white pencil pouch she kept in the storage space of her wooden desk to get her personal pencil sharpener, but before she could get it out, her pencil rolled off the desk and onto the floor. Without thinking, she leaned forward out of the desk to retrieve it. When she backed up again into the desk, she found that she was sitting not on the hard



wood, but someone's fleshy lap. She turned around to see who it was, fully expecting to see Derek Leonard's crooked grin, but instead, it was Kirby! Grinning, he made it clear he meant to sit in her desk. She popped up faster than a Jack-in-the-box, but it was too late. The class had seen what had happened and were laughing.

Lanie didn't know what to do. Something strange had happened and everyone had seen. Derek laughed and gave Kirby a high five. When Kirby stood up to go back to his own desk, Lanie heard the laughter lacing through her Big Mama's admonition against fast girls. Good girls didn't sit on boys' laps; only fast girls did things like that. Spurred on by the sound of laughter and disapproval, Lanie, without thinking, threw her arm out and slammed it down on Kirby's back. She began pounding on him, releasing her anger and shame. Her eyes were closed, and she had no particular aim for his body, only that she hit it with her fists.

"Stop! Stop! I'm sorry," Kirby yelled. Lanie couldn't hear him over the sounds of laughter and her grandmother's words braided together so that they became confused into one. She only stopped because she was tired, empty. She plopped down in her own seat.

"What are you doing?" Piper leaned over and fussed at her.

What *was* she doing? Lanie looked over at Kirby, sitting in his desk, breathing hard, his head bent down over a sheet of notebook paper. The Name List! Oh no! He was going to write her name down for sure. She was going to be in so much trouble from her mother and her grandmother. She couldn't have her name on the list. What had she done? On top of it all, too, he would never want to go with her now.

Lanie felt like she was buried in sand at the beach. She wished Mrs. Anthony would hurry up and come back in the classroom and yet she dreaded every rattle of the doorknob.

She thought about apologizing, but although she turned back to look at him, she could never open her mouth to say it.

When Mrs. Anthony finally came into the class with a vase of purple hyacinths and asked for the list, Lanie saw only black. It was over for her. Her mouth was full of that sand she had been buried in; it tasted dry and bitter. She dropped her head into her hands.

“Well, it looks like you were all good for a change,” Mrs. Anthony said brightly.

What? Lanie’s head rose like a spring. He hadn’t taken her name! Why not?

It wasn’t long after that that the bell rang for them to go home. As they passed out the door, Kirby slipped her a note. Opening it, she thought he would threaten her or something. Her mouth almost dropped when she read: I’m sorry. It was just a joke. I like you. Will you be my girlfriend: Check yes, no, maybe.

What? He liked her? Lanie couldn’t believe it. Butterflies danced in her stomach. But could she get past what he had just done? Wouldn’t she see Derek laughing with him every time she looked at him now? And why was she considering saying yes? Dang! Why did he have to do it? Now it was so complicated. She just wanted to like a boy and have him like her. Big Mama didn’t tell her how to deal with this. What were good girls supposed to do?

# “Too Quiet”

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*By Julie Whitehead*

Marlie was sitting, leaning her back against the headboard of her bed, nursing her new baby that morning when her husband Joe came in from working all night at the sawmill. Mary Jane was a week old that day. Neither of them cared.

He sat down on the foot of the bed, staring at the little red-headed baby she was holding. Marlie was trying to get her fed and asleep before the five other ones got up to go to school.

Joe sat staring so long, even after the baby stopped sucking and had gone to sleep with a string of Marlie’s long dyed blond hair in her hand. “What you thinking on so hard, Joe?”

“When you’re going to tell me where that baby came from, that’s what.”

Marlie stirred as she started to get up. “Don’t you get up walking out from me,”

“Same place all babies come from,”

“Takes two to do it. I told you we was getting too old for this baby business. You come home with this one. You and me both half –Choctaw--you pop out a baby with red hair and green eyes? Ain’t no sense in that.”

“You signed the birth certificate, Joe. What do you want me to say?”

“I already told you what I want— it ain’t my fault they catch me at the door with pen in hand before I ever got to see her. What else was I supposed to do once I saw her, huh? I’m responsible for you. I take care of you. Now you do me this way. We are going to talk today—I can’t live like this.”

“You take care of me? Wasn’t no taking care of me for a year before you got this sawmill job that’s got both of us chasing our tails. I work days with you working nights. Precious little time for you to take care of me. Our kids taking care of each other—“

“Don’t you go change the subject. The matter at hand, Marlie.”

Marlie got up from the bed, putting Mary Jane in the same white wooden bed cradle that had held all five of the others before they were weaned. “What do you want to know?”

“Can we start with a name?”

“You don’t know him.”

“Who do you think I don’t know? I know every man in this county, kin to half of them. Now tell me a name. Do I got to start picking them out of the air?”

“I’ll tell you the same name he told me. Sean. He was black Irish. His name he called himself was Sean McDowell.”

Joe narrowed his eyes. “Ain’t no black Irish around here.”

“Fool. He ain’t from around here.”

“You met him at the hotel while you was working?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Lord, I get to live this long, you sit here telling me you got tied up with a black Irish in town only for the day.”

“You wanted a name, you got it. Now leave me and my baby be.”

They sat for a long time, with Mary Jane sleeping in the crib. Marlie looked at the clock, realizing that the other kids should start waking up soon. “You got anything else you want to say?”

“So he left you something to remember him by. You mean for him to do that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Joe stood up. “I guess I can divorce you. Put you and her out on the street.”

“Who’d take care of the other five you gave me, huh? You thought any about that?”

“Plenty of widow women around here for me to choose from. They’d take a hardworking man that kept himself to himself.”

“Don’t give me that. You think I don’t know about you stepping out with Suzie Bates ten years ago? That’n she has that keeps people thinking him and Joe, Jr. are twins? Everybody knows about that. And you’re not as young as you used to be.”

“Joe, Jr. What about him?”

“You know damn well he’s yours. Planted the first night we were ever together. Born 38 weeks later to the day. You know better.”

“I thought I knew better now. Guess I was wrong.”

“What’s one more?”

“It’s not mine is what’s one more. Can’t you get that through your head?”

Marlie sat back down on the bed. “Don’t it count that I’m still here?”

“Where else you got to go?”

“He offered me to go with him. I told him I couldn’t leave my babies. So there.”

“Not to not leave me.”

“That’s right.”

She looked at the clock again. Joe, Jr. had surely gotten the other kids up by now. She didn’t hear anything that sounded like them.

“I guess I could kill you. No jury’d convict me after what you’ve done.”

“You’re thinking like the old days. You’d go to jail--the kids’d go to the state. You want that for them?”

“I sure as hell don’t want this for them. Lord God—be with me, help me.”

Everything was quiet. “How I see it is we’re stuck with each other now. We might as well all make the best of it. How’s that by you?”

Jeoe stared at her. “It’s like I said before. No one else around here’d have you, No one else’ll take me either.”

“You might can live with that. I can’t.”

Marlie saw the gun come up too late to jump out in front of it. The splinters from the baby cradle shot all over the room. She jumped across the bed for it screaming “No!” before feeling the gunshot in her back. Her last thoughts as she blacked out were of Sean McDowell, how he held her hand as he said her name.

She came to with a paramedic standing over her. “You don’t know how lucky you are to be alive, ma’am.”

“What about my babies?”

The paramedic shook his head.

# Critical Essays

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# The Chains of Violence: Echoed Violence and Dehumanization in Lauren Beukes's *The Shining Girls*

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*By Anna Bills*

Lauren Beukes's novel *The Shining Girls* follows the two interwoven stories of Harper Curtis, a serial killer who gains the ability to travel through time in order to pursue his victims, and Kirby Mazrachi, a victim who manages to survive against the odds and now searches for revenge on her would-be killer. In a nonlinear narrative spanning across decades, Beukes considers the detrimental impact of violence and fate through Harper's displacement, and the ensuing creation of a fantasy that allows him to fulfill his perceived "destiny." In seeking and eliminating these "shining girls," Harper believes that he is finally reclaiming his identity that has been lost while righting a failure of society. However, acts of violence affect more than just the victim. This paper will argue that great acts of violence towards another human being will simultaneously cause harm to the perpetrator as well as the victim. Consistent repetition of violence leads to normalization as the perpetrator becomes accustomed to the violence and, in an effort to justify their cruel treatment of other human beings, relinquishes a part of their humanity, loosening their hold on those darker, violent tendencies that had been hidden away.

The South African author takes up several themes of postcolonial literature such as dehumanization and its consequences in *The Shining Girls*, dramatized by Beukes's depiction of Harper's own normalization of violence. Therefore, although set in twentieth century U.S., thinking through Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* will help understand the normalization of such inhuman acts in the text. In his discourse, Césaire notes this normalization and the consequent dehumanization in the context of the colonial and the postcolonial. The colonizer internally dehumanizes the colonized "native" in order to justify their cruel treatment; however, this violence



is undoubtedly harmful to the colonizer as well, “[awakening] him to long buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism” as the colonizer, in order to “ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*” (Césaire 35, 41). In the process, the colonizer suffers from the same dehumanization as the colonized, transforming himself from a rational, civilized colonist into an irrational, violent animal. In *The Shining Girls*, although set in the U.S., I argue that Harper Curtis succumbs to this same process of dehumanization that afflicted the colonizer, becoming “more snarling, more openly ferocious, more shameless,” and “more summarily barbarous” (Césaire 64). By fulfilling his created fantasy—whereby killing his victims, he is able to reduce them to the nonhuman state of death—Harper believes that he is supposedly repairing a failure of society, validating his new position, and overcoming his sense of emasculation; however, in the process, Harper himself is dehumanized, his identity shattered, and he becomes trapped in a vicious cycle of violence.

Compared to Beukes’s past novels, *The Shining Girls* is not overtly colonial, nor is it set in South Africa, instead taking place in the depression-era United States. However, this does not make the postcolonial theory any less relevant. In the introduction to the special issue of *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, Ronit Frenkel and Andrea Spain point out the “conduits between South Africa and the United States that circulate cultural and political influence” across a variety of sources, but especially in American-themed South African literature, questioning “what makes a text South African or American” (Frenkel and Spain 193-4). This special issue highlights how South African writers create representations of “America” that “draw attention to the connections between oppressions that cut across nations and continents to reveal connections between global issues,” and it is for this reason that a postcolonial theoretical setting may still be taken despite *The Shining Girls*’s American setting (Frenkel and Spain 194). Several of Beukes’s past novels have been situated in contemporary Johannesburg, allowing her to attempt to write back and reclaim the town. But with her recent novel’s American-setting, Beukes is also able to illuminate the

similarities between the slowly rising “cultural global unconscious: that of white male resentment, of the ostensibly ‘forgotten men’ who face a perceived threat to their masculine and racial power” in contemporary South Africa and U.S., allowing her to continue rewriting Johannesburg (Frenkel and Spain 200). With the privileges previously guaranteed by gender and race stripped away, white men such as Harper Curtis must now struggle to reorient themselves in a rapidly evolving social structure, destabilized further by the economic uncertainty of the Great Depression.

In the early 1930s, the world was hit with one of the greatest economic depression in history that lasted over a decade and left thousands impoverished, homeless, and unemployed. The Great Depression is well-known as the longest and most widespread depressions of the twentieth century with disastrous consequences for numerous countries, both rich and poor. With so many plunged into poverty and left without work, it is little surprise then that there were those who felt abandoned and forgotten by a society that had promised them so much. This sense of abandonment was especially felt by the World War I veterans finally returning home. These men had been called away from their regular jobs and drafted into the military, with the promise of a well-deserved bonus pension to be received in 1945 when they return. While the working men were away, however, more workers were then needed to fill in the jobs left behind in the factories to keep up with industrial demand brought on by the war, finally allowing more women and people of color to begin entering the workforce. When the war ended, the veterans returned to find more competition in the workforce, and when the depression hit, many lost their homes, their businesses, as well as their promised bonus pension. Many veterans were soon left homeless, unemployed, and frustrated, believing themselves forgotten by the country they had fought for, and they soon became the symbol “of America’s wronged virtue” the forgotten men (Shlaes 113).

It is against this backdrop of economic recession and disenfranchisement that the events of *The Shining Girls* take place. Harper Curtis believes that he is one of these “forgotten men.” As a “man formed both by the violence of the First World War and the precarity of the Great Depression,” Harper returns from serving in the military to a Chicago ravaged by the depression,

and he quickly finds that the “good life” that he believed he had earned was little more than a lie (Spain 265). Others have arrived in the workforce, and now he finds himself forced to compete for the position he believed rightfully belonged to him. In the end, Harper is unemployed and homeless, left to wander through infamous Hooverville, “the abode of forgotten men” where “misfortune [is] saturated” into the very bones of the abandoned people (Beukes 10). At the time, with rates of unemployment so high, many men were unable to provide for their families or even for themselves, and as a result, they were no longer able to fit themselves into the idealized narrative they believed they were supposed to fulfill.

In his article, “Men, Masculinities, and the Demise of a State: Examining Masculinities in the Context of Economic, Political, and Social Crisis in a Small Town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” scholar Theo Hollander gives a quick sketch of the masculine ideal as “self-reliant, hardworking, and successful,” a man who is able to support his family as well as himself, and who “does not complain [...] or show pain” (Hollander 421-2). If a man is able to meet this status of masculinity, he is assured of his superiority over others and becomes more confident in his own power; however, if a man is unable to fulfil this role, then he will be left emasculated and ashamed, often displaced from his perceived position of dominance. With the shifting economic environment, the loss of the idealized, breadwinner role is a call for a “renegotiation of the masculine ideal” to create a new ideology in order to better adapt to the changing statuses of society (Hollander 424). While some men are able to adjust, for others the shifting social order is intolerable, and they seek an outlet through other means. According to Hollander, the impacted men typically fall into one of two different renegotiated ideals: “effaced masculinity,” where the men are able to successfully “lower their self-expectations” and adapt to the shifting social order, or “victimized masculinity,” where rather than adapt, the “blame for their emasculation” is placed “completely outside,” resulting in destructive behavior such as alcoholism and violence, as well as gratuitous self-pity and idleness (Hollander 435). Men who create these victimized narratives then fall back on “the one masculine feature they hadn’t lost, their physical strength” (Hollander 435).

For Harper, whose entire sense of self has been built upon an allegedly inherent position of power, to have that position suddenly become uncertain is unacceptable. But rather than face his own inadequacies, Harper creates his own victimized masculine ideal after losing the power through that which “he extends sovereignty,” and he lashes out at the society he believes has betrayed him (Mbembe 129). Harper firmly believes that his displacement is the result of a failing of society, and so he seeks justification and a new purpose—a purpose that is given to him when he stumbles upon the House. With a mystical ability to travel between the years of 1929 and 1993, the House gives Harper his new purpose. From the moment he steps in the house, he claims that he could feel the House, “full of expectation,” and sense a presence calling to him, telling him that “the House has been waiting for him” and that “it called him here for a purpose” (Beukes 33-4). For Harper, everything occurs for a reason. No event is ever truly coincidental. Instead, it has already been decided by some mysterious force beyond his understanding. It was already decided that he would meet the elderly woman, choke her, and steal her jacket in order to find the key that would lead to his destiny. His discovery of the House is fated, the girls’ deaths are fated, and, and so it is his fate to be the one to kill them.

Harper’s perceived betrayal left him emasculated and enraged but also without an outlet for his anger. Society has betrayed him, he believes, and lied to him. Instead of returning to occupy the position of power as he had expected—and believed he deserved—he finds himself forgotten and pushed to the slums with the filth, left without purpose. But within the House, he finds his “destiny.” Suddenly:

It’s enough. The realization. Like a door opening up inside. The fever peaks and something howls through him, full of contempt, and wrath and fire. He sees the faces of the shining girls, and knows they must die. The screaming inside his head: *Kill her. Stop her.* (Beukes 36)

The forgotten man now has a purpose again. With the ability to travel through time, Harper is able to watch how the city’s landscape changes, falling away, rising up, before crumbling away again. He travels to 1988 where Hooverville has disappeared, instead leaving a city that has “changed its color,

from dirty white and creams, to a hundred shades of brown. Like rust. Like shit” (Beukes 61). The new environment unnerves Harper, for now the city is made up of “shining towers so high the clouds swallow them up,” bustling with a “crush of people” and cars that seem to resemble “woodborer beetles eating their way through a tree” that will soon rot and collapse in on itself (Beukes 61). Once holding a position of prestige as a soldier, Harper had returned to find that Chicago had been transformed from a city of bustling success into a place of disease and desolation, filled with foreigners and outsiders, while he has been excluded, forced to languish in the slums with the other forgotten men. But within the House, he is able to find glory in his new “destiny”: by finding and killing the “shining girls,” he will finally be able to reclaim the power that has been wrongfully stolen from him.

Violence has long been a crucial component of Harper’s identity. Even before the events of the novel, Harper has been captivated by violence. Harper spent his childhood on a farm, and as a boy, he would spend a great deal of his free time tormenting and torturing the various farm animals, from causing seizures in their family cockerel—creating “a stutter in its brain”—to mutilating young chicks by cutting the legs off of one chick and watching with sadistic pleasure as it “dragged itself forward [...] Its stumps [leaving] thick snail-trails of blood in the dust” (Beukes 238-9). Later, when he is eleven, he sits by calmly as his brother is crushed by his own truck and notes with morbid interest how his brother’s “pelvis made a sharp snapping sound, like a pinecone in the fireplace” (Beukes 239-40). The accident ends with his brother’s paralysis because rather than running to get help, Harper becomes fascinated by the gruesome scene. As he ages, his tendency towards savagery and cruelty is at first appeased by his work in the military, where he is able to receive the justification he desires as well as fulfillment of his sadistic nature. Harper relishes in the absolute power he believes he possess—to “exercise control over mortality” (Mbembe 12). In Achille Mbembe’s article, “Necropolitics,” he states that the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the ability to “exercise control over mortality and to define life”—to decide whose life has value, and whose is expendable (Mbembe 12). For Harper, his ability to be the one to make the decision on who lives and who dies

is clear validation of his inherent sovereignty over all others (Mbembe 12). However, this repetition of murder and violence has an unintended consequence on Harper's psychological state, echoing the consequences that early colonizers also came to face during colonization.

In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire notes the dramatic impact that colonization has on both the colonized “natives” and the colonizers. More specifically, he highlights how colonization—and particularly the violence that often accompanies it—has a way of bringing out the worst of even the most civilized man, “[brutalizing] him” and “[awakening] him to long buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism” (Césaire 35). For Césaire, all forms of colonial activity are largely centered around the “contempt for the native,” and any action taken against the colonized is “justified by that contempt” (Césaire 41). As well as justifying their behavior by the contempt held against “natives,” in order to accept the violent, inhuman treatment often afflicted on the colonized, the colonizer will soon “[get] into the habit of seeing” and “treating [the colonized] like an animal” (Césaire 41). Over time, the colonizer becomes accustomed to the violence of colonization and to the consistent dehumanization of the colonized “native,” but in the process of acting in such inhuman ways towards a group of people, the colonizer inevitably transforms himself from a rational human being into a violent, mindless animal trapped in a cycle of violence. This is what Césaire calls the “boomerang effect of colonization,” where neither side is left unscathed in the aftermath of great violence (Césaire 41). As for Harper, he is initially drawn into this cycle of violence as a method of restoring his presumed power and pride as a white man, as well as to right what he perceives to be a failure of society; however, once he has been drawn into this violent cycle, like the colonizer, he becomes trapped in the vicious cycle of violence, gradually losing his hold on his humanity, no longer able to escape.

Harper's need to violently fulfill his fantasy, as well as the brutal consequences of his actions, also mirrors the motivations underlying colonization. Though he does not understand exactly why, Harper claims to just *know* the shining girls by sight alone and believes that they are selected because

they glow so brightly with exceptional potential—such as Zora who is making steps in breaking the gender and racial barrier during the Harlem Renaissance, and Margot’s work in an underground abortion clinic in a movement that would someday “change women’s rights to be in control of their own bodies, forever” (Beukes 251). Each of his shining girls possess the potential to change the society dramatically, but for Harper who seeks to restore the “natural” order, their potentiality signifies an immanent threat that must be eliminated. Just as the colonizers firmly believed that in “civilizing” the “natives,” they were showing them the way to a better life, Harper fully believes that he must eliminate these women in order to fix the failure he perceives in society, creating a better future for himself. With each murder, he is constantly acting out his violent fantasy—brutalizing and reducing the women to the nonhuman state of death. He murders them when they are at their brightest, greatest potential, savagely dehumanizing them. Whereas before they shined with potential, in death they are reduced to lifeless corpses that Harper will then arrange artfully, laying their vulnerabilities bare for all the world to see. By doing this, he believes that he has reestablished his rightful position of superiority—in his mind, these women symbolize the reason his life has gone wrong, so by baring their true selves, Harper believes that he is reclaiming his life.

But in the end, it was the colonizer who continued to “[hold] things back” while the colonist yearned to move forward; it was the colonizer who, unable to accept that the natural order could change, became trapped in an echoed loop of brutality and violence (Césaire 46). As Harper comes closer to completing his fantasy, he becomes increasingly irrational, uncertain of what truly awaits him. He stops at a science fair in 1987 to find his next victim but becomes disturbed at the sight of a star map, suddenly struck with the thought that the constellations “could just as easily be something else if you connected the dots differently,” the patterns seen in the sky simply being “a desperate attempt to see order” in a world where “it might all be random.” Harper is unsettled by this thought, feeling “as if the whole damn world is stuttering” (Beukes 310). If this is true, then would his “destiny” truly have any impact on the world? For a moment, his fantasy of glory and destiny seems

dubious. But despite the obvious mental deterioration, Harper can not resist the compulsion of the shining girls. He does not stop. Now, he is no longer able to stop, even if he wanted to.

Just as Césaire warned that the colonizer would eventually be unable to escape the cycle of repeated violence, Harper has become trapped, unable to voluntarily stop the killings. Emphasizing his entrapped state even more is that Harper has had the opportunity to stop, and at one point, upon meeting a potential partner, he even wants to. Granted the amazing ability to travel through time, Harper could have easily stopped early on in a time period offering the life he so desperately desired. It may have once been possible “to leave the House and never come back,” find stable work, meet a girl, and set up the life he believes he deserves (Beukes 240). Yet the compulsion of the House is too strong. While one aspect of Harper’s fantasy is that he is actively restoring society to the way it should be by killing the women, he also yearns for the heady power that comes from being the one who gets to decide when they die, for this decision validates the unquestionable sovereignty he believes that he holds over all others. He could leave the House to make the life he once wanted, but then he would not be able to feel the “knife twist” and see the “girl’s insides spilling out,” or “[watch] the fire die in her eyes” (Beukes 240). Harper has completely lost himself to the pull of violence and the drunken power that comes from extinguishing such potential. He has created a new identity whose sense of self revolves around the fulfillment of his violent fantasy, and as Césaire warned, like the colonizer, he has “transformed *himself* into an animal,” losing hold of his rationality, his control, and he is unable to escape even when at one point he truly wants to (Césaire 41).

It is when Harper meets Etta Kappel that he truly considers stopping. During their first encounter, where he has his injured foot tended to, he is indifferent to her, and in their second meeting, it is only she who shows interest—primarily in the contents of his wallet—but Harper, who claims to “know her type,” is disdainful of the “little piggy nurse” (Beukes 120). Compared to his special, shining girls whose beauty and potential shines from within, the nurse’s poorly hidden greed and contempt disgusts him. However, he does take an interest in her. At first, the interest is sadistic



in nature, a game he plays with the nurse and her friend in order to set them against one another and laugh at their humiliation, but Etta's venom begins to appeal to him. She is a strange woman who is unaffected by his charisma, who "sets herself above the rest of the miserable humanity, deservedly or not" (Beukes 151). Harper is intrigued. Their ensuing relationship is far from normal with them enjoying one another's cruelty. Harper even allows her to enter into the House, the sacred place that had supposedly given him his purpose, and he "feels a thrill at telling her" about it, even though "it's a violation and he knows it" (Beukes 262). The power is tempting. They take short excursions throughout time, and for a short while, Harper believes he may have finally found a partner, one who is just as cruel as he is, who he can be happy with. Upon meeting Etta, Harper truly considers the possibility of leaving the House for the first time:

Maybe, he thinks, this is possible. Maybe Catherine was the end. Maybe *none* of the girls shine anymore, and he can be free of it. But the Room still hums when he goes up there.  
(Beukes 289)

The House and Harper's compulsion to kill will not let him escape. With Etta, he believes he has finally found acceptance—a woman as cruel as he is, who embraces his violent nature—but then she discovers the Room, and the sanctity of his fantasy is compromised. Harper kills her without hesitation, and it seems like "he's trapped in this moment forever [...] sobbing in self-pity, tears and mucus running down his face: "You made me do this. You made me.'" (Beukes 291). Etta's death drastically affects Harper and illustrates just how trapped he has become within the House. He did not want to kill Etta. For Harper, his time with Etta was a time when he felt truly content and accepted. But once the Room was discovered, he believed that he had no choice, and his body moved immediately to act. Even afterwards, although he regrets her death, Harper still refuses to take responsibility, placing the blame on Etta for "forcing" him to kill her. Harper claims that he had no choice but to kill her, just as he has no choice but to continue to follow the House's compulsion. The violent fantasy has completely overtaken his life, and even though he seems to want to stop, Harper

believes that he no longer has any choice in the matter. However, Etta's death will continue to haunt him, and it marks the beginning of his devolution.

Although the majority of criticism of Beukes's work has focused on Harper's victims, there has been very little written on the serial killer himself. In an interview with Dr. Caitlin E. Stobie, Beukes describes Harper as a "real serial killer," empty and cynical, but also "trapped in a circle" of violence, unable to break out of it. Although she does feel sorry for him, Beukes says that this is simply "the nature of serial killers: they are stuck in their compulsions, and it is an addictive behavior, because they're so broken" (Stobie 48). However, this aspect is also what makes Harper Curtis so intriguing. While it is true that Harper Curtis is a despicable man who blames society and others for his own failings rather than taking responsibility himself, unable to face his own impotency, there are definite moments when he tries to break away from the cycle of violence before being drawn back, compelled by the mysterious force to fulfill his destiny. As Beukes said, it is part of the nature of serial killers to become addicted to the heady power killing brings to them. Once they kill, it is difficult for them to stop on their own. Perhaps then, just as Harper believes that it is his "destiny" to kill the shining girls in order to restore the natural order of society, it is also his destiny that foretells his inevitable death.

Unable to save himself or redeem himself, Harper's death is inescapable, and it is only fitting that he die at the hands of one of his beloved shining girls; however, his death offers him little relief. In his last moments, Harper witnesses his own death through a distorted out of body experience, and it is at that moment that he comes to a sudden, crucial realization: all along, the compulsion of the House was "not so much a possession as an infection [...] the House was always his. Always Him" (Beukes 361). Throughout the novel, Harper has claimed to be unaware of the true nature of the House and the compulsion he experiences, in the seconds leading to his death, he finally recognizes the compulsion as his own. At this point, Harper has become overwhelmed by his violent delusion and is unable to stop himself from following the House's compulsion to fulfill those last few steps in his fantasy. Despite his crumbling mentality, Harper is overtaken by the unavoidable desire to track

down and kill Kirby Mazrachi —the girl who survived—for he believes that only her death will mark the successful fulfillment of his fantasy, and he will finally be freed. But at his death, Harper realizes the truth of the House. Able to travel through time, the cycle of violence he has become entrapped in has now become his prison, and there is no escape.

Although he believes that his death marks the end, in this novel, time is a continuous cycle—he may die now, but out there, somewhere, sometime, Harper Curtis is still fulfilling his imagined fantasy, stumbling once again upon the steps of the House. In the final chapter of the novel, Bartok, a Polish man that Harper had initially found dead when he discovered the House—and later even killed as a result of the temporal loop—is shown stumbling upon the House, the bloody key abandoned in the snow, and the cycle continues on. Just as Césaire illustrates through the dehumanization of the colonizer, the repeated violence leaves a deep impression, ingrained and inescapable even though time may pass. For Harper, he realizes in the end that the true “infection” has been him all along, and his inability to accept the changing society, yet the repercussions of his actions have already taken effect (Beukes 361). With his death, Harper is freed, but somewhere in another time, another place, his “destiny” has only just begun.

Harper’s actions were the brutal and inexcusable actions of a man unable to accept displacement, who felt emasculated and forgotten by a society he believed had owed him a particular place of power. His actions were devastating for his victims—they lost their lives, their representation, and their power—but Harper did not escape unscathed. With each murder, he devolves further, becoming more aggressive and more violent, losing sight of his past or his desires, emasculated and immobile. Instead, he mindlessly follows the order of the House—an intangible force that has compelled him, and given him the purpose that he believed had been ripped away from him. In the end, Harper can no longer save himself and can no longer redeem himself. The only solution appears to be his own death. Yet as he lays dying, Harper is struck by the sudden realization that the voice that he believed had been guiding his destiny has in reality been his own all along, and it was his refusal to accept his own impotency, and the unrelenting need to reclaim his

supposed “right” as a working-class, white man that finally overcame him. It is not long before Harper succumbs to the same violent fate that awaited the white colonizers before him, that Césaire warned of in his *Discourse*. As Harper continuously committed violent act after violent act, violence slowly became the only feasible solution that he could see to his plight, and it is this compulsive belief that eventually destroys him.

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# “Diasporic Interrogations of Alternative Mothering: Othermothers and/in Black Women’s Diaspora Fiction”<sup>1</sup>

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*By helen crump*

*"My past was my mother.... Oh, it was a laugh, for I spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother – I was my mother." – Jamaica Kincaid, Lucy*

*"I slip my mother's tongue on like a glove / and wonder if I will become like her / absolutely. / [...] Her name at times, does not fit me. (Irma McClaurin, "The Power of Names" 63)*

*"There is a place [...] where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: 'Ou libere?' Are you free, my daughter?" (Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* 234).*

The passages above suggest a connection between mother and daughter in which the daughter’s sense of self is significantly related to her understanding of or relationship with her mother or mother figure. They point to a complicatedness of that relationship as well: the identities aren’t so easily linked or separated, the interconnections so easily made or separable, and the daughters recognize that their present and future lives are influenced by their pasts, their heritage, which points to potential diasporic ties. Generational differences, traditions, expectations, separations, and other experiences come to bear and must be resolved (or even understood as un-resolvable or not fitting) in order for the daughter to become a “complete woman” (Alexander 25).

In this effort toward a diasporic link between the maternal and black women’s lives, the “mother-daughter dyad” provides a valuable space through which to contemplate and analyze diaspora and black women’s experiences in a diasporic context. As used in this

discussion, the “mother-daughter dyad” refers to interactions between mother figures and their daughters. Specifically, this motif encompasses the “mother-daughter relationship” (interactions between a mother figure and her daughter or ward); “motherlessness” (literal or figurative absence of a mother figure, especially the biological mother, and often through forced separation or abandonment), and “matrophobia” (fear of becoming the mother or of repeating the oppressive, marginalizing experiences she has endured). Addressing the value of the mother-daughter connections in exploring diaspora consciousness, Caroline Rody, in *The Daughter’s Return: African-American and Caribbean Women’s Fiction of History*, asserts, “Coming back like daughters – intensely devoted and yet convinced of the arrival of their own moment – African American and Caribbean women writers recast the conventions of historical fiction as well as received narratives of their peoples’ founding trauma, New World slavery. Staging mother-daughter relationships as the site of transhistorical contact” (3), thus, becomes a means of / site for theorizing black identity.

This analysis centers Sandra Jackson-Opoku’s *The River Where Blood Is Born* and Maryse Condé’s *Desirada* as diaspora fiction. The authors “recast” black women’s diasporic lives as addressing the impact of a “founding trauma” on generations of diasporans. Generally, I explore this through the “maternal narratives” prevalent in the novels, focusing specifically on the “mother-daughter dyad,” which is one of those maternal narratives. Used here, “maternal narratives” are discourses or experiences that speak to, explain, or theorize motherhood / mothering; the narratives reflect the practice, relationships, gender expectations, and critiques of motherhood depicted in the novels. Therefore, contemplating the function of these narratives in an African Diasporic context highlights the fluidity and diversity of black women’s identity, even in regards to the maternal, which is often one of

the key identities or identity markers associated with women. Basically, I suggest that, as a role or concept specifically gendered and associated with women and specifically represented and understood in black diasporic communities, “the maternal” provides a site through which to begin analyzing black women’s diaspora identity.

The main women characters of the featured novels are representations of this recasting. They are depicted as “coming back like daughters” – though many do so as a means of clarifying the familial history they’ve been given or that has been kept from them, as such, clarifying a personal awareness of self. For the diaspora daughters, it is imperative that they understand their heritages to some extent, either by tracing the past to ancestral origins (Africa – as in Jackson-Opoku’s *River Where Blood*) or to a living foremother (Nina or Reynalda – as in Condé’s *Desirada*). In so doing, the black women characters reach a resolution with themselves and their mothers – who are literally and symbolically, a site of origin. In this article, I consider just a few of the several examples of the “mother-daughter dyad” available in Condé’s and Jackson-Opoku’s novels as a potential lens for extrapolating additional models from the texts.

In focusing on alternative or othermother narratives, the “mother-daughter dyad” used in this writing includes multi-generational kinships like the (great) grandmother-mother-daughter triad or the othermother-(adoptive) daughter dyad. As such, it integrates relationships between “daughters” and surrogate or othermothers – often a grandmother, aunt, or older sibling, someone of the community, or a woman known as the “other” or “adoptive” mother – and highlights the interactions (or even lack thereof) between a mother figure and her daughter or ward. The multiple potential othermother figures reflect the extended kinships of various African and diasporan cultures, as well as the reconstruction of



family as a result of loss, separation, and abandonment (often associated with the traumatic past of slavery of African descendants and resulting systems of oppression like Jim Crow and the prison industrial complex). This particular “maternal narrative” encompasses 1) the mother-daughter relationship, 2) motherlessness, and 3) matrophobia, which I address below.

### ***Mother-Daughter Relationships***

Within the diasporic novels *River Where Blood* and *Desirada*, the diverse references to mother-daughter relationships emphasize their significance to the concept of the African Diaspora. As such, Africa (in its multiple incarnations as place, idea, heritage, symbol, etc.) exemplifies the “mother figure” in relation to her “daughters” / Africa’s descendants. Also, in the general trajectory of *River Where Blood*, (West) Africa and the Queen Mother are positioned as mother figures (an ancestral motherland or othermother) whose “daughters” have been removed or, more accurately, are taken from them, literally ripped from their shores and enslaved. Throughout the novel, the “mothers” await their daughter’s return, a reconnection between mother and daughter, ancestor and descendant. This figurative and literal daughter is represented in the character of Alma (née Allie Mae). The severed connection between the two entities (mother and daughter) is depicted as having had a negative impact on both parties: the mother is losing her vibrancy and her strength, her relevance to her progeny which exist outside of her. The daughter appears lost, unsure, searching, and depicted as if on a journey to discover her ancestry and her sense of self, which are implied as integral to the quest and a resolution of the self. Eventually, the “daughter of return” finds her way back “home” to Africa and to the Queen Mother –

presented as both a physical return and as an awareness of a particular historical or ancestral heritage. The continent, then, is positioned as a site through which the daughter of the African Diaspora might reconnect to her ancestral legacy and so to a sense of self, and this overall concept frames the maternal relationships presented throughout the novel. Moreover, it introduces the concept of other or alternative perceptions of mothering that then resonate across the text.

One of the more demonstrative examples in *River Where Blood* of the connection between the (other) mother-daughter relationship and Diaspora identity takes place between Alma (née Allie Mae) and her great grandmother Big Momma (Bohema). During a summer in Cairo, Illinois, Alma and Big Momma engage in a number of conversations about quilting and family that allow readers to witness a passing down of knowledge (of culture, family, and womanhood) across generations through the simple yet complex, layered activities of conversation and quilting. Significantly, quilting becomes a means through which the characters are able to communicate about family, heritage, and gender and to highlight the importance of each. It provides a communal site of connection and interaction, conversation, creation, and recollection between othermother and daughter – emphasizing a sense of gendered and generational connection, reflecting a time of communing among women.

Traditionally, quilting involves using pieces of cloth and other available materials that hold memories of people (especially family members), places, and events.<sup>2</sup> The pieces pulled together tell a story, send a message, and record family history. Quilts serve a particular functionality as well: first, they incorporate leftover or otherwise individually unusable materials (a kind of recycling) to create usable coverings; second, they act as a kind

of protective component (providing warmth) and a decorative element to a space; and third, they are artifacts of particular time periods or records of family ancestry. Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" is an example of the multifaceted value of quilts as both historical documents that connect family and as functional pieces that provide comfort and decorative elements to a space.

Overall, quilting, as used in Jackson-Opoku's diaspora narrative, illustrates an intent of mother-daughter relationships in which mothers and mother figures are perceived as models for their daughters. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall explains, "[M]others provided road maps and patterns, a 'template,' which enabled [daughters] to create and define themselves as they moved from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. Though daughters must forge an identity which is separate from their mothers, they frequently acknowledge that a part of themselves is truly their mother's child" (61), a sentiment Jamaica Kincaid echoes in the line from *Lucy* used as an epigraph to this article. As such, the daughters concede a certain internalization of the social, cultural, and other knowledges imparted to them from their mother figures. For Alma, this takes place in relation to her interactions with Big Momma, as well as in an heirloom of beads that Big Momma gives her, handed down from Big Momma's great grandmother Ama Krah (Proud Mary).<sup>3</sup>

As Alma learns about her heritage, herself, and her family, she gains a valuable sense of identity. During an early exchange, Big Momma tells Alma about quilting as a form of remembering and documenting one's heritage. She and Alma discuss a particular quilt that Big Momma has been working on for years, one that speaks to the importance of blood / kin, of ancestry, as well as to the symbolism of the river that links the novel's primary matrilineage:

“‘Looks like these pieces come from everybody in the family,’ the girl observes. ‘Like pictures in a family album.’

“‘It’s a lifetime’s worth of work, honey. [...] *Don’t never forget the bridges you crossed over on.*’

[...] “‘Ain’t none of us alone in this world, Little Daughter. Nana, my great-granny, used to keep a place in the corner with a piece of something from all the kinfolk: buttons, baby teeth, locks of hair, scraps of cloth. I do the same thing with my quilt. These patches are our peoples; the born and the dead, the lost and the left behind, the righteous and the wrongdoers. And what do you make of this red thread winding into each piece?’

[...] “‘Maybe it’s the blood that joins us all together. Hey, some of these patches got red running in, but none coming out. Did you forget to join them?’

“‘[...] You don’t want nothing that’s too perfect. Ain’t no questions in it left to answer.’” (Jackson-Opoku 152)

Big Momma’s comments speak of dispersal and generations as she explains the purpose of “‘Scraps,’ [...]. Bits of some of everything. Overalls, some tafeety from an old petticoat. Hopsack, linen, lace” (150). The scraps symbolize people’s lives and their experiences, which are then used to produce “historical documentation” that traces the movements and lives, their existences of Big Momma’s ancestors and descendants; the document / quilt shares stories (and people) that often go untold or get lost amidst a dominant narrative. Jackson-Opoku’s *River Where Blood* highlights such voices through attention to the multiple stories of black women’s lives. Furthermore, Big Momma describes the scraps as

encompassing the family's heritage, all connected by "the line of red, running through like a winding river." Thus, she informs readers of the significance of the actual river where blood is born that is the source and link for the diasporic matrilineage at the center of the novel and, consequently, prompts us to consider the complexity of recalling and negotiating the diaspora and diaspora identity. The imperfections associated with the "line of red" point to the reality that a significant population of black people's histories and kin are not so easily traceable, the details of each life not so readily known. Yet, they reflect an overarching idea of diaspora – one that suggests that sometimes the connections are visible only temporarily, fading away and reappearing in other places or lost forever (16). Also, Big Momma reveals the generational lesson of keeping abreast of one's history as much as possible when she recalls that her great-grandmother kept pieces associated with or memories of family members as well, which inspired Big Momma in her efforts to remain attentive to family in the same way that she, in turn, is doing for Alma: creating a "pattern" for Alma to follow as she undertakes her own life's journey and creating an awareness and appreciation of ancestry.

Another example of this "mother-daughter" sharing occurs after Big Momma and Alma stop by the cemetery, "visiting" and paying tribute to family members buried there. This remembering of family members keeps them alive – in the novel's Afterlife and in a sense of awareness for the living family members. This moment foreshadows Alma's trip to Africa and her desire to track her ancestry there. Alma considers Big Momma's ancestry lesson:

“If my great-grandmother’s great-grandmother was born over in Africa, then I might be got some kin over there. It makes me wonder who they are and what they’re doing. [...]

“If I ever went there, [...] I wouldn’t know where to look for them, because I don’t know them and they don’t know me.

“Blood is thicker than water, that’s the way a family is supposed to be. Like the red thread in Big Momma’s story quilt. [...] The blood flows like red rivers through the veins and arteries. *But all the blood in the body is connected, so it has to come back to the source.* Which is the heart.

*“But it don’t seem like our family is connected right. [...] Our bloodlines run every which way. I don’t think none of it goes back to the source. It’s a deep cut somewhere and all the blood just gushes out.*

[...] “But now I’m in Cairo, Illinois. Cairo is named after a city in Africa. Africa is where the first woman in our family comes from, that’s what Big Momma says. For the first time I feel like I’m connected to something. Like a tumbleweed putting down roots.” (Jackson-Opoku 155, emphasis mine)

In this and the previous passage, then, Big Momma is positioned as an example of Caroline Rody’s “mother-of-history” who shares that matrilineal history with her great-granddaughter, ensuring that future generations will know it. Too, this moment intimates a mother-daughter relationship in a few ways: one, it recognizes (and questions the extent of) a connection between Alma and her ancestry; two, it identifies the generational link between Alma and her foremothers, particularly her great-grandmother, who both illustrates the diasporic characteristic of multigenerational kinships and provides an important

maternal influence for Alma at a time when Alma's relationship with her own mother (Callie Mae) is strained; and three, it acknowledges the great-grandmother as an othermother and "first teacher" to her "daughter" – as teaching Alma to appreciate herself and her family history, which guides her journey. Using "maternal narratives" like the "(other)mother-daughter dyad," Jackson-Opoku suggests a "fictionalized theoretical discourse"<sup>4</sup> through which to comprehend the connection between the African Diaspora and motherhood – as an overall expression of the complications of black women's identity formation in a diasporic context, in addition to the benefits of pursuing and forging such a broad sense of self.

In Maryse Condé's *Desirada*, the central mother-daughter relationships are strained and generally non-existent. Marie-Noëlle is estranged from her birth mother Reynalda and has been since the day Reynalda handed over her newborn baby to a woman named Ranélise, an othermother who raised Marie-Noëlle to the age of ten,<sup>5</sup> and left town. As depicted in the novel, daughters who have little to no role model in creating the self within a world of oppressions and contradictions seem incapable of creating such an environment for their own daughters, who appear to be constantly on a quest for some sense of self and familial association. Reynalda, who has a tense, alienated relationship with her own mother, Nina, is unable to mother her child beyond the obligatory financial and other need-based provisions. She works continuously to "improve" her condition, as if challenging the criticism and low expectations (because of her dark skin color, impoverished class status during her childhood, and out-of-wedlock birth) directed at her while growing up, yet this effort does not extend to her relationship with Marie-Noëlle.<sup>6</sup>

Ranélise, then, raises Marie-Noëlle until she is ten years old. As such, Ranélise views herself as Marie-Noëlle's mother ... and vice versa: "she had completely forgotten that Marie-Noëlle had not come out of her belly" (11). However, she is abruptly reminded of this reality when Reynalda, prompted by her husband Ludovic and more out of a sense of obligation and ownership than maternal feelings, decides to reclaim her daughter. In the context of this mothering relationship, especially regarding the frequency with which othermothering is engaged and operates within African Diasporic countries and communities, Condé raises a powerful and necessary question about "ownership" and belonging in regards to what determines a mother: "Who was the child's real maman? The one who had cared for her [...] or the one giving herself airs in France?" (15). At the same time, Condé implies that, in a diasporic context and with challenges of marginalization based on gender and race, the expectations of family, especially mothers, can be negotiable. Too, she contends that the ability to provide substantial maternal or even personal role models is hampered by past events – a problematic heritage of indifference and/or provisional caring passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter, as illustrated in the grandmother-mother-daughter triad of Nina (Reynalda's mother), Reynalda, and Marie-Noëlle. The strained relationships hinder or do not allow for the maternal relationship seen with Jackson-Opoku's Big Momma and Alma. However, Condé does suggest a similar social, cultural, and familial exchange in the (other) mother-daughter relationship between Ranélise and Marie-Noëlle in the years leading up to Marie-Noëlle's tenth birthday, an exchange that, until interrupted by Reynalda, establishes a solid mother-daughter relationship between Marie-Noëlle and Ranélise.



In *River Where Blood* and *Desirada*, the strained or barely-there mother-daughter relationships create a need for alternative, othermother figures, a situation reflective of the impact of dispersal, as well as of the impact of ancestral or generational trauma on families. This happened often under colonial practices associated with slavery. In place of many birth family structures, new kinships formed, and as a result, questions about ancestry abound and motivate searches for resolution and reconnection, which Jackson-Opoku and Condé prompt and explore through the development of their mother- / othermother-daughter relationships.

### ***Motherlessness***

As evident in the problematic or unfulfilling mother-daughter relationships discussed previously, the mother's absence contributes to the friction between mother and daughter, especially when the absence leads the daughter to experience a sense of motherlessness in her coming of age. Used here, "motherlessness" refers to the literal or figurative absence of a mother figure, especially the biological mother, and often is depicted in the form of emotional, psychological, and physical absences. A strong first example of motherlessness arises in Jackson-Opoku's novel with the character Emilene (née Diaspora), first daughter of Ama Krah (later known as Proud Mary after escaping slavery). Upon arrival in the New World on the slave ship *Sable Venus*, Ama Krah's baby daughter narrates her own story and reveals that she must birth and name herself. This child, then named Diaspora, is separated from her birth mother and motherland, sold into slavery, and appropriated by something of an othermother (in Mercy Winston, the slave owner's wife), which, in the child's case, is a complicated existence in that her "adoptive" mother also owns her (as a slave), yet claims that Diaspora is her "daughter." Despite difficult relationships with

surrogates or alternative / othermothers in the forms of Mother Mercy and Nanny Griggs, Emilene obviously still experiences motherlessness. Even more, juxtaposed Alma's relationship with Big Momma, the reader recognizes the significance of that othermother-daughter interconnection and, so too, Emilene's loss even in that alternative of the maternal.

Emilene's experiences of being Mother Mercy's "adopted daughter" yet property reflect the complexity of diasporization in the context of slavery. Seeing Emilene-as-Diaspora as a baby in Ama Krah's arms, Mother Mercy, wife of plantation owner Gareth Winston, claims the child as her "daughter" and (re)names her Emilene – in one moment stripping the child of her mother, her identity, and her heritage. Also, because Emilene is Mother Mercy's "child," she is isolated from the black community around her, and because she is not white, she is not necessarily accepted as part of the dominant class either. Ultimately, she is located as in-between or rather displaced, not really belonging anywhere until she finds her voice. So, although Mother Mercy "adopts" Emilene, race and status as a slave prevent the relationship from taking on a real othermother-daughter association. Emilene expresses this when she says that Nanny Griggs, a slave woman charged with caring for her, is the one who gave her hugs and reassurances, who nurtured her, mothered her, not Mother Mercy, who never touched her – as if fearful of contaminating herself. However, regardless of her concern for Emilene, Nanny Griggs realizes that her (other "othermother) relationship with the child can go only so far since, under the circumstances, Nanny Griggs, has limited or non-existent authority of her own life, let alone in Emilene's. Thus, in both relationships, Emilene is once again a "motherless" and abandoned child; neither her birth mother nor her othermothers can provide her a sense of belonging or

identification with a mother figure that both Alexander (25) and Amy Kaminsky (142) suggest is important for the daughter's development.

Additional depictions of motherlessness intersect with the “maternal narrative” of mother's resistance<sup>7</sup> -- situations where the mother challenges the automatic assumption of motherhood as related to womanhood – to emphasize the function and complexity of othermothering in the novels. Specifically, alternative or othermothering becomes necessity when the traditional or biological mother figure resists or rejects the maternal. In *River Where Blood*, Lola's relationship with her daughter Cinnamon (née Pat) is an example of motherlessness in that Lola abandons “motherhood,” the role of being a mother and, as such, “abandons” her daughter to the alternative mothering of her husband Clyde, making him something of an “othermother.” Lola chooses not to adhere to traditional expectations of womanhood that include being a mother. She reveals that she does not want to be, nor has ever intended to be, a mother. In fact, her pregnancy is the result of Clyde deciding that Lola was mistaken and would love motherhood once she had a child of her own: he sabotaged his condoms by poking holes in them. Yet, in spite of being forced into maternity, Lola stands her ground and her position by telling Clyde that, if he wants their daughter to have a mother, then he will have to “mother” her himself. This is significant in multiple ways: 1) Lola provides an alternative representation of black womanhood, especially in asserting her voice and her viewpoint regarding motherhood and her identity; 2) the meaning of “to mother” is positioned as human behavior (not specifically gendered), discussed in terms of nurturing, caring for, and loving, behaviors typically associated with women; and 3) this example of maternity prompts us to reexamine and broaden our ideas associated with fatherhood as well as with motherhood.

In *Desirada*, Condé addresses the concept of mother's resistance in terms of the father as maternal figure also. As mentioned previously, Reynalda abandons her daughter until her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday when Reynalda reclaims Marie-Noëlle, sending for the girl to join her in France, a decision made based on Reynalda's husband's urging rather than her own sense of what is right or appropriate. However, despite this repossessing, Reynalda does not suddenly embrace motherhood. Instead, Ludovic, Reynalda's husband, takes on the role. Like Jackson-Opoku's Clyde, Ludovic becomes an "othermother" who takes care of the children (Reynalda and her younger brother) – preparing meals, making sure that their needs and desires are met, and playing with them.

Despite Ludovic's efforts, Marie-Noëlle feels motherlessness; in addition to a loss of not knowing her father's identity, she feels doubly abandoned by a mother who left her behind right after she is born and then rips her from the only mother she's ever known (Ranélise) merely to primarily, ignore her. Marie-Noëlle spends a significant amount of time trying to understand her mother and to discover her father's identity, collecting mother figures along the way, as if seeking to fill the absence created by her birth mother and too by her othermother Ranélise. So, Marie-Noëlle's sense of motherlessness is not just an absence stemming from her mother's initial abandonment and subsequent indifference, but also because Reynalda removes Marie-Noëlle from the home, life, and community she's known for ten years with her adoptive mother Ranélise.

Significantly, this sense of motherlessness is present in the lives of all of the women of the matrilineage that drives *Desirada* – Marie-Noëlle, Reynalda, and Nina – thus suggesting and centering the influence or repercussions of generational traumas of sexual abuse, poverty, parental absence and abandonment, and so on. Each woman experiences

the absence of and/or abandonment by her mother, which has a profound impact on her life, her relationships, and her identity formation. As if developing in a ripple effect, each woman influences her daughter's (in)ability to "mother" her own daughter or even to see herself in such a maternal role. Since mother figures are expected to socialize their daughters about womanhood and cultural and other behaviors, then the biological mother figure's absence negatively affects the daughter. Then, in addition to the separation from a significant maternal influence, these women experience the (biological) motherlessness of place / home (as with many diasporan beings) that often serves in a similar capacity.

Tragedy and difficult living conditions stemming from poverty, racism, and sexism shape their existences. As Nayana P. Abeysinghe comments, "Nina, Reynalda, and Marie-Noëlle share certain events in their lives that have made an indelible mark on their being. [...] All three women are torn from the place of their birth, where [...] they feel rooted in a sense of well-being and belonging. [...] Furthermore, [they] grow up in the shadow of the missing father and, perhaps more significantly, in the shadow of the missing mother" (319). In part, Condé positions the idea of motherlessness as a metaphorical reflection and diasporic sensibility of the unfortunate, yet too common circumstances of colonization and appropriation, loss and displacement that often separated diasporan mothers from their children and dispersed people from their homelands.

The women characters who experience the absence of their mothers subsequently engage in a search for a sense of identity and belonging or even for some aspect of their heritage. Ultimately, this results in an attempt to resolve some familial issue and/or to gain insight into the mother's character, in the hope that something about themselves is also revealed. From this perspective, which seeks to make connections between *maternal*

*narratives* and black women's identity, the authors' representations of black womanhood as linked to the quest reflects the sense of separation and loss that has historically affected many in the diaspora, especially when such a positioning is accompanied by a lack of connection to one's heritage and/or when one experiences marginalization in society based on perceived differences, of race / ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic positioning. And for the three women characters, it is the maternal figures' reactions to their daughters' perceived differences that create and/or enforce tensions in the mother-daughter relationships, often prompting daughters aggressively to seek to be and/or to pursue lives drastically different from the models or examples they witnessed at home.

### ***Matrophobia***

“PARTUS SEQUITUR VENTREM—the child follows in the condition of the mother.”

(S. Hartman 80)

A potentially contradictory subsection of the “mother-daughter dyad,” “matrophobia” denotes a fear of becoming (like) the mother or, in this diasporic sense, a fear of repeating any oppressive and marginalizing experiences that the mother has endured. It speaks to the separation and generational differences that exist between Africa and her Diaspora, as well as between mothers and daughters in / of the diaspora. Diasporan descendants have sought to avoid the oppressive experiences of their ancestors who were enslaved and/or otherwise colonized; similarly, children of the oppressed – of those parents, grandparents, and guardians, including other extended family, who have been marginalized attempt to resist and move beyond the interlocking systems of oppression that affected their elders. This is often seen in the social and political movements of youth and young adults, as with the civil rights movement and today the BlackLivesMatter movement.

Naoko Sugiyama contends that the sense of oppression and powerlessness women experience in society becomes reflected in the mother-daughter relationship. As a result, the mother and daughter connect through a feeling of weakness instead of a sense of strength. And while this might be true when the mother is viewed as a primary model of identity for the daughter's ideas about womanhood, the desires to overcome oppressive circumstances can also create a foundation of strength for building that relationship. For instance, having witnessed the negative circumstances of their mothers' lives, daughters then aspire to achieve better for themselves and to uplift their mothers and/or future generations along the way.

Invariably, the "mother-daughter dyad" highlights the mother and daughter as a connected, interdependent pair. On one hand, the daughter is seen as an extension of the mother (Grice 38), who is a reflected model of what the daughter might become. The daughter then views the mother as the guide for her development.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, part of discovering one's self-agency involves daughters seeking, at least in part, to distance themselves (emotionally, spatially, and/or circumstantially) from their mothers. These diaspora daughters seek to construct their own identities separately from their mothers, independently of their mothers' marginalized lives. Often, too, though, characters see their maternal figures as somehow giving in to or accepting their oppressions. It's that sense of "choice" in one's oppression that the daughters in *River Where Blood* and *Desirada* seem so bent on resisting.

Elaborating on the desire for and experience of disconnection, Wendy Ho defines the daughter's need for a mother-daughter separation along the same lines as Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*. Quoting poet Sukenik, Ho writes, "It is a way for a daughter to disavow the

condition of her mother as a victimized and compromised [...] immigrant [or minority] woman, who constantly reminds her of a woman's subordinate status in culture and society" (91). Discussing Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Jana Evans Braziel addresses this idea of matrophobia as well, suggesting that complications of the "mother-daughter dyad" develop as the daughter creates her own identity and, in various ways, becomes critical of the mother's experiences / existence. Braziel contends that the daughter's matrophobia reflects her "fears [of] an over-identification with her mother that will erase the possibilities of her own future becomings" (126). Therefore, this identification or "over-identification" can be problematic for the daughter, especially when it becomes a limiting experience for her.

In *River Where Blood*, Alma watches her mother Callie Mae work two jobs to take care of her children (Alma and her older brother Benny, who is developmentally challenged). Then, she sees her mother become oppressed under the dictates of her second husband Otis, who polices Callie Mae's (and Alma's) actions, "comings and goings," and attire – verbally and psychologically restrictive relationships. And although Alma's mother is present physically, at times the tension of their relationship as Alma vies for her mother's attention leaves Alma feeling a maternal absence (a sense of temporary motherlessness). As Alma sees her mother's struggle, she acknowledges that she doesn't want the same for her own life. Moreover, she is taught to see education as a way out of the poor-to-working class employment and environments, out of racist and/or sexist situations, and out of an otherwise limiting existence, and despite their own setbacks, Callie Mae and Big Momma encourage and assist Alma toward this goal.



In her discussion of the “mother-daughter dyad” and “matrophobia” Lisa D. McGill comments that “a matrophobic theoretical framework [posits] the erasure of the mother – the attempt to locate the mother as object and not subject of a novel – [and] serves as a means by which theorists both argue a discontinuity with past ideas of femaleness and hypothesize the burgeoning presence of an autonomous female persona” (34). As such, McGill views the separation from the mother as introducing a new definition of “femaleness,” of womanhood that highlights black women’s subjectivity. Potentially, it offers up a new means for black women, even the characters constructed in Jackson-Opoku’s and Condé’s novel, to think about and then process their own identities, separate from the burdens and traumas witnessed in their mothers. This potentially addresses and possibly sidesteps the possible impact of generational trauma.

From a cross-cultural point-of-view relevant to an analysis of diaspora, Angelita Reyes addresses matrophobia as constructed in black women’s fiction, commenting, “Decidedly, there is the kind of mothering – historical, biological, or other – that devours and destroys. Contemporary black women writers [as daughters] across cultures deal with these issues of fear and the detriment and deterrent of mothering” (9). Attempting to elude such maternal influence and to avoid repeating what they perceive to be the mothers’ oppressive or stifling lives, the daughters aim to separate themselves from their mothers. By disrupting the view of mother-as-model, the daughters seek the ability to construct their own identities, not locate themselves as extensions of the mother. Yet, Alexander contends that one only becomes complete “when one has a sense of ‘home,’ when one has made peace with the mother and the mother’s land” (25). And for Alexander, the “mother,” whether birth or surrogate, represented as a woman or place, must be a “nurturing presence,” one

with whom the daughter legitimately connects. Otherwise, the process of self-identifying continues unresolved. Jackson-Opoku's Alma and Condé's Marie-Noëlle are such examples – Alma of a resolved relationship, Marie-Noëlle as a continually unresolved one. Yet, even for Alma, the question of self is complicated. In regards to Callie Mae, Alma sees a means of identity that need not necessarily exist through or like her mother. However, in regards to her relationship with Mother Africa / West Africa / her African ancestry (prompted by Big Momma's stories of Ama Krah / Proud Mary), Alma's sense of belonging and womanhood become linked to the past and that heritage. This is required in the novel as Alma is positioned as the daughter of return who helps the dispersed / diasporized daughters (across generations) to find their way home. Too, it is needed for Alma as she seeks to ground herself in ancestry, story, and place that are bigger than herself and what her 20<sup>th</sup> century world in the U.S. has told her she is or can be. For Marie-Noëlle, the lack of resolution with Reynalda actually seems to free her from the limitations of her mother's expectations and distant attitude. Even more, her relationships with her othermothers (women serving as guardian, mentor, and friend) provide her with tools and lessons of love, friendship, and communication that ultimately liberate her.

Still, even for the daughters who seek a complete separation, it isn't realistically possible, for whether in agreement or opposition, the mother acts as a lens through, against, or in line with which the daughter constructs her own sense of self. The daughter "creates" herself in relation to what the mother is or is not; consequently, the mother remains a (necessary) point of reference for identity development. Along similar lines, Amy Kaminsky contends, "[T]he daughter must eventually come to a recognition of the separateness of the (m)other, of her mother's selfhood as a precondition of her own. [T]he daughter, as an

unavoidable part of her [...] separation from the mother, carries a bit of her mother with and in her. Paradoxically, only by retaining this residual connection can she truly recognize her mother's wholeness, and her own" (142).<sup>9</sup> Naoko Sugiyama and Helena Grice echo this contradictory interdependence, a need or desire for separation at the same time as one seeks or needs a connection to the mother figure.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of matrophobia (presented in Reyes, Alexander, Kaminsky, Sugiyama, and Grice collectively) is evident in the fictional discussions of mother-daughter relationships and experiences of motherlessness addressed in this article, which demonstrates how these narratives are interdependent and intersect with one another. For example, Marie-Noëlle feels her mother's absence, yet even as she searches out her own sense of self in opposition to her mother-as-model, she clings to some desire to know her mother, even if only because the mother is perceived as integral to her understanding of her parental heritage and, therefore, a greater self-awareness.

### ***Maternal Narratives, Alternative Mothering, & Diaspora Identity***

Jackson-Opoku and Condé "foreground the mother-daughter relationship as the site of [and means through which] transhistorical contact" becomes possible and comprehensible (Rody 3). These novelists, their narratives, and their main characters (or the authors *through* their main characters) explore an "inherited history" (3) as a means of theorizing the concept of diaspora, diasporan identity, and the significance of interactions between daughters and mothers or othermothers in identity formation among black women. Emphasizing the notion of an inheritance left and passed down across generations (from multiple mothers to daughters) rather than to a single daughter or in a single journey extends the importance of the transcultural and "transhistorical contact" (as diasporic) and

its impact on *who* is or is perceived as a mother figure. Condé and Jackson-Opoku's use of the "mother-daughter dyad" provides a point of entry for analyzing this fiction, and the examples reflect the discourse of diaspora, which includes concepts of belonging, identity, and ancestry. Moreover, the role of mother (as biological and fictional kin), typically associated with women, is invaluable in the context of the diaspora, positioning black women themselves as embodied knowledges that are fundamental to the creation and/or nurturing of generations and the handing down of familial and cultural histories. Yet, as the characters in the featured novels of Sandra Jackson-Opoku and Maryse Condé suggest, those maternal and generational connections are not easy and, in fact, are quite complicated. And the ancestral and generational narratives and knowledges, consequently, are complex and disrupted and must be navigated carefully.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. This work is taken from a larger project on *maternal narratives* and black women's diaspora identity.

<sup>2</sup>. For an in-depth discussion of "literary quilting" in reading the diaspora in black women's literature, specifically in regards to demonstrating intertextuality among black women's diaspora texts, see Lean'tin Bracks, "Chapter 1 – Literary Quilting: History, Language, and Identity in Women's Diasporic Texts," 3-28.

<sup>3</sup>. Gay Wilentz's *Binding Cultures* and collections like Patricia Bell-Scott, et al.'s *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* and Cecelie S. Berry's *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on Motherhood* each explore black (diaspora) women's lives and mother-daughter relationships.

<sup>4</sup>. I borrow this term from Pius Adesanmi, who uses it to analyze diaspora in black men's fictions about Paris, and reposition it to discuss diaspora in black women's fiction.

<sup>5</sup>. Ranélise saved Reynalda, at the time a pregnant teenager, from drowning herself as a way of dealing with her situation. The paternity of her child Marie-Noëlle remains in question throughout the novel.

<sup>6</sup>. Notably, for Marie-Noëlle, the struggle for identity and familial connection is most visibly tied to a need to uncover her biological father. It seems to control her movements throughout the novel and the way she thinks about herself and forms relationships with the men she meets. Yet, I argue, the non-traditional and significantly problematic relationship with her biological mother prompts her to keep "replacing" and/or trying out othermothers surrogates throughout the text.

<sup>7</sup>. I discuss "mother's resistance" as a separate *maternal narrative* in a longer work that is currently in progress.

<sup>8</sup>. Several authors analyze black or African Diasporan mother-daughter relationships, including Alexander, Carole Boyce Davies, Barbara Christian, Chinosole, Patricia Hill Collins, Fultz and Wilentz.

<sup>9</sup>. Kaminsky makes this observation in regards to her analysis of Maria Lugones's discussion of motherhood, specifically her relationship with and perception of her own mother in her book *After Exile: Writing The Latin American Diaspora*.

<sup>10</sup>. This reference to Sukiyaama is to the difficult cross-cultural connections between Asian (American) mothers and their Asian American daughters; however, the overall idea is useful to my discussion of diasporic / black mother-daughter relationships.

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# “Author Becomes Savior: Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*”

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*By Dana Davenport Jones*

Dorothy Allison makes no bones about the fact that her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a semi-autobiographical novel. The fictional story of Bone Boatwright was an outlet for Allison to deal with the traumatic events of her past. In fact, it is clear that this novel is a form of therapy that some refer to as scriptotherapy through which “writing about trauma can lead toward individual and collective healing and alleviation of symptoms” (Carter 888). However, Dorothy Allison took this form of therapy a step further by not only using *Bastard Out of Carolina* to come to terms with her trauma, but also as a means to write herself in as a character that at many times is a savior to Bone while also to her younger self.

In the essay “A Question of Class” Allison gives the details of her upbringing; details that are at times identical to those of the Bone’s family. Allison’s mother, like Anney Boatwright, was a fifteen-year-old girl when she gave birth to her daughter Dorothy. Allison’s mother married a man with whom she had a second daughter and just like Reese’s father, he died shortly after Allison’s sister was born. Anney Boatwright marries Glen Waddell when she is about the same age as Allison was when her mother remarried. The details of Glen’s first sexual assault of Bone are the same as the first time Allison was assaulted by her stepfather. Dorothy Allison’s mother also left her husband on a couple of occasions that are mirrored in *Bastard*. There is also what Allison refers to as a “family scandal” that must have been the inspiration for the scene after Aunt Ruth’s funeral when



Bone's aunts and uncles discover Glenn's abuse of her before the uncles almost beat him to death (4).

However alike the characters and situations are, there are also several differences. Allison's parents took their children and disappeared one night to relocate to Florida and in *Bastard* Bone does not leave with her mother and Glen (Question 4). However, when Bone says "Or Florida, maybe." as an answer to where her mother has gone it is a clear allusion to the relocation of Allison's family in her real life (*Bastard* 308).

Dorothy Allison also describes the difference between poor and white trash in her essay:

There was an idea of the good poor—hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. I understood that we were the bad poor: men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes. (3)

She says that she knows her family is white trash and when she writes the story of Bone she depicts them as white trash also. Throughout the novel her uncles and aunts drink and have many children. In her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, Dorothy Allison's family was a part of "they" or the "them" group. These are the groups of people that other "more fortunate" people talk about and look down on. Allison remembers hearing mothers tell their children that they couldn't play with "her" as if she were some sort of a diseased child and the condition of poor could be passed on like an illness (1).

Allison's one saving grace was that when she moved to Florida her community contained a smorgasbord of different people that she found herself no longer being grouped

according to class, but being group according to intelligence. In that grouping, she excelled. She and her sisters began to learn ways to avoid her stepfather's advances and she began to hope for the future that might be different than the one she had originally envisioned for herself, the future that showed up in her dreams so vividly that she worked even harder to escape that cycle that was "white trash" (5).

Just as Allison has a savior in education, Bone has a few saviors in her life also. Shannon Pearl is a savior to Bone as she takes her away from her home for a little while. There is no telling how many times Bone escapes the hands of Daddy Glenn when she is with Shannon Pearl. In addition to being an escape, Shannon also shows Bone a different type of people. Shannon and Bone seem to be true friends and there are a few occasions in which Bone stands up for Shannon. However, after a fight the two girls do not talk for a while. Bone is offended when Shannon refers to a group of singers that they hear as "niggers." Bone wonders if Shannon talks about her like that because the way she says "nigger" is very similar to the way people call Bone's family "trash." After some time passes, Shannon calls Bone and invites Bone to a picnic at her house. It is unclear if Shannon calls Bone because she really misses her friendship or if being around Bone makes her feel better about herself. Bone cannot decide if she wants to go to the picnic or not, but finds herself wandering to Shannon's place in time to hear Shannon's family from Mississippi making fun of Shannon. It is at this moment that Bone realizes she might be one of the only friends that Shannon has (Bastard 168-172; 199).

Realizing this truth about Shannon and then watching her die makes Bone feel a little guilty about the way she had been treating everyone. As a result, she begins to be nicer to her family and try to become closer to Reese again. She started examining herself to try to

find out who she was and more about herself. She begins to have a spark of self-esteem because when Daddy Glenn puts her down she becomes down on herself, but then she has a realization:

I would know that he had no idea who I was, that he never saw me as the girl who worked hard for Aunt Raylene, who got good grades no matter how often I changed schools, who ran errands for Mama and took good care of Reese. I was not dirty, not stupid, and if I was poor, who fault was that? (209).

This realization came about after Bone takes a deep look inside of herself after Shannon's death. Therefore, Shannon becomes a type of savior to Bone, if only for a small amount of time in her life.

The most obvious savior in the story of Bone is Aunt Raylene. The first instance of Raylene defending her family is when at the funeral of Anney's first husband she stops to "tell Mrs. Parsons what a damn fool she was" (Bastard 8). Bone does not spend much time with Raylene when she is younger, but as she gets older, there are a few times when Anney tells Bone to go out to Raylene's to stay out of the house when Daddy Glenn is home after having his hours at work cut back.

Raylene is also the aunt who discovers that Daddy Glenn has beaten Bone when she sees her stained panties in the bathroom after Ruth's funeral. There is no doubt the contempt that Raylene has for Glenn when she tells Beau "I'd kill him" (Bastard 245). At this point in the novel she encourages Anney to bring the girls and come live with her, but Anney refuses. She gets an apartment and moves the girls in there. Bone feels her mother's distance from her and coupled with her own shame she goes out to Raylene's place on the river for a little peace. She goes back to her mother and has a conversation with her and

realizes that her mother will eventually go back to Glenn. This is when she decides that she will not go back with her mother, but that she thinks she will go live with Aunt Raylene.

When Aunt Raylene finally tells her story it is clear that Allison puts quite a bit of herself into the character of Raylene and therefore becomes a savior to her younger self. She tells Bone that she better think about with whom she is really mad. This is a question that Allison would have had to ask herself as she dealt with the demons of her past.

Allison would have to come to terms with a mother who chose to go back to the man who abused her just as Bone had to come to terms with Anney going back to Glenn. However, Allison gave Bone an out that she herself did not have. Raylene is the one that brings Bone home from the hospital after Glenn rapes and beats her although Anney was there and took Bone to the hospital. Raylene seems to have a special connection with Bone; for example, she does not have to say much, yet she and Bone understand one another. When they come home from the hospital Raylene tells Bone that when she was in the carnival she was in love with another woman and she forced that woman to choose between her and her own child. The woman chose to stay with her child and Raylene came back home to live alone. She tells Bone “no woman can stand to choose between her baby and her lover, between her child and her husband” (Bastard 300). An obvious connection between Allison and Raylene is that they are both take female lovers. However, unlike the mothers in Allison’s and Bone’s life, the woman in Raylene’s life made the “right” choice—she chose her child.

Allison claims that *Bastard Out of Carolina* is the result of the “one story that would haunt me until I understood how to tell it” (Class 13). Not only did she tell that story, but also she was able to use a character that like her came to terms with who she was to become

the savior to a little girl that was so much like herself. This adds another dimension to the story and gives hope to any reader who is experiencing abuse. In the end of the story not only did the author become saved from her past, but she was also able to become savior.

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# Balancing the Two Cultures in Djerassi and Hoffmann's *Oxygen* and Stephenson's *An Experiment with an Air Pump*

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*By James Fowler*

At the height of the Cold War, C. P. Snow published two essays, *The Two Cultures* (1959), and *A Second Look* (1964), largely lambasting modern literature for failing to address the revolutionary advances of science and technology. Underpinning this argument was the philosophical premise that while the individual condition is tragic because lonely and mortal, social conditions can be improved by the latest products and processes that science has to offer (*Two Cultures* 6-7). Literary high modernism, by forsaking hope in collective, material progress and finding a kind of salvation in private states of consciousness—leaning toward the fascistic when addressing the political realm at all (*Two Cultures* 7)—had only widened the divide between the scientific ranks and the literature-consuming but technologically illiterate public (*Second Look* 61). If this gap were not closed, Snow warned, the democratic West could lose its innovative momentum (a caveat echoed in the current STEM campaign). Further, the world's poor nations, technological have-nots, might lose patience and turn to the Communist bloc for assistance with modernization (50).

Of course, Snow's argument muted the technologically-driven barbarism of the First World War that fueled much of the modernist movement's reactionary subjectivity. In general, the potential for nuclear war aside, Snow displayed a true believer's faith in scientism, as if technological fixes were a cure-all for what ails society. His follow-up volume, *A Second Look*, did find an encouraging dialectic third term for the vexing binary of *The Two Cultures* in the social sciences (69-71, 81-84), those people-centered disciplines firmly grounded in empirical methods.

In the interval between these two volumes, the literary critic F. R. Leavis responded with “Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow” (1962). The question mark in the title might better have appeared at the end, given the way in which Leavis swatted Snow like some intellectual fruit fly. First mocking Snow’s ineptitude as a novelist, Leavis then proceeded to deride his materialist approach to social history and utter incomprehension of imaginative literature’s capacity as a criticism of life. For Leavis, “*The Two Cultures* exhibits an utter lack of intellectual distinction and an embarrassing vulgarity of style” (30).

The postmodern period, or nuclear age if you will, has seen an upsurge of literary works conversant in the different branches of scientific endeavor. Science-based plays in particular are now numerous enough to warrant special-topics standing in the English curriculum. The pair under consideration here—Carl Djerassi and Roald Hoffmann’s *Oxygen* (2001), and Shelagh Stephenson’s *An Experiment with an Air Pump* (1998)—extend and flesh out the Snow/Leavis debate as they reveal the very human face behind the mask of objective scientific inquiry, suggest that scientists in their turn should not be dismissive of humane learning, and express humanistic skepticism of the technological fix as final solution in any case. Each toggles between the late eighteenth and the verge or start of the twenty-first century, playing on millennial expectations. The former takes pneumatic chemistry as its theater of discovery, while the latter uses the field mainly for its metaphoric value, focusing in its modern-day scenes on the prospects of genetic engineering.

In *Oxygen* we have a work produced by a pair of prominent chemists. Djerassi is best known for inventing the birth-control pill. Hoffmann is a Nobel-Prize winner. *Oxygen* serves as the second in a trilogy of plays that Djerassi calls his “science-in-theatre” project (“Contemporary”). The motive behind the work is unabashedly didactic: “I want to use fiction to smuggle scientific facts into the consciousness of a scientifically illiterate public—a pedagogic activity I consider intellectually and socially beneficial, because the majority of scientifically untrained persons are afraid of science” (“Contemporary”). So on a practical level Djerassi agrees with Snow’s midcentury critique. In his



brace of essays Snow explained the dearth of science in modern literature as both a reflection and reinforcement of prevailing societal ignorance (*Two Cultures* 31; *Second Look* 61). Djerassi's term "smuggle" suggests the delivery of a possibly bitter scientific pill in a palatable theatrical treat. Granted, *Oxygen* does have too many lecture-hall moments, and its characters could be more rounded. Still, its dramaturgy is canny enough to deflect charges of trespass from the literary/performance quarter—itsself given to division these days.

Critics have commonly noted the debt that *Oxygen* and *An Experiment with an Air Pump* owe to the staging devices of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (Hornby 95; Shepherd-Barr 42; Barnett 213). All three shuttle fluidly between different times in the same location. The setting for *Oxygen* is Stockholm in 2001 and 1777, excepting side episodes on the eighteenth-century protagonists. In the play's present, a committee meets on the centenary of the Nobel Prize to determine the recipient of the first retro-Nobel award in chemistry. This fictive premise corresponds with a prior imaginary contest in the court of the Swedish king Gustav III to determine whether the honor for discovering oxygen belongs to the Englishman Joseph Priestley, the Swede Carl Wilhelm Scheele, or the Frenchman Antoine Laurent Lavoisier. The premium placed on priority in scientific discovery drives the action in both periods. As Djerassi puts it, "[T]he scientific Olympics only award gold medals and no silvers or bronzes" ("Contemporary"). The character chairing the Nobel committee, Astrid Rosenqvist, summarizes the situation in comparable terms: "Science is done by humans . . . humans are competitive . . . scientists are even more competitive . . . and they want to be rewarded for being first" (Djerassi and Hoffmann 109).

In both time periods, however, no decision is reached. Bickering among the three contenders at the Stockholm Challenge of 1777 leads King Gustav to refuse declaring a winner. Maneuvers among the retro-Nobel committee members lead them only to the verge of voting before the curtain drops. The three rival chemists themselves voice the controversy over assigning credit in this case:

PRIESTLEY: The question, sir! The question! Who made that air first?

SCHEELE: (*Much more insistent than before, to audience*) I did. And

future generations will affirm it.

PRIESTLEY: (*To audience*) But by the grace of God, I made it too . . . and

published first!

LAVOISIER: (*To audience*) They knew not what they'd done . . . where oxygen

would lead us. (89-90)

Or, as one of the Nobel committee members summarizes, “[W]e still haven’t agreed what ‘being first’ means: is it the initial discovery . . . the first publication . . . or full understanding?” (109).

Roald Hoffmann admits the jurying was so difficult that he and Djerassi wrote “nine endings” (qtd. in Rayl).

Lavoisier’s functional understanding of oxygen served as the driving force behind the modern Chemical Revolution. By stages he came to realize that something—phlogiston according to prevailing theory—was not released by combusted substances but added to them from atmospheric air, something that comprised one-sixth to one-fifth of air mass. Phlogiston adherents like Scheele and Priestley rationalized weight gain rather than loss in burned materials by supposing that phlogiston had negative mass (White 79). Lavoisier recognized this “eminently breathable air,” which he latter dubbed *oxygen* (literally, acid generator), to be a major component in atmospheric air along with nitrogen (Bell 103-04, 107). Further, he proceeded to follow the oxygen trail in sketching connections between respiration, combustion, perspiration, and nutrition (Poirier 300-10). His critical mapping of the constant interchanges between the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms was much more revealing than the phlogiston-exchange model ever could have been, and paved the way for discoveries in organic chemistry (311-15).

During the Stockholm Challenge, Lavoisier and his wife present a satiric masque in rhymed couplets, *The Victory of Vital Air over Phlogiston*. A foreword to *Oxygen* states that “Such a play, now lost, was actually staged by the Lavoisiers for their friends and patrons” (Djerassi and Hoffmann vi).

Though ostensibly offered as an amusement, it is clearly meant to unsettle Lavoisier's rivals. A kind of chemical *Mouse-trap*, it causes its targets to "overturn their chairs and rush off stage" (45).

As Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* dramatizes the threat posed to the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos by the Copernican system (itself further refined by the title character's telescopic discoveries), *Oxygen* stages a comparable paradigm change in chemistry. Classical—specifically, Aristotelian—authority had to be challenged in both cases.<sup>1</sup> In Edmund Blair Bolles's phrase, Lavoisier then proceeded to "purge chemistry of its alchemical names" (qtd. in White 102), devising a new parsable grammar that sought to do for chemistry what Linnaeus's system had done for biology (Bell 135). Further, his principle of the conservation of matter enabled an algebraic approach to the balancing of chemical equations (135). The Swedish committee member played by the same actor who portrays Lavoisier in this dual-role drama credits the Frenchman with Nobel-worthy achievement "by making chemists pay attention to the balance sheet of nature" (Djerassi and Hoffmann 93).

An astute reader will recognize in this play a dramatizing of Thomas Kuhn's argument from his landmark volume, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Just as adherents of the Ptolemaic model devised elaborate modifications to account for anomalous planetary motions, phlogiston advocates resorted to such ingenious notions as negative mass to explain weight gain in combustion. For Kuhn, such pretzel maneuvers indicate a theory in trouble. Lavoisier recognized the crisis, and so was able to see with new eyes as it were (Kuhn 56-57). Dismissing Priestley's outmoded conception and vocabulary, the fictional Lavoisier declares, "When a new structure is needed for a science . . . when indeed, there must be a revolution, new names are also required" (Djerassi and Hoffmann 76). The play's staging of the Stockholm Challenge in 1777 seems to second Kuhn's observation that "[w]hat Lavoisier announced in his papers from 1777 on was not so much the discovery of oxygen as the oxygen theory of combustion" (56).

The audience is to understand the far-reaching significance of oxygen's identification, not just glean interesting tidbits of chemical history. Snow had such superstructure in mind when he lamented that the literary camp does not appreciate "the scientific edifice of the physical world . . . in its intellectual depth, complexity, and articulation, the most beautiful and wonderful collective work of the mind of man" (*Two Cultures* 14). While he does criticize scientists for being "self-impooverished" (14) in their ignorance of the liberal arts, he spills much more ink chiding men of letters as Luddites. Further, he baldly asserts (much to Leavis's indignation) that scientific culture "contains a great deal of argument, usually much more rigorous, and almost always at a higher conceptual level, than literary persons' arguments" (*Two Cultures* 12).

As if to deflate this notion of consistently high-minded intellection, *Oxygen* juxtaposes the professional squabbles among the scientists in both centuries. One of the Nobel committee members, Ulf Svanholm, suspects that his fellow member Sune Kallstenius dragged his feet vetting Svanholm's article on oxygenated polymers in order to give Kallstenius's "Stanford pals in California" (Djerassi and Hoffmann 23) a chance to publish first. In an eighteenth-century parallel, Carl Scheele complains that his printer has unnecessarily delayed publication of his research (47-48). Likewise, Ulla Zorn, the committee's secretary—actually a graduate student in history working on the thesis topic, "Women in the lives of some 18<sup>th</sup> century chemists" (63)—scoops Bengt Hjalmarsson, the committee member doing research on Lavoisier, by uncovering a (fictive) letter from Mme. Lavoisier to her husband concerning Scheele's priority-establishing 1774 letter to him. Hjalmarsson is upset on several counts. Zorn is young, female, not in the sciences, and something of a plant by the committee's female chair, a theoretician with some sense of superiority over experimentalists, a fault Snow finds in pure scientists vis-à-vis engineers (*Two Cultures* 31-32). Elsewhere Hjalmarsson in turn suggests that chemists interested in the history of their field have simply passed their prime as cutting-edge researchers (Djerassi and Hoffmann 34). When another committee member admits

that chemistry students likely wouldn't know who Scheele was, Zorn replies that their professors may be to blame (50).

Djerassi and Hoffmann appear to be acknowledging that while the general public is behindhand in its science knowledge, scientists are in need of the perspectives offered by the backward-looking arts and humanities.<sup>2</sup> Those in the applied sciences, whose work tends to have an engineering thrust, are focused on specific contributions to the proverbial better tomorrow. The lab as incubator of the future, however, does not offer a wide enough field of view to assess the value and impact of the technical innovations being produced. Its hothouse atmosphere is like that of the sauna in which Mrs. Priestley, Mme. Lavoisier, and Fru Pohl (Scheele's future wife) try to sweat information about the rival chemists' activities out of one another.<sup>3</sup> Claims that in an increasingly specialized world scientists must simply tend to their business and leave implementation to other professionals—technocrats, product developers—lead to counterclaims that scientific neutrality is a convenient buck-passing license. Brecht's post-nuclear version of *Galileo* has his self-denouncing protagonist predicting disastrous consequences should scientists pursue their work in a moral vacuum: "Should you, then, in time, discover all there is to be discovered, your progress must become a progress away from the bulk of humanity. The gulf might even grow so wide that the sound of your cheering at some new achievement would be echoed by a universal howl of horror" (124).

The social, economic, and political arenas surrounding the objective methodology of science link *Oxygen's* proceedings in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. For instance, in both eras institutions exist for disseminating and time-stamping research results. Lavoisier benefited from membership in a national academy of science (as did Priestley in England) that placed him in diverse intellectual company—mathematical in particular—and kept him reporting results in ways that required careful formulation of his arguments and reasonable scrupulousness in data marshaling (Holmes 500-01). Further, his considerable revenue as a royal tax collector afforded him his

expensive research agenda as a chemist. Scheele and Priestley, on the other hand, were relatively impecunious, anticipating modern scientists who fret about and scramble for funding. The play's foreword draws a further neat contrast between Priestley and Lavoisier: "Lavoisier, the chemical revolutionary, is a political conservative, who loses his life in the Jacobin terror. Priestley, the political radical who is hounded out of England for his support of the French revolution, is a chemical conservative" (vi). So the architect of the Chemical Revolution falls victim to the French Revolution, his magnificent brain severed from the oxygenating apparatus of heart and lungs.

In an ironic echo of its content, privileged professional ties and funding aided the very publication and staging of *Oxygen*. Djerassi and Hoffmann leveraged their standing as chemists to get the science publisher Wiley to print the play before it had even been staged, an extraordinary reversal of the usual sequence (Djerassi, "When" 100). Suzanne Lynch, in reviewing a London performance of the play, pointed out that production funding for *Oxygen* from such corporations as Dow and Pfizer might well rankle those who see no such support for the vast majority of talented playwrights (qtd. in Shepherd-Barr 195). The humanities/science divide that Snow warned against and that Carl Djerassi tried to bridge reasserts itself under such real-world circumstances (182).

Market forces play a prominent role in Shelagh Stephenson's *An Experiment with an Air Pump*. Ellen, a scientist associated with the Human Genome Project in want of research funding, considers a lucrative offer from a biotech company that is developing fetal test kits. The discriminatory uses to which insurance and finance companies might put such genetic data worries her husband Tom, a laid-off lecturer in English. In this brave new world of human engineering, the humanities only seem to offer qualms in the face of progressive technological solutions.

The play's two time settings—1799 and 1999—are close to those of *Oxygen*, which debuted three years later. Both plays consider Enlightenment values on the verge of millennial upheaval. Stephenson's eighteenth-century scientist, Joseph Fenwick, seems to owe his political radicalism to Joseph Priestley, though Fenwick's salty language might have shocked the Nonconformist minister.

The riot over food prices that rages in the play's background does not bother Fenwick, who considers himself a friend of the people; conversely, a mob outraged by Priestley's religious dissent and revolutionary sympathies burned his house in Birmingham (White 99). An optimist for most of the play, Fenwick looks to science to enlighten the uneducated and oppressed regarding right order in the natural and political realms. One might speak of sweeping change in pneumatic terms here, as Priestley did when lowering at an outmoded English regime (Costello 665-67). At times, though, Fenwick's vision of the road to New Jerusalem interspersed with the best modern bridges seems only slightly less naïve than his daughter Harriet's hymn to furnaces, iron, and chimneys, capped by her steam-belching bonnet (Stephenson 153, 178, 198, 209). Snow peddles a complementary gloss of the times in the blanket assertion, "[N]o one should feel it seriously possible to talk about a pre-industrial Eden, from which our ancestors were, by the wicked machinations of applied science, brutally expelled" (*Second Look* 83-84). However, after the mysterious death of a servant girl who, in his democratic idealism (or conceit), Fenwick considers part of the family, history no longer appears such a certain march of progress.

The play begins with a tableau vivant based on Joseph Wright's painting, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768). Stephenson freely adapts the picture to her dramatic purposes. Of the two plays under consideration, *Air Pump* is the more fictive. Peter Mark Roget, later to become the *Thesaurus* Roget, is the only historical figure. He and other characters—four of whom are doubled with counterparts, as in *Oxygen*—give voice to viewpoints arranged along a spectrum from cold rationalism to heated emotion. Thus, Claudia Barnett detects Brechtian epic theater in the weave, with its emphasis on the struggle of ideas in the sociopolitical marketplace (218).

Fenwick himself presents a mixed case. A balanced Englishman rather than an extreme French philosophe in epistemology, he refuses to idolize reason or the scientific method as "pure objectivity" (Stephenson 182): "When we conduct an experiment we bring to bear on it all our human frailties, and all our prejudices, much as we might wish it to be otherwise. I like to think that

good science requires us to utilise every aspect of ourselves in pursuit of truth. And sometimes the heart comes into it” (182). Hearing his own words, he realizes that he needs to make up with his wife, Susannah, whom he curtly dismissed moments earlier. The heart as blood pump, emotive center, or at least symbol of sympathy, underlies the title image of air pump. Susannah justly complains that her democratic husband has regard for everyone but herself. In her frustration she has resorted to strong drink and verbal sniping.

An instance of thorough heartlessness, the young physician Thomas Armstrong has taken up temporary residence in the household. Claudia Barnett rightly pegs him as “a Jacobean villain” (221). He epitomizes scientific inhumanity in his perverse pursuit of Isobel Bridie, a Scotch servant with a twisted spine. Though his seduction seems to have an erotic component—“D’you know the first time I saw it [her back] I got an erection?” (Stephenson 220)—his attraction is finally that of the probing, invasive scientist. Bedding Isobel would give him a chance to explore her deformity “in all its delicious, twisted glory” (220). But what he really wants is to dissect this abnormal specimen.

Paired with Armstrong as a kind of good-twin figure, Peter Mark Roget assists Fenwick in finding a speaker for the New Year’s lecture to the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society. While also a budding physician and scientist, Roget displays a deep-seated, compulsive interest in the systematic cataloguing of words. He shares this verbal penchant with Isobel, and draws on it when reviling Armstrong in a manner worthy of a thesaurus maker: “You are amoral, corrupt and depraved. You are cruel, heartless, mean-spirited, barbarous. You are treacherous, despicable, and vilely contemptible. You are a low-down seducer. You’re a cunt, Armstrong. A complete and utter cunt.” (221). In a country renowned for flyting and the Shakespearean curse, Roget concludes with a term of long Anglo standing.

The object of Armstrong’s project is a bright, articulate young woman thoroughly inexperienced in the wiles of young men. In the absurd “hymn to progress” (150) staged by Fenwick’s twin daughters, the conscripted Isobel appears as a sheep—sacrificial, as Stephenson’s drama reveals. Having given her heart away the very first time to a plausible scoundrel, she



overhears him boasting of his exploit and hangs herself, seemingly destined for a loveless existence. She still has a pulse when Armstrong cuts her down, but he proceeds to smother her, intent on gaining access to her corpse. So, unlike the air-deprived dove or birdie at play's start, Isobel Bridie does not fly free of the cruel experiment that entraps her. Rather, she dies of asphyxiation in airless environs, choked by a noose of tightening circumstance. Armstrong pockets her incriminating suicide note and presumably participates in the grave-robbing dissection that follows.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier in the play, Fenwick voices a prediction of eventual scientific progress over the human "frailties" and "prejudices" that by his own admission enter into the research process (182). The thinking seems to be that fallible individuals contribute to a collectively honed body of knowledge that in turn renders its inheritors less prone to fallacy: "By the end of the nineteenth century everyone will understand how the world works. By the end of the following century, if you can imagine that far, every man or woman in the street will understand more than we can ever dream of. . . . Magic and superstition won't come into it" (180). At play's end, standing over Isobel's coffin, he admits, "The future looks less benign now, Isobel. We're a little more frightened than we were" (231). The Enlightenment form of millennial confidence—countered at the time by satiric and philosophical warnings against incipient scientism—does not carry the day, much less the century. In fact, Fenwick's subdued outlook qualifies both of the play's fin-de-siècle celebrations.

Exhibiting good Neoclassical form, *Air Pump*, like *Oxygen*, connects its two time periods through parallelism and counterpoint. The latter is mainly achieved through gender role reversal. For example, in Irene Backalerick's words, "The neglected wife of 1799 becomes the hard-edged scientist [ . . . ] of 1999" (qtd. in Barnett 214). Likewise, the scientist of 1799, Joseph, becomes the inconsequential-feeling husband of 1999, Tom. While she consults him, it is his wife Ellen's decision whether to take a job with a biotech company and to sell the inherited country house in which scientists such as Fenwick and Lavoisier once met.<sup>5</sup> At forty, she is the upwardly mobile partner, while fifty-five-year-old Tom seems destined for an unwanted early retirement. Those familiar with Snow may recall this jab: "[Y]oung scientists know that with an indifferent degree they'll get a

comfortable job, while their contemporaries and counterparts in English or History will be lucky to earn 60 per cent as much” (*Two Cultures* 18). Armstrong’s equivalent in the play’s present, twenty-five-year-old Kate, recruits Ellen for the job with an assurance based on deficient moral imagination. Life is a cut-and-dried proposition for her. The actor who plays Armstrong, however, doubles as the inspecting contractor Phil in 1999. Unlike his predecessor, this lapsed Catholic has a surfeit of imagination and heart. His superstitious nature belies Fenwick’s prediction of an eminently rational future (Stephenson 180).

In the first act, Tom comes in from the garden and says, “I was just getting some air” (184). This apparent throwaway line resonates in the play’s bell-jar atmosphere. He brings cuttings from heritage bushes, including roses, hoping to preserve more natural strains that have largely been replaced by hybrids. If the sale goes through, the company buying the house will use it for “Corporate hospitality” (163). In place of authentic heritage, this business concern will gin up a commercial “heritage trail” experience (163). Tom foresees the garden being replaced by a parking lot. Compounding the gloomy vision of things to come is a discovery from the house’s past: a skeleton in the closet, or, more accurately, a partial skeleton under the extended kitchen, formerly part of the garden. Tom takes this macabre finding to heart, semiconsciously connecting it with the embryos that Ellen will be using to enable predictive fetal testing. Like these in-vitro-fertilization leftovers that would otherwise be discarded, Tom himself is redundant. He can’t understand how Ellen, who has experienced multiple miscarriages, could treat these seeded human eggs as so much lab material.

It is the men in the play’s present who voice such sensitivities. Phil, for all his urban-legend credulity, comes across as a good bloke who champions the value of human life, including the damaged variety—a vestige, likely, of his Catholicism. The fact that his manic-depressive Uncle Stan finally killed himself is no argument with Phil for preemptive strikes, whether abortion or treatment in the womb: “You never met him. You don’t know what went on in his life, or what things meant to him” (173). Tom later squares off with Ellen and Kate along similar lines: “James Joyce probably

had a schizophrenia gene, his daughter certainly did. It's a continuum, at one end you get poetry and at the other confusion . . ." (225). Just so, at the constructive end of obsessive-compulsive disorder you might get a thesaurus. Unfortunately, such sympathetic protests can sound merely anecdotal, regressive, and fuzzily righteous. Leavis comments trenchantly on the disadvantaged position from which humanists register dissent: "The upshot is that if you insist on the need for any other kind of concern, entailing forethought, action and provision, about the human future—any other kind of misgiving—than that which talks in terms of productivity, material standards of living, hygienic and technological progress, then you are a Luddite" (38). Or as Ellen bluntly puts it, "All you have is moral principles, Tom. You don't have any solutions" (Stephenson 189).

Despite this comeback, Ellen is not as steely as her younger colleague, Kate. Roughly speaking, she plays Roget to Kate's Armstrong. It is Kate who correctly identifies the skeleton as a product of dissection. As with a choice corpse in 1799—"meat" to Armstrong—a "fourteen-day-old bunch of cells" for Kate is too opportune to waste (206, 171). Ellen too has no problem working with what Kate euphemistically calls "pre-embryos" (171), though she does refer to unspecified "qualms about the job" (186). Still, they are not serious enough to keep her from taking it. In the play's exchanges over scientific pursuit and its applications, Ellen seems to lean toward the former interest. When explaining her motives for accepting the offer, she speaks of how "exciting" and "sexy" the work is, how "It makes me fizz inside" like "a form of rapture" (222, 223). This language recalls a comment of Robert Oppenheimer's: "When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb" (qtd. in Dyson 78). Soon after Tom draws a parallel between this pressing biochemical project and the Manhattan Project, Ellen confirms the sense of compulsion by stating, "You can't not pursue something" (224). Technical sweetness aside, a race between nations to be the first with nuclear weapons is followed several generations later by a more laudable, collaborative effort to map the human genome, though commercial interests drive

the project's applications. And given cultural developments, more women like Ellen and Kate participate in the effort.

Regarding the drama's unsimple feminism, Claudia Barnett writes, "The point of the play is not to make women look good but to make them question what it means to be good" (214). In this sense it extends a track laid down by *Top Girls* (1982), Caryl Churchill's Thatcher-era treatment of women's relations in an arenalike economy. Here, though, the two modern women are better equipped to deal with the culture's trajectory than the men are. Kate goes so far as to call Tom a "dinosaur" (Stephenson 225), that lumbering species rendered extinct by rapid greenhouse-effect climate change. She herself, by contrast, is "hooked on the future" (224); in Snow's phrase, as a true scientist she has "the future in [her] bones" (*Two Cultures* 10). While Stephenson portrays callous, even murderous, male conduct in 1799, she suggests that in present times scientific amorality posing as professional neutrality is more of an equal-opportunity pitfall. In the short term, for instance, before fetal gene therapy can catch up with fetal diagnostics, Kate clearly implies that the Uncle Stans of the world would be better off aborted (Stephenson 173). If human perfectibility is the goal, flawed genetic outliers must step aside.

Tom's skeptical attitude toward scientific salvation—"the Messiah's not coming" (225)—seems validated to some degree by the scarcity of major breakthrough treatments to date. Even in cases of one-to-one correspondence between genetic defects and maladies, lab-to-market progress has been incremental. But if the eugenic future is running behind schedule, the human dinosaurs who lumber feelingly through life gain some breathing space. These backward-looking verbal types—sensitive to affinities between words, persons, generations—may have more principles than solutions, but the latter can turn out to be specious, or even dreadful in effect. At play's end Susannah and Joseph Fenwick have trouble telling whether the crowd outside is "rioting or celebrating" (231). Likewise, technological forces at large tend to leave the modern citizen unsure whether to raise a glass or barricade the windows and doors.

In *Air Pump* the scientist Ellen asserts, “Once you know something, you can’t unknow it” (224). Reams of lost knowledge aside, this claim argues for a kind of inevitability to the progressive scientific endeavor. That project has accelerated with the aid of math’s universal language. Gillian Beer writes tellingly on this development:

[T]he mathematicization of scientific knowledge . . . has speeded up communication between scientists to a startling degree, as if the Tower of Babel had been built in a day once the workers found a common discourse. The admonitory force of the story of Babel has swung, for many, to suggest that perhaps after all the barriers of language were heuristically benign, slowing the pace at which knowledge can be acquired so as to give time for sensibility to catch up. (321-22)

For this reason, the gap between STEM initiates and everyone else is only likely to widen over time. The STEM movement itself replays the Cold-War anxieties that gave rise to the Snow-Leavis debate: instead of chasing Sputnik, however, the American establishment is racing to maintain the lead in cyber offense/defense, biotech, and energy development. Another of Snow’s critics, Michael Yudkin, foresaw that the two-cultures dilemma might resolve itself with the ascendance of science and marginalization of the humanities (64), a prescient surmise. The recent inclusion of arts in the science/math push, converting STEM to STEAM, seems to cast creativity in a supporting role, seconding the main agenda of hi-tech acceleration.<sup>6</sup> Speaking for beleaguered humanists everywhere, Tom puts it this way: “Yeah, well, we look around, us dinosaurs, and we know we’re old and tired, a bit cynical, a bit ironic, but we know the score, we can see the arc of things. We’ve seen things come and go. And one thing we know is that the Messiah’s not coming. We know that much.” (Stephenson 225).

Across the aisle, Carl Djerassi has this to say about the forming of the modern, university-housed scientist: “As we learn to cope with the constant jockeying with colleagues and competitors over position and priorities, the order of the authors, the choice of the journal, the quest for the grail

of academic tenure—even Nobel lust, that most exalted failing of the great—we learn how the game is played by people in white coats, speaking an impenetrable jargon, but people all the same” (“Contemporary”). Beyond the individual career, though, the collective effort can produce a solution↔problem cycle that cascades like a feedback loop. To fix its technologically induced problems, society pins its hopes on other technologies. The better tomorrow seems just in reach, but never quite arrives as advertised.

So there still must remain seats at the table for broadly educated critics and artists. Creative writers with a general knowledge of the sciences will be challenged to convey the human interest along increasingly technical fronts, seeking metaphoric resonance in seemingly discrete arcana. Playwrights at their most cogently playful will stage dramas in which common and recondite human pursuits can intimate to audiences the latest news of their kind.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lavoisier acquired a reputation for chemical myth-busting that extended beyond the phlogiston chimera. In 1774 he announced to the French Academy that atmospheric air is not an element but a mixture or compound; having staked this claim, he identified the main components three years later (Poirier 78, 104). Then in 1783 he made a comparable preemptive claim about water, successfully decomposing and recomposing it by 1785 (150-51). He thereby made a name for himself by debunking two of the four Aristotelian elements. Madison Smartt Bell credits him with decomposing a third classical element, earth (117), presumably because he, unlike Scheele and Priestley, realized that he was working with compound metallic oxides.

<sup>2</sup>Of course, such fields as paleontology, geology, evolutionary biology, paleoclimatology, and astrophysics do concern themselves with the long past. The humanities take a shorter view of human culture, but aren't as prone as research science to the positivist attitude that history is a site of error or less accurate knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>The play's approach to the chemists through the women is quite deliberate (Djerassi, "Contemporary"). Women traditionally have had even less access to careers in science than they have in the arts. Marie Lavoisier presents something of an exception, as she served as her husband's secretary, illustrator, and sometime lab assistant. In atomic terms, though close to the core of research, she still spun like a low-orbit electron around it. The fact that science in the West has long been the privileged domain of Euro-American males indicates a traditional exclusiveness contributing to its cultural insularity.

<sup>4</sup>A year before this fictive crime, William Wordsworth had written: "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect" ("The Tables Turned," ll. 26-28). Armstrong's acts are a grossly literal fulfillment of this warning.

<sup>5</sup>I have not come across any evidence that Lavoisier ever visited England.

<sup>6</sup>Both arts and sciences, though, are supported to the degree that they serve the perceived greater economic good. Hence, liberal humanities scholars and climate-change researchers have found themselves under attack as wrongheaded obstructionists.



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# The Wounded Warrior: White Masculinity and the Displacement of Counterculture in *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Forrest Gump*

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*By Mikki Galliher*

During the first half of the 1990s both *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Forrest Gump* garnered critical and popular success. Both films won multiple Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director in their respective years. Further, both films depict the lives of Vietnam veterans. Despite these similarities in films, the two films set their protagonists, Ron Kovic and Forrest Gump, on nearly opposite trajectories. Based on Ron Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July* is a decidedly anti-war movie that follows its protagonist's evolution from innocent youth dreaming of fame and country, to wounded soldier, and finally to outspoken, long-haired, anti-war activist. In contrast, *Forrest Gump* portrays a protagonist who overcomes childhood disability to find success as an athlete, soldier, entrepreneur, and single father all the while remaining stubbornly unchanged down to his crew-cut and blue gingham shirt. Nevertheless, both of these films utilize disability as a symbolic act of marking that works to overshadow the struggles of racial minorities and re-center the white male as the dominant figure of power.

In discussions of identity politics, one commonly held starting point is that white masculinity in the United States has historically maintained a privileged position through its invisibility—meaning its unmarked status. Whiteness and maleness are typically considered the default or “normal condition,” and thus these categories become the measure

by which all persons' normalcy and value are measured, and those who are categorized as "not normal" by reason of their gender, race, or other differences are deemed lacking in some fundamental quality. They are "marked" by their differences and shut off from access to power. Thus, white patriarchal society has been able to maintain its cultural hegemony (Robinson 1-2). However, according to Sally Robinson in her book *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, the countercultural movements of the 1960s sparked an adaptation in the maintenance of white patriarchal power. The identity politics of this decade—politics that exposed the oppressive nature of racism and sexism—presented a crisis in white masculine identity. Robinson writes, "From the late sixties to the present dominant masculinity appears to have suffered one crisis after another" (5). In response to this imagined trauma, which is truly no more than the rest of society holding a mirror to white patriarchy, the white male hegemonic machine has found advantage in marking its constituents as victims, and according to Robinson, "white masculinity most fully represents itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body" (6). This casting of the white male as victim pushes aside the true victims of patriarchal oppression and substitutes the white male. While typically these representations take the form of discussing the abstract concept of disempowerment with metaphors of bodily injury, in both *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Forrest Gump*, the films utilize actual disability of the white male protagonist and other white male characters to displace the racial minorities.

Almost immediately after its release in late 1989, *Born on the Fourth of July* was recognized for its unflinching realism and anti-war message. The film concentrates all of Kovic's Vietnam War experience into a mere seventeen minutes, but in that seventeen minutes, the audience witnesses Kovic participate in the slaughter of a village full of women

and children, accidentally kill his comrade during a confusing battle, become seriously injured in an ambush, and receive last rights in a field hospital filled with critically wounded soldiers. The images are truly horrific and certainly do not inspire the blind nationalism of earlier war propaganda and films of which both the director, Oliver Stone, and Kovic are so critical. Despite the power of these scenes, the film gains most of its anti-war persuasive power through the audience's identification with Kovic as he experiences the anticipation of glory, the actual reality of war, and the bitter backlash of his reception at home.

Nevertheless, this strong anti-war message comes at a significant cost: the near obliteration of the civil rights message. When Kovic returns to the U.S., he is sent to recover in the Bronx V.A. hospital. Ron's experiences at this hospital are simultaneously some of the most gut-wrenching scenes in the film as well some of the most problematic. The hospital is disgusting. Disabled soldiers are confined to their beds without even privacy curtains. Patients throw food at large rats on the floor to keep them away. Vomit, urine, and fecal matter splatter the floor at various points this portion of the film. Patients lay in their own excrement for hours and are cleaned unceremoniously with water hoses and given enemas with questionably sanitized equipment, while their bedpans are hosed out and hung on a nearby wall. Faulty medical equipment such as catheters and pumps endanger patients' health, and patients have time to die and turn grey and rigid before the staff members even notice. Presiding over all this squalor is a staff that is almost entirely composed of black orderlies and nurses. When the film transitions to the hospital, in the span of less than a minute the viewer witnesses an orderly who is looking for help replacing a defective catheter for a patient whose urine is "backing up into his kidneys." The orderly finds a group of four other black orderlies who are smoking and playing cards. After the

concerned orderly has explained the situation to the group, their leader states, “I’ll be there when I get there. Give me a fucking break.” Immediately following this encounter, another orderly, finds two more hospital employees shooting heroin in a broom closet. In these mere minutes the mostly black staff is set at odds against the maimed and crippled veterans, who are, with very few exceptions, white. Thus, the oppression of the white soldiers dominates every scene and overshadows the very real struggles of minorities taking place during the time period of the film’s setting.

Stone does make some effort during this portion of the film to introduce the civil rights movement into the narrative. Willie, one of the few positively portrayed orderlies in the film, discusses the issue of racial inequality with Kovic during a physical therapy session:

You one crazy Marine, Kovic. You so gung ho and everything, but you don’t know shit about what’s going on in this country...I’m serious, man, it ain’t about burning the flag and Vietnam, man. While we fighting for rights over there, we ain’t got rights at home...It’s about Detroit and Newark, Man. It’s about racism, man. It’s about you can’t get no job at home. It’s a white man’s war . . . There’s a revolution going on, Kovic. If you’re not a part of the solution, you’re a part of the problem.

While Willie’s sentiments should seem reasonable given his position as a working class black man, in the context of the film, they are undercut because as an able-bodied man, he holds considerable power over the patients he assists, and his words seem self-centered and unempathetic given Kovic’s physical and emotional vulnerability at that time. Thus, the reasonable argument is muted by its context and made to appear trivial and unimportant in the face of the suffering endured by the patients.

The discussion of racial inequality is further undercut a mere six minutes later in the film after Kovic falls, suffers a compound fracture of his femur, and is put in traction for three months. The scene opens with Kovic hanging face down in a traction bed looking at his own vomit on the floor. The viewer hears Kovic's desperate cries for help as he repeatedly presses the nurse call button. By the time nurse Washington arrives, Kovic is frantic. He feels that there is something seriously wrong and demands to see a doctor, but Nurse Washington scolds him for raising his voice to her. The situation escalates as Kovic, Nurse Washington, and an orderly named Marvin begin a heated argument. The nurse and orderly even physically threaten Kovic, who is not only paralyzed but also strapped helplessly to a bed. Finally, Kovic yells, "I want to be treated like a human being. I fought for my country. I am a Vietnam Veteran. I deserve to be treated decent." Marvin replies, "Vietnam don't mean nothing to me, man, or any of these other people." In this moment, Kovic assumes fully the marked position of the Other. This shift in focus is particularly marked by his declaration that he is "a human being." Kovic's claim echoes the rallying cry of the black sanitation workers of Memphis, who in the same year as Kovic's injury and rehabilitation declared: "I am a man." In the context of the film, Kovic's statement pushes aside the earlier statements about the life-threatening realities faced by blacks in the U.S. and replaces that narrative with his own suffering. He is an unquestionable victim while the black nurse and orderly, along with the civil rights movement that represents them becomes pushed to the periphery and replaced with the victimized white male. The film never once returns the issue of racial inequality. Its sole focus is on the injustice of war and the suffering of the Vietnam veteran—a victim cast almost exclusively as white and male.

While *Born on the Fourth of July* is at heart an anti-war movie, *Forrest Gump* is a more conservative film that ultimately paints an ambivalent view towards war as the film simultaneously dismantles the potency of the civil rights movement's call for equality. Forrest, like Ron, naively joins the military and serves in the Vietnam War effort. The horror of war is portrayed in the brief Vietnam sequence in the film, a sequence that includes soldiers wading through and sleeping in mud; the death of Forrest's best friend, Bubba; and the loss of Lt. Dan Taylor's legs. However, Forrest's attitude toward the military and his opinion of the war are left murky. The viewer experiences the film through Forrest's first-person point of view, a point of view that Forrest's mental disability and childlike simplicity invite the viewer to accept with little question. Unlike *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Forrest Gump* stops short of a full condemnation of the American military or even war in general. War is definitively a horrific experience for Forrest, but the viewer never hears Forrest explicitly renounce the war. In one of the most famous scenes of the film, Forrest, who is unwittingly led to speak at a large anti-war demonstration, is entirely muted during his speech because of an equipment malfunction. This muting as well as Forrest's lack of complete understanding of the situation and the humor that arises from it, undercuts any anti-war message that Forrest might contribute. Additionally, Ron's experiences in the field hospital and the subsequent challenges he experiences in the Bronx V.A. Hospital depict a military that has largely used up and cast aside its war veterans, while Forrest's experiences are more sanitized. In contrast to Ron's paralysis, Forrest is merely shot in the buttock and suffers only minor injury. His rehabilitation takes place in a pristine facility where he can play ping pong and eat ice cream all day. Forrest does not experience discrimination based upon his status as a veteran until he meets Jenny at a demonstration in Washington D.C.,



and this discrimination based on his veteran status is a mere fraction of the film. Thus, while *Born on the Fourth of July* condemns the government and embraces the anti-war counter culture for which Ron eventually becomes a spokesperson, *Forrest Gump* embraces the government and trivializes the anti-war movement as merely movement that, in Forrest's words, likes to "use the F-word a lot" and which has no real connection to or understanding of the war and the men who have served in it.

In addition to the rejection of the counter-cultural peace movement, *Forrest Gump* displaces suffering of racial minorities and generally disavows the reality of mainstream racism. This approach is a more subtle rejection of the civil rights movement than the blatant racist stereotypes in *Born on the Forth of July*. Robert Zemeckis, the director of *Forrest Gump*, uses several strategies to accomplish this feat. First, although both Forrest and Lt. Dan face repeated bullying and discrimination due to their disabilities (childhood bullying, denial of educational access, homelessness, etc...) depictions of racism are depicted only during the segments of the film that are set in the 1960's. Civil unrest is noticeably absent from the depictions of later decades. Jennifer Hyland Wang notes that this fact leads the audience to believe that racism is a thing of previous generations or merely on the fringes of society represented by George Wallace and the Black Panthers. Thus, the film implies that "New Man," embodied in Forrest, has already overcome this racism (98).

The earliest mention of racial conflict arrives early in the film and occurs during Forrest's discussion of his namesake, General Nathan Bedford Forrest," respected" Confederate general and one of the founding members of the Klu Klux Klan. In describing his name sake, Forrest's profound misunderstanding of the Klan as a silly organization in

which people “dress up as spooks or something” deeply undercuts the serious threat of the clan, particularly in the South during Forrest’s life time. The clan was responsible for multiple acts of terrorism including multiple lynchings, murders, and bombings, including the Birmingham church bombing which killed four little girls. Further, Forrest’s comments accompany scenes from the famous film *Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed the Clan as heroic defenders of traditional values, southern culture, and ladies’ virtue. Such an inclusion of this scene in which actors donning full clan regalia heroically positioned on horseback seems particularly irresponsible of the film makers.

The film also manipulates historical news footage to displace the civil rights movement. In one famous scene, Forrest appears within actual video footage of the Stand at the Schoolhouse Door between Governor George Wallace and black student Vivian Malone. Forrest, oblivious to the racial tension in the encounter, sees that Vivian has dropped her notebook and he returns it to her as the film merges with the black and white footage of the momentous encounter. The scene ends with Forrest squarely in the center of the frame. Forrest’s presence and dominance in this scene displaces that of Vivian and thus marginalizes the importance of the moment in Black history.

Similarly, the film’s inclusion of historical assassinations and assassination attempts uses news footage to reinforce the position of white patriarchy and deny the existence of terror acts committed by white supremacists. News footage accompanies Forrest’s description of multiple assassinations and assassination attempts: JFK, George Wallace, John Lennon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan. According to Byers, these men, who are gunned down for no apparent reason, “are all equalized as victims of lunatics. . . all of their actions as well as their disagreements . . . disappear in the face of their status as targets—and

as wounded patriarchs” (427). All of the men, with the exception of John Lennon are either sitting presidents or presidential candidates, thus they are “Fathers or aspiring fathers of our nation. Even John Lennon is cast first and foremost as a father since he was gunned down on his way to see his child. The inclusion of the assassination of these white, father figures leads the audience to see threats to white patriarchal order as malevolent forces of chaos” (Byers 427). Further, the conspicuous omission of both MLK and Malcom X’s assassination completely camouflages and trivializes the dangers of racially motivated violence and terrorism (Byers 428).

The dichotomy of Forrest’s interactions with the unnamed Black Panther and Bubba further undermines the actual nature of racial inequality. Bubba is innocent and soft-spoken; he never mentions racism, discrimination, or his rights. Bubba’s behaviors contrast sharply with those of the Black Panther Forrest meets at an anti-war demonstration. Byers writes, that the activists’ rhetoric is reduced to “aggressive, irritating background noise to Jenny’s, anti-war activist boyfriend inflicts on her” (431). The visual representation of the Black Panther and his headquarters also codes the organization as a gang complete with assault weapons and walls strewn with graffiti. The film reveals that “the good Blackman’s soft-spoken a political friend to whites who dies for America; the band ones are the violent loud mouths who refuse to do this, and whose oppositions is coded as criminality” (Byers 431). The relationship with Bubba is particularly problematic in that after Bubba’s death early in the film, his position as Forrest’s best friend and spiritual brother is replaced by Lt. Dan Taylor, a disabled white veteran. The attention that the audience would have paid to discrimination against Bubba is now directed toward Lt. Dan and his quest for wholeness.

The audience is literally ushered away from the reality of racial oppression to focus on the victimhood of the white man.

The scenes that revolve around Bubba's mother further reinforce this dichotomy and deemphasize the problems of racism. As Forrest discusses Bubba's mother and her ancestry, the audience watches a long string of black women cooking dinner for rich, white women. This chain of subservience stretches all the way back to the times of slavery. However, after Forrest begins making profits from Bubba Gump Shrimp and sending "Bubba's portion" to his mother, Bubba's mother is able to achieve her dream of prosperity and hire a white serving woman. According to Wang, this scene indicates that racism is not a significant cause for poverty. Rather, Bubba's mother is rewarded because of her son's entrepreneurial dream that drives Forrest's economic success (100). The filmmaker's would have us believe that wealth is earned by those able to articulate and maintain a vision. However, it does not question the difficulty that Bubba or any of his family would have had accumulating enough money or obtaining a large enough loan to actually purchase a shrimping boat on his own as a black man in the South.

While both *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Forrest Gump* have earned a lasting place on our cultural heritage, neither film satisfactorily wrestles with the racial inequality of our society. In fact, both films displace the suffering of minorities in order to focus on restoring and maintaining the patriarchal authority of their white, male protagonists. While there is much to admire in each film, there is also much to question.

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# Dying and Death in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: A Thanatological Perspective

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*By John J. Han*

## **Introduction**

Many characters in O'Connor's stories end up dying, sometimes in cold-hearted and blunt ways. Considering that the author's father died of lupus when she was only fifteen, and that she was diagnosed with the same disease at twenty-five and died of it at thirty-nine, she was likely preoccupied with death and dying. As a woman of firm Catholic faith, she adopted a highly religious view of the world and lived her short life seemingly without losing hope for a better life beyond the grave. As a result, she offers a generally impassive view of mortality in her own stories.

O'Connor scholars have debated the issue of death and dying in her fiction mostly in terms of the author's theological vision or of the Southern Gothic. Embracing the author's own explanation, many critics, such as Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, justify O'Connor's pervasive use of fictional violence based on theological grounds. Baumgaertner writes,

[O'Connor's] characters show extraordinary initiative and ingenuity in finding ways to avoid confronting their frailties, the chief of which is their own mortality. It is often only when a character smacks flat up against death that the necessity of salvation is finally apparent. That is why so many of O'Connor's stories reach a violent climax, forcing the characters to see grace in a new and terrible way. (26).

Other critics view the violence in O'Connor's fiction as part of the Southern Gothic tradition which is characterized by the macabre and grotesque. For instance, in "The Evolution of Southern Gothic," contemporary Southern Gothic novelist Jamie Kornegay notes,

Aristocratic Southern society, in its post-bellum heyday, erected a [...] façade of gentility and custom to hide the way people really lived. Southern writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Tennessee Williams contrasted these customs with grotesque caricatures and shocking imagery to amplify the contradictions of Southern society.

Indeed, many of the discussions of O'Connor's fiction revolve around her religious vision as related to violent deaths in her stories. Departing from the current scholarship, this essay pursues death and dying in O'Connor's fiction from the perspective of modern thanatology, the psychiatric study of death, dying, and bereavement that became popular with the publication of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's landmark work *On Death and Dying* (1969).<sup>1</sup> "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," "The Displaced Person," "Judgment Day," and "Wildcat" are the primary texts for this discussion. Although many deaths happen quickly in her fiction and O'Connor does not describe death scenes in detail, her fiction shows that she had some knowledge of the process of dying, as discovered by thanatologists of the twentieth century. O'Connor's work also can serve as a good source for understanding the psychological aspects of death, dying, and bereavement.

### **Pre-Death Visions: “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”**

Clinical observations indicate that dying patients sometimes have departing visions (or deathbed visions) in which they communicate with their loved ones or spiritual beings. The visions include “glimpses of another world and those waiting in it” (Callahan and Kelley 14). In O’Connor’s fiction, the moment of death can be preceded by some kind of vision. A case in point is the General in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” who has a succession of visions in his final moments on this earth. At the beginning of his granddaughter’s graduation ceremony, he starts to imagine he has a hole on his head, which seems to suggest that he has some type of hallucinatory experience. The music that is being played seems to seep into his mind through this hole. He sees distorted images of the procession; the black robes of the graduating students seem like cloaks of darkness. He gets angry at others around him because no one seems to listen to him. Then, he sees images of his deceased wife, mother, and son, all of whom he has forgotten for many years: “He saw his wife’s narrow face looking at him critically through her round gold-rimmed glasses; he saw one of his squinting bald-headed sons; and his mother ran toward him with an anxious look. [...]” (O’Connor, *CS* 143).

After he sees these visions, everything slowly starts to go dark, which is a prelude to his death. There are different theories on how deathbed visions take place,<sup>2</sup> but many hospice professionals hear their terminally ill patients say that they are seeing visions of loved ones or spiritual beings. Those figures, whom other people cannot see, typically appear to “take them home,” and patients are comforted by them (Mendoza). O’Connor’s



text does not explicitly say the General is comforted by his visions, but the appearance of deceased family members preceding his death can be explained in clinical terms.

### **Comfort on the Deathbed: “The Displaced Person”**

Many dying patients feel isolated, bewildered, anxious, or distressed. In hospice care, it is considered an act of compassion to stay with them and comfort them to the end. As hospice nurses Maggie Callahan and Patricia Kelley note, “By trying to understand, and therefore participate more fully in the events of dying, families and friends can gain comfort, as well as important knowledge about what the experience of dying is like and what is needed to achieve a peaceful death. [...] Many [dying] people want the company of one or two important people” (14, 36). In some Western cultures, the clergy play an important role in meeting terminally ill patients’ spiritual needs in matters of forgiveness and reconciliation, finding meaning in one’s life, and hope for an eternal life.

In “The Displaced Person,” O’Connor exemplifies a form of palliative care. Mrs. McIntyre loses all of her possessions, develops a fatal illness, becomes bedridden, and is cared for by a black woman. The only person that visits her weekly is an old Catholic priest, who sits next to her deathbed to “explain the doctrines of the Church” (O’Connor, *CS* 235). Somewhat similar to the title character of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), who is deserted by all but his faithful servant, Gerasim, Mrs. McIntyre will likely die comforted by the presence of the caretaker and the priest. O’Connor does not enter the mind of Mrs. McIntyre on her deathbed, but it is plausible to imagine her renouncing her sinful past, accepting Christ, and preparing her journey toward the next world.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, regardless of O'Connor's theological intention, the fact that Mrs. McIntyre does not respond in any way to the priest's indoctrination opens the possibility of her completely shutting herself out of the world—as some dying patients do. With declining eyesight and with no ability to speak, Mrs. McIntyre is confined to bed. Clinical research indicates that some of the dying patients literally face a wall, refusing to interact with people. Throughout O'Connor's story, Mrs. McIntyre appears as a materialistic woman who never put her faith in spiritual matters. It is not entirely clear whether her spirituality changes on her sickbed; her unresponsiveness may signal that she is alienating herself from the world, instead of embracing the Catholic faith the priest tries to instill in her.

### **The Fear of Death: “Wildcat”**

Regardless of beliefs about the afterlife, a fear of death—thanatophobia—lingers for dying patients. “Dying, like living, is simple—but not easy,” Michael A. Simpson notes in *The Facts of Death*. “The principal difficulty lies in the fear of death and of dying” (55). Religious faith does not always protect patients from fears of death. According to Maggie Callahan and Patricia Kelley, some of their dying patients wonder about the faith that have sustained them for many years; they may say, “I’ve always believed in God; faith has always been a very important part of my life, but now I find myself wondering if it’s all true, whether God really will be there after I die. What if there’s nothing after all?” (48). In *Facing Death*, Robert E. Kavanaugh also cites a thirty-seven-year-old woman, a dying patient, who confessed that her Christian faith did not alleviate her thanatophobia: “I am surprised my faith did not help more in dulling the fear of separation” (53).<sup>4</sup>

In O'Connor's story "Wildcat," an old African American man named Gabriel fears a wildcat, which he can supposedly smell from afar; he is fearful of entering heaven with a body torn apart by a wildcat. Outwardly, Gabriel welcomes death: "[T]he Lord was waiting on him with a troupe of angels and golden vestments for him to put on [...]" (O'Connor, *CS* 31). Ironically, the fact that he repeatedly claims not to fear death hides his fear of dying. Soon, inside his house, Gabriel hears a noise which he believes is that of a wildcat. Immediately, he is gripped with fear: "His stomach flew inside him and stopped hard and the shelf board fell across his feet and the rung of the chair hit against his head and then, after a second of stillness, he heard a low, gasping animal cry wail over two hills and fade past him; then snarls, tearing short, furious, through the pain wails. Gabriel sat stiff on the floor" (31). As a confident Christian man who believes in an afterlife, Gabriel seems ready for death, but when he actually encounters it, he panics. Gabriel, like anyone else, could not prepare himself for death because it is an experience no person can predict.

### **The Desire to Return Home and Guilt in Bereavement: "Judgment Day"**

Clinical evidence suggests that many dying patients desire to return home, die among loved ones, and be buried in familiar surroundings. According to research conducted by Donna Wilson, professor of nursing at the University of Alberta, 90 percent of terminally ill patients want to die at home or somewhere close to nature (Cairns and Ahmad). Also, some terminally ill patients wish to be buried in their respective places of origin. Some Jews living outside Israel are buried in Israel for various reasons: they want to avoid the possibility of grave desecration, to follow the biblical custom of burial among ancestors, or to be resurrected earlier than those outside Jerusalem when the Messiah returns (Ravitz). Some

immigrants to the United States, especially those from Mexico, desire to have their remains taken back to their place of birth so that they can be buried next to their ancestors (Lahirijune; Roth). In the case of immigrants, the desire to return home likely comes from the fear of being forgotten.

In “Judgment Day,” Tanner, a man from Corinth, Georgia, wants to be buried in his native state, not in New York, which, for him, is “no kind of place” (O’Connor, *CS* 532). At the beginning of the story, Tanner is determined to go to Georgia by himself: “Tanner was conserving all his strength for the trip home. He meant to walk as far as he could get and trust to the Almighty to get him the rest of the way” (531). He finds New Yorkers uncaring, angry, and abusive. The lack of genuinely nice people force him to try everything to get back to his hometown, where he could be buried by people who respect him. Tanner envisions a peaceful death in Georgia, surrounded by people who care for him.

“Judgment Day” also exemplifies a psychological reaction often displayed by the bereaved: feelings of guilt. In the words of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, “Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death. When an illness is diagnosed as a potentially fatal one, the family members often ask themselves if they are to be blamed for it” (169). The loved ones often feel that they should have done better caring for the departing or departed one. In O’Connor’s story, Tanner attempts to go back to Georgia alone when his daughter says he will always stay in New York. One day, when she returns home from grocery shopping, she finds him dead “with his head and arms thrust between the spokes” (O’Connor, *CS* 549). She initially buries him in New York, but, tortured by feelings of guilt, she reburies him in Georgia. Only then can she regain inner peace: “She buried him in New York City, but after she had done it she could not sleep at night. Night after night she turned and

tossed and very definite lines began to appear in her face, so she had him dug up and shipped the body to Corinth. Now she rests well at night and her good looks have mostly returned” (550). When Tanner was alive, it did not seem to be as big of a deal for her to dismiss his wishes. Once he dies, however, she cannot sleep until she rectifies what she realizes to be a mistake. Caregivers do not know exactly how they will feel when death strikes someone they love; after the passing of the loved one, they sometimes feel guilty, whether the feeling is justified or not.

## **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, O’Connor’s insights into death and the process of dying were likely nurtured by an early loss of her father and by the reality that she would not live to a ripe old age. Death preoccupied her—not as a form of pathological absorption but as “an old companion in [her] brief life” (Sibley 5). In a letter sent to Janet McKane approximately a year before her death, O’Connor reveals that she has finished reading Karl Rahner’s *The Theology of Death*, a book which, she says, is beyond her comprehension (O’Connor, *Habit* 527). O’Connor’s keen interest in death is also evident in other letters and essays. For instance, in her correspondence with T. R. Spivey, O’Connor calls Pasternak’s novel *Dr. Zhivago* (1957) “a great book,” concurring with the main character’s statement “Art has two constants, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus creates life. All great, genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John” (305). O’Connor’s vision was similar to that of the Russian novelist: the contemplation of death leads to a good Christian life.

O'Connor faced death with both Christian courage and a reasonable amount of anxiety. On the one hand, she took a brave posture without indulging in self-pity or anger; some of her close friends did not know the severity of her illness until after her passing. She considered sickness that precedes death a divine blessing: "Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies" (163). In her speech on "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," delivered at Hollins College fewer than a year before her passing, O'Connor also stated, "[I]n this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" (O'Connor, *Mystery* 113). Finally, as a dying patient, O'Connor exhibited dignity and graciousness in her final letter addressed to Maryat Lee—the two virtues not universally displayed by dying patients. Showing concerns about Lee's personal safety, O'Connor ended her letter with a word of encouragement: "Cheers" (O'Connor, *Habit* 596).

On the other hand, the prospect of dying seems to have cast an ominous shadow over O'Connor's consciousness. In her comment on the main character in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," she readily acknowledges that no one is fully ready to leave this world: "[T]o all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for [death]. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely" (O'Connor, *Mystery* 110). As an accomplished author with so much potential, O'Connor would have liked to live longer and continue to be productive. It is not surprising that, as she was approaching death, she asked for—and deeply appreciated—prayers for her. In her correspondence with Janet McKane, sent a month before her passing, she cites Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Spring and Fall":

I like Hopkins [...] particularly a sonnet beginning

Margaret, are you grieving

Over Goldengrove unleaving?... (O'Connor, *Habit* 586; ellipsis in original)

Such a somber sentiment is expected of dying patients as they grieve over their exits from this world. Overall, O'Connor faced her death with sadness but without losing dignity or graciousness.

Interestingly, the way O'Connor died seems much different from the violent way many of her characters die. As a committed Catholic, she believed she was headed to purgatory on her way to heaven (O'Connor, *Habit* 131). Although O'Connor's faith may have helped her transition into the next world, and although she may have hoped that nonbelievers would have the same experience, one would never know exactly what she felt in the final moments of her life. However, her fictional deaths show that she approached her end deliberately and thoughtfully.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004) played an important role in publicizing modern thanatology, she did not found the modern science of thanatology; Ukrainian immunologist Élie Metchnikoff (1845-1916) is commonly considered the initiator of the study of death, dying, and bereavement. Much thanaological research, some of which contradict Kübler-Ross's findings, has appeared since her death.

<sup>2</sup> There are three main theories on why deathbed visions happen: the changes in the dying brain and body produce these experiences; the fear of death creates the experience; and, finally, they indicate that there is a soul and an afterlife (Mendoza).

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to "A," O'Connor explains the Christian theme of "The Displaced Person" while discussing Mrs. Shortley, who—according to O'Connor—catches glimpses of a believing Christian's ultimate destination: "The prayer [to St. Raphael] had some imagery in it that I took over and put in 'The Displaced Person'—the business about Mrs, Shortley looking on the frontiers of her true country. The prayer asks St. Raphael to guide us to the province of joy so that we may not be ignorant of the concerns of our true country" (O'Connor, *Habit* 132). However, the story itself does not necessarily support the author's interpretation; Mrs. McIntyre may or may not experience spiritual transformation. It would be safe to say that her final state of mind remains a mystery.



<sup>4</sup> Most hospice care professionals agree that death is usually a peaceful process. As a leaflet produced by PalliativeCare Australia explains, “Carers are often concerned that death will be a painful experience for the [dying] person. However, the time before death is generally peaceful. There is a gentle winding down that may take several days. The body starts to ‘let go’ of life. If restlessness does occur, it can be treated” (“Dying”).

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# Morality and Money: The Economic Value of Virtue in *The Story of Margaretta*

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*By Candis P. Pizetta*

As a topic, the relationship between gender, morality, and commerce in early America has a surprising resonance today as we recover from a recent global recession and religious fundamentalism enjoys a resurgence while public characterization of moral behavior seems to be undergoing radical, multiple, and paradoxical redefinitions. Enlightenment era discourse on the moral implications of an increasingly capitalistic economic and social structure ranged widely from arguments that human beings have an innate moral sense that drives us to consider the happiness and well-being of others to those that claim we are inclined to act in their own self-interest to the detriment of others. Francis Hutcheson, best known for his treatises on our communal moral sense, explores how our happiness as individuals is intertwined with the happiness of others in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728). He argues that we exhibit “our Determination to be pleased with the *Happiness* of others, and to be uneasy at their *Misery*,” which he called our “*Publick Sense*” [italics in the original] (Hutcheson 17). Although Hutcheson’s optimistic view of human nature directly influenced Adam Smith and David Hume and, indirectly, Immanuel Kant, these other philosophers viewed human benevolence as more transactional (Hume), as part of a network of trust that allows society to function (Smith), and as a matter of justice (Kant). Nonetheless, benevolence toward other human beings was expected as part of the rational forward progress of civilization, whatever the specific argument for it. For the late eighteenth-century writer, charitable acts and support of others in the community was what the successful man and his family took on as part of civic duty, especially in the new United States.

The concept of benevolence, which comes to be closely associated with women’s activities as the nineteenth century progresses, was not gendered in the early national period, or rather, it applied

to both genders, though in different ways. As Eve Kornfeld notes, “republicanism associated virtue with the public, male sphere” while sentimental novels challenged that depiction of social order by associating virtue with women (74). In some texts from this period, the responsibility for benevolence seems to weigh more heavily on women, especially those charitable acts that revolve around either the giver’s or the receiver’s virtue. Madelon Jacoba interprets Judith Sargent Murray’s *The Story of Margareta* as a political message, claiming that Murray adapted the conventions of the sentimental genre to advance a gendered version of republican ideology. Whether or not the message of the novella was overtly political, it did take part in public discourse on republican values, especially those related to female moral and economic virtues. In Christopher Clark’s essay “A Wealth of Nations: Interpreting Economy and Morality in Early America,” Clark explores the “moral economy” that informed the development of American identity in the colonial and early national periods. Although Clark’s essay focuses primarily on the intersections between the market economy and religion, his discussion provides a useful background for fictional explorations of virtue and gender during this period. Particularly in didactic, sentimental fiction by women, the idea of female agency in economic matters is clearly tied to a woman’s virtuousness. Unlike the more familiar heroines of later sentimental fiction, the female characters in these earlier examples of the genre save themselves or their friends from financial ruin through their own industry, economy, and virtue. In this essay, I will explore how Judith Sargent Murray’s novella, *The Story of Margareta*, reflects and contributes to the development of the female side of that moral economy.

The story of the orphaned Margareta illustrates how virtue can be intertwined with a search for economic stability. Murray embeds Margareta’s story in a series of essays rather than presenting it as a single, linear narrative. The novel was published in serialized form in the *Massachusetts Magazine* from 1792 to 1796 but was not published in sequential issues, and the published segments were interspersed with essays by Murray’s alter ego, Mr. Vigilius, who wrote under his own pseudonym, the Gleaner. The essays are a combination of social commentary and storytelling that

shift the focus from the sentimental plot line of the novel to the didactic aspects of the story, allowing Murray to covertly introduce radical ideas on female financial independence.

Murray was not the only writer in the early national period to contribute to the increase in public discourse on how virtue and commerce affected, and could possibly reinforce, republican values. Karen Weyler's study of gender and economics, *Intricate Relations: Sexual and Economic Desire in American Fiction, 1789-1814*, notes that novelists, essayists, playwrights, and poets during this period were all concerned with how changes in economic practices would affect the morality of the new nation. The primary pressure on women in early America was to be chaste, while the primary expectation for men was to be "economically virtuous," in other words not to gamble, speculate, or spend profligately on luxury items (Weyler 107). Early American fiction is rife with characters trying to overcome family poverty, disinheritance, being orphaned without inheritance, or making bad financial choices at a young age. Not only were there few options beyond a good marriage for female characters, but female characters were subject to censure of any form of economic acquisitiveness, particularly when female characters attempted to marry for wealth. Weyler claims that this gendered view of economic activity led to fiction being a factor in "the gendering of the American economic system by presenting international trade as a virtuous means of making money while simultaneously constructing economic desire as a masculine prerogative" (Weyler 106). The impact of male economic activity serves as the focus of a number of novels from the time. The title characters in Charles Brockden Brown's 1799 *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) and 1787 *Edgar Huntly* (1787) both fantasize about finding wealthy surrogate fathers to provide financial security; Rebecca Rush's 1812 *Kelroy* (1812) and Sally Wood's 1801 *Dorval; or, The Speculator* (1801) present male characters who make poor economic decisions and then connect that public economic activity to its effect on domestic life; and the anonymously authored *Moreland Vale* (1801) presents a protagonist who is rewarded by an unexpected inheritance after a life of virtue that depended on his reliable work ethic. Virtuous action often leads to economic rewards for male protagonists, but female characters suffer

economically in many of these texts. The suffering of the female characters occurs despite their own virtuous behavior and often as the result of a male character's greed or desire for a luxurious lifestyle. These early narratives suggest that hard work and virtue, core values in the early republic, clearly led men and their dependent women to financial stability but had little to do with the financial stability of single or widowed women.

Hard work, luck in having the right parents, or becoming a merchant, especially of foreign goods, were the ways that men became virtuously prosperous. A man's desire for economic success was a proper and admirable goal if it was connected to the desire to contribute to his family's or his community's well-being. According to Weyler, "Men turn to foreign commerce not out of greed or desire for luxuries, but rather for reasons of sentiment or honor—to support aged parents, redeem a father's debts, or honor an engagement" (110). The concept of virtue tied to economic activity was not an oxymoron to those who had imbibed or been influenced by Enlightenment philosophy. In particular, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* moves beyond Smith's earlier discussion of higher moral sentiments and the sympathetic feeling among men in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to examine the commercial behavior of a virtuous but self-interested man of business. What Smith explores in those two dense works of philosophy, many early national era writers depict in the actions of their characters and in the exploration of the consequences of those actions. Thus, in early American fiction, the virtuous men who find commercial success or who are rescued from economic hardship by other virtuous men are part of the ideal moral economic system.

For women, even in fiction, there were few options for achieving economic stability or even for participating in the economic sphere and still maintaining virtue, and though the separation of men's and women's social roles has come to be defined in terms of private versus public spheres, a more precise label of the separation might be that men lived in a public, economic sphere and women in a private, domestic one. Murray's serialized novel and the Gleaner essays published between segments of the novel attempt to suggest some alternate paths to financial stability for

young women, both as direct lessons for Murray's readers through the essays and as illustrative examples for the young Margareta in the novel.

The *Story of Margareta*, which purports to be the story of an actual orphan told by her adoptive father, Mr. Vigillius, revolves around the education of the title character. In the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Vigillius rescue Margareta Melworth, who at the start of the novel is about to be orphaned for a second time in her life. Margareta Melworth's birth mother married the man she loved and because of that marriage became estranged from the older sister who had reared her after the death of their parents. Margareta's biological father, Mr. Melworth, is depicted as an honest and loving husband, but when he perished in a shipwreck while working as a merchant of foreign goods, Margareta's mother died of a broken heart, leaving the infant Margareta to her married aunt. The aunt and her husband moved to America, where he died not long after their arrival. Margareta's aunt also became ill, and at the start of the novel when Margareta was around six years old, the aunt is clinging to life, hoping to find someone to care for her niece. Just before the aunt's death in a rented room, Margareta is introduced to the reader and to the childless Vigilliuses. Much of the beginning of the novel details how Mary Vigillius educates Margareta and trains her in household economy and acts of benevolence. After these segments of the novel were published, Murray published several essays that introduced female characters struggling with economic insecurity, including a young woman named Rebecca Aimwell, who opined to Mr. Vigillius that she was waiting to hear more about his and Mary Vigillius's advice to Margareta so that she would have better guidance for her own future.

The essays introduced during and after the novel explore specific economic challenges faced by single or widowed women, and clearly relate to the seduction plot Murray introduces to her novel. After highlighting the precarious economic situations of the women described in the essays, Murray reintroduces Margareta, who is in her late teens and who appears to be a model daughter whose virtue is nearly matched by her rational and frugal benevolence. The purpose of the interstitial essays becomes much clearer as Margareta, upon reaching the age of seventeen, and despite her



excellent training, develops an infatuation with a fortune-hunting rake, Sinisterus Courtland. Although Courtland claims to be in love with the person of Margaretta, his interest clearly is tied to her position as the heir of Mr. Vigillius's estate. When Mr. Vigillius tells Courtland that he plans to leave the bulk of his estate to a distant kinsman and only a token amount to Margaretta, Courtland makes it clear that he cannot marry a woman who "doth not seem to have *any* well grounded expectation" (Murray 88). Margaretta overhears this exchange and recognizes Courtland's true nature, eventually turning to her parents' preferred candidate, the comfortably and virtuously wealthy Edward Hamilton. After Margaretta's reconciliation with Edward, it comes to light that Courtland was not only destitute, but he also had a wife and children that he had abandoned. The implication is that Courtland's lack of virtue in his financial affairs was matched by and reflected in his lack of virtue in his faithlessness to his wife. Murray created Courtland as a precise foil to Edward Hamilton, whose own problems with money make him more determined to be honorable and to live up to his obligations through socially acceptable and morally unambiguous means of making money.

Margaretta's near-seduction experience serves as a vehicle for Murray to discourse on the value of solid, concerned, and involved parents. Throughout the novel and in some of the Gleaner essays, the Mr. Vigillius rescues young people whose parents did not or could not provide them with support, guidance, and fatherly protection. Both Edward Hamilton and his half-sister, Serafina Clifford, are the beneficiaries of the Vigillius's fiscal care and guidance. Although Hamilton and Margaretta marry and Margaretta quickly produces a son, it is revealed that Hamilton had gambled away most of his money in a fit of sentimental passion when he thought Margaretta loved another. Hamilton's half-sister, Serafina Clifford, tries to give him all of her inheritance, but the Vigilliuses refuse to allow her to do so. The Vigilliuses have stepped in the parental role for both the Hamilton children since they, too, are orphaned. When Hamilton is on the verge of leaving on a dangerous sea voyage to recover his fortune as a merchant of foreign goods, Margaretta's natural father, Mr. Melworth, returns from the dead, wealthy enough to save Hamilton and secure Margaretta and their

children from any future want. Even in this outline of the plot, the focus on money is apparent, and in the details of the novella, there is even more discussion of economy, frugality, prudence, commerce, usury, and profligacy. A number of the side stories and interstitial essays reinforce the novel's focus on the importance of financial stability as both a marker of and an aid to virtue.

The novel highlights the ways that female virtue and independence are integrally tied to financial independence, and there are three specific situations in the novella and one in an interstitial essay that provide an outline for Murray's views on the need for and scope of female financial independence. Margaretta's training and her foster-parents' involvement in protecting her from financial hardship are the key to understanding Murray's ideas about the relationship between morality and economic independence. The education of Margaretta covered a wide variety of topics, from "fine writing, arithmetic, geography, astronomy, music, [and] drawing" to domestic arts and domestic economy to civic benevolence (Murray 58). Though the Gleaner explains briefly the value of all of these subjects, and Murray is today best known for her focus on female education, the narrator spends much more time in the novella and related essays emphasizing the value of domestic economy and benevolence to developing Margaretta and other young women into virtuous members of society. The need for virtue practiced by men and women was the object of considerable debate in the novels of the eighteenth century (Bellamy 182). Murray seems to weigh in on this topic in two ways, by ascribing charitable acts to both male and female characters and by discussing how all children should be trained and educated to do meaningful work. As the narrator points out in essay 91, young women can attain a measure of independence; he writes, "THE SEX should be taught to depend on their own efforts, for the procurement of an establishment in life" (Murray 729). This freedom to earn a living and to control her own finances meant for a woman the freedom to determine her future. Few female characters in the novel or essays are employed, and those who are forced to support themselves because they are single and parentless or widowed. Yet the collection leaves the reader with the overall sense that women are responsible for their financial well-being.

Murray fashions this unorthodox stance on female financial responsibility by adapting cultural norms of economic virtue to the domestic sphere.

One of the interstitial essays that is sandwiched between two chapters of the *Story of Margaretta* highlights the lessons that Mary Vigillius teaches Margaretta about domestic economy. Directly following the installment of the novel that outlines Margaretta's education, the narrator includes an essay that contains correspondence between two sisters, Helen and Penelope Airy. The girls are orphaned at ages fourteen and fifteen, and end up apart—Penelope with her father's industrious New England relatives and Helen in New York with her mother's socialite parents and siblings. Predictably, Penelope develops into a sober, frugal, and industrious young woman while Helen sleeps the day away and spends the evenings dancing, flirting, and playing cards. Most significant to Murray's theme of female financial independence, however, is the model Penelope finds in her unmarried aunt Dorothy, who teaches Penelope how to invest money and to turn her hand to fine needlework so that she might be financially independent and only marry if she feels a connection to a particular young man rather than marrying from financial exigency. This model of financial independence for women presents women with even fewer options for economic virtue than men had during the period. While men could engage in trade to improve their financial situations, women who eschewed entering into marriage solely for financial stability had extraordinarily limited options for virtuous employment. Thus, Murray's model presupposes some minor income-producing inheritance combined with frugality and genteel economic pursuits, like fine needlework, as the only alternative for women to enjoy financial independence.

The value of inheritance to financial independence for women is further emphasized in the third example, the subplot about Edward Hamilton and his half-sister Serafina Clifford. Serafina and Edward shared a father, but Serafina's mother was old Mr. Hamilton's mistress, not his wife. Serafina's father left this income to her, in part, because he wanted her to avoid the need to depend on a man for financial support, recognizing the transactional nature of his relationship with

Serafina's mother in allotting their daughter ample funds to remain unmarried. When Serafina is apprised of Edward's tenuous financial situation, she attempts to sign over the inheritance that makes her financially independent, promising to remain unmarried and in Edward's household, caring for his children for the rest of her life. Mr. and Mrs. Vigillius, who are Serafina's temporary guardians, refuse to allow the transfer. Mr. Vigillius, the ever vigilant parent, prevents what would be for Serafina a loss of power and autonomy; he claims that he is taking advantage of his "patriarchal dignity" to save her from "a kind of frenzy" brought on by her attachment to Edward, Margareta, and their infant son William (Murray 225, 226). In his account of this incident, Mr. Vigillius explains to the reader that Serafina may count on Edward's care of her in future as her advocate in public affairs, but that her security is more certain if she retains financial independence. Despite the fact that the novella contains many elements of the sentimental novel, including the seduction plot, orphaned child, and return from the grave of a wealthy father, the underlying message on women's economic security is extremely practical. Murray, who herself had experienced many economic hardships, clearly argues for female financial independence as the ideal rather than as a secondary option for unmarried women.

For Murray's characters in the *Story of Margareta* as well as in the interstitial essays in *The Gleaner*, economic security not only prevented suffering for women but also made it possible for women to provide support for others in need. As Ruth Bloch notes in her essay on gendered virtue in the early-national period, the only acceptable and clearly virtuous public activity for women was through acts of charity in the community. The final vignette of *Margareta* focuses on Margareta's charity toward a woman who had both inheritance and husband and lost both through no fault of her own. Her children died in a smallpox epidemic, her husband was murdered, her house burned down, and she lost her own beauty, the only commodity she had, in the same smallpox epidemic that took her children's lives. By the time she is introduced to the reader, she is so destitute that she cannot even afford to send a letter to Ireland where her maternal grandmother's estate awaits her.

Margaretta works to restore the woman to financial security when no one else in her acquaintance can or will assist. Despite Murray's arguments for proper education and sober choices regarding money, she chooses to end the novella with an example of a woman at the mercy of an economic system that offers her too few options to maintain both her virtue and her financial independence. The suggestion regarding charitable acts throughout the novel is that good citizens, especially women, have a responsibility to assist those in need and to create a web of benevolence in their communities. This is the final element in female financial education that Murray suggests, and it clearly was meant to prepare young women to support virtuous avenues to economic stability for themselves and other women. This concluding example answers, in part, the question of why we might want to look at sentimental didactic novels from the early national period.

Murray's formation of an early feminist conception of financial independence as a vehicle for female virtue will reappear as one of the essential tenets of the Woman Question in the nineteenth century. By the time that the 1893 Congress of Women at the Columbian Exposition featured female activists speaking on the need for female financial independence, Murray's depiction of female financial agency tied to moral behavior had become a rallying cry for women to be trained to support themselves and to end their financial dependence on men. One speaker at the Columbian Exposition, Lydia Prescott explained it this way:

Where economic systems require submission and dependence, economic virtues are wanting. What, then, may be said of the moral growth resulting from a lifelong and complete dependence of one-half of the civilized world upon the other half—and the case aggravated through countless generations of inheritance? For it is not alone that the economic pressure upon woman compels submission, it is that because of her inheritance of class dependence she can not rightly judge or strongly act independently of others. Her moral nature is stunted by her environment—her slavery.  
(528-529)

Neither Murray's fiction nor her personal letters and diaries go so far as to call marriage slavery, but underlying her genteel concern that women should not feel forced into marriage is the recognition that the eighteenth century-woman could not be free unless she controlled her own income. Financial independence meant both security for the individual woman and the possibility that the woman could engage in acts of public benevolence. As Donna Bontatibus notes in her study of Murray's novel, the seduction plot was a mechanism by which early American women writers explored the social problems and political status of women in the early nation. Through depictions of female economic virtue like the ones Murray provides in her novel, we can understand how the humanitarian impulse that came to be associated with women's civic movements in the nineteenth century—from anti-slavery, to a push for universal education, to temperance—were ultimately tied to the idea of financial independence as a virtue. In other words, women who were free from the need to worry about their own financial cares—through inheritance, marriage, or careful industry and economy—were in a much better position to contribute to the civic good.

Examining these texts gives us greater insight into the bonds between self and society and into the ways that women writers in the early national period reflected and redirected Enlightenment conceptions of identity formation and moral theory. Through study of these texts, we add to our understanding of the complexity of eighteenth-century attempts to theorize the relation between the imaginary, yet very real moral bonds that make up a stable society and the autonomous individual self.

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