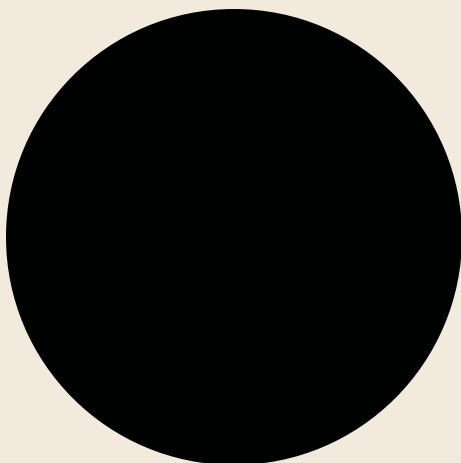


WATER MARK



Writing from the Margins



Vol. 19

WATERMARK

VOLUME 19

2025

Department of English
California State University, Long Beach

Watermark is an annual, scholarly journal published by graduate students in the Department of English at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). We are dedicated to publishing original, critical essays engaging with theory, literature of all genres and periods, as well as essays representing current issues within the field of rhetoric and composition. As this journal is intended to provide a forum for emerging voices, only student work is published.

All submissions must include a 250 word abstract and cover page consisting of the writer's name, phone number, email address, essay title, and a short biography (no more than 2 sentences). All essays should be no less than six pages, typed in current MLA format with standard 12-point font, and cannot contain the writer's name. All submission materials must be sent as separate Word documents. Please direct all submission materials and/or questions to csulbwatermarkjournal@gmail.com.

All papers have undergone a blind peer-review and editing process.

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that CSU Long Beach continues to occupy ancestral land of the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples. We pay our respects to these communities who were removed unjustly and acknowledge how we at CSULB are beneficiaries of this removal. We honor and remember the Gabrielino/Tongva ancestors past and present and their connection to this land.

Watermark © Copyright 2025. All rights reserved to contributors upon publication.

Department of English:

Watermark California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90840

WATERMARK

VOLUME 19

2025

Executive Co-Editors

Johann Long

Randy Reynaga

Managing Editors

Alec Gonzales

Sherry Kolber

Pauline Menchavez

Editors

Jasmine Bañuelos

Anna Bogdanovic

Pearl Pham

Estevan Raygoza

Kaylee Stull

Richmond Tran

Volume 19, 2025

Readers

Aryanna Draeger

Summer Khattak

Brissa Reyes

Cover Artist

Meilani Cottrell

Layout Designer

Francisco N. Favela

Staff Advisor

Dennis López

Table of Contents

- VIII A Note From *Watermark's* Executive Co-Editors
By Randy Reynaga and Johann Long
- 1 Bodies, Subjectivities, and the Horizon: Butler's Framework of Grievability as the Phenomenological Structure of Objectification
By Paige Kim
- 11 Joining in Nowhere: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Poetics of Precarity, Chaos, and Relation
By Suhyoun Kim
- 23 To Be a Woman in Exile: Etel Adnan's Queer Diasporic Longing
By Nicole Prucha
- 35 "But Horror Held Her": Haunted Bodies, Religious Terror, and the Gothic Entrapment of Black Female Desire in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*
By Jade Saffery
- 47 Creature of the Night: Robin Vote's Descent into Madness and Monstrosity in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*
By Aryanna Draeger
- 55 "Why, Is It Such a Bad Thing to Die?": Yeong-Hye's Return to Nature in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*
By Christopher Yeung
- 67 "No Body to Speak of": Asexuality, Antinatalism, and Alternative Maternity in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*
By Erica Snelgrove
- 77 Warehouse Ozymandias: The Radical Public Ruin of David Wojnarowicz's "Losing the Form in Darkness"
By Nicolas McKelvie

A Note from *Watermark's* Executive Editors

Last year's journal received a submission dealing with the topic of disability. While this paper did not make it into the published journal, the topic did inspire the theme for this year's edition of *Watermark*: writing from the margins, a theme that centers such crucial issues as disability in the face of an ongoing pandemic. It feels in the spirit of our university to work towards diversity and equity, to challenge canon, and to interrogate what space is made for who and what.

While this year's theme was chosen several months before the most recent presidential election, it has, since then, only become more pressing to center marginalized voices, as the Trump administration works to silence these voices, disparaging and negatively portraying inclusionary frameworks designed to give voice to diversity, such as DEI. We have seen, recently, the antagonism leveraged in recent media attacks from the political right, and we've seen that, within Trump's first 100 days in office, institutions upholding the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion have been defunded or dismantled, as have institutions meant to promote public health and protect natural resources. This antagonism also becomes manifest in the visas revoked from international students for expressing political opinions contrary to right-wing political discourse and in the deportation of peaceful immigrants to the political prison CECOT in El Salvador. As the political rhetoric orients itself towards threats of deporting political enemies to the same inhumane foreign captivity, we also see vehement discourse leveraged against transgendered individuals, immigrant populations, and against higher education in general. We see the cancellation of research grants and the defunding of entities of higher education, should they not adapt to and adopt the social rhetoric disseminated by state powers, rhetoric originated to mute and marginalize socially diverse voices. The Trump administration's attack on these institutions and values seek to undo decades of work towards repairing the harm caused by the bigotry this country is founded on. As his administration continues to target marginalized communities, it is more important than ever to stand up for these communities and refuse to abandon the values that are meant to help bring about equity and combat centuries of exclusion.

Last year's executive editors aptly noted that academia often seems aimless in the face of large-scale anti-intellectualism and destructive individualism that cares little for community. The Trump administration's attack on educational institutions speaks to how important these institutions are for challenging the system and advocating for change. As such, it is more important than ever to continue speaking out against rhetoric that encourages bigotry, and this volume is one small act towards this larger project.

In this light, it feels fitting to open this year's edition of *Watermark* with Paige Kim's theoretical discussion of the perceptual frameworks that permit the objectification of individuals, before moving into an array of explorations that address the experience of

marginalization, examining various axes that contribute to pushing certain voices to margins. Essays by Jade Saffery and Nicole Prucha, for instance, speak to the intersection of race and gender while essays by Aryanna Draeger and Erica Snelgrove examine the intersection of gender and sexuality. We conclude with Nicolas McKelvie's commentary on marginal history as memory embodied in the physical urban environment, a reminder that the past, however unseen or unheard, still surreptitiously affects the feelings and dynamics of people in the present, suggesting that something silenced is never quite silent.

We are proud to be publishing scholarly work from across the country, from our own campus, to NYU, to UCLA, to Virginia Tech, while we are pleased to have received submissions internationally including from universities in Canada and Pakistan. We would like to thank our perpetually positive and hardworking editorial staff and the readers who volunteered their time to make this edition possible. We would also like to thank Dr. López, our *Watermark* and graduate advisor, for his guidance and support. We also owe thanks to English office staff: Christopher Knight for his patience and administrative support as well as Heather Ross and Lauren Colberg for helping update the website with previous, digitized editions of the journal. Additionally, we would like to recognize Dr. van Elk for her guidance and expertise, volunteering her time to speak with and advise our editorial staff about academic writing in preparation for our editing sessions.

We are thankful for the important work and scholarship being generated across the country, in opposition to, and in spite of threats of suppression, and we are proud to have the opportunity to provide a forum for these scholars to give voice to the socially marginalized voices and identities presented in this nineteenth edition of *Watermark*.

Randy Reynaga and Johann Long
Executive Editors, 2025

Bodies, Subjectivity, and the Horizon: Butler's Framework of Grievability as the Phenomenological Structure of Objectification

Paige Kim

1. Introduction

Phenomenology is the study of how things appear and how this determines one's experiences. According to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, the way we constitute our world depends on several mechanisms. These mechanisms are transcendental in that they are the necessary conditions for which experiences are possible. Husserl asserts that a fundamental transcendental mechanism is the horizon. The object of our intention, or the object that we direct our consciousness toward in that instance, is the focal point which is contextualized among the background of our perception. This horizontal background of our perception is made up of the objects of potential intention, and as we intend on the focal point we maintain subtle awareness of these potential objects. The focal point, the background, and their relationship to one another makes up the horizon itself. However, the horizon of our perception does not consist merely of physical objects in space, extended objects, but also ideas, concepts, and presuppositions in which we frame our experiences. Husserl claims that nothing appears to us solely as an independent experience for if this were the case it would be a meaningless experience—it is through the horizon that our perceptions obtain meaning (Husserl 23).

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler examines the ways in which certain populations are not permitted to exist as actualized subjective beings in the perception of the dominating Western culture. Those stripped of subjectivity are seen as incompatible with experiencing, perceiving, and understanding in a unique and valuable way. Their perspectival existence is dismissed, and they are reduced to being seen as an object rather than a person. This is the act of objectification. Butler asserts that there is a framework in which we contextualize which bodies are worth being grieved and which are seen as expendable. Grievable bodies belong to those who are considered to be subjective beings and non-grievable bodies belong to those who are objectified. Objectified people are particularly vulnerable to violence and hate because the violence committed against them is absolved of moral judgment and the assailants are

not only excused but often celebrated. The ethical obligations a society holds to protect and respect a certain people is contingent on this framework. Butler further argues that objectification and non-grievability is not only the justification for violent actions already committed, but also the incentive used to advocate for further violence. Objectified bodies are vulnerable, but when their objectification is the result of the imposition of a dominating culture's perceptual structures, they are also targeted.

The way we impose the assignment of subjective or objective to people around us that we intend also determines the way in which we constitute ourselves. One understands their place within this framework through their awareness of how others belong to it as well—it is only apparent to a grievable body that their subjectivity is protected because they are aware of the other whose existence is confined to objectification. In this paper, I will examine Butler's frameworks of grievability through Husserl's phenomenal structure of the horizon. I will argue that objectification, specifically imposing violability, is an intersubjective phenomenological experience that contributes to the constitution of one's own subjectivity. Further, the synthesis of these two concepts can demonstrate the phenomenal experience of objectifying the other, which I will argue is not the complete dismissal of their transcendental ego but the inability to intend upon it as the focal point of the horizon. This leaves only the body to be the sole constitution of how one perceives the objectified other.

2. Husserl's Horizon

The phenomenological structure of consciousness is predicated on the transcendental ego¹ having intentionality which directs its acts towards an object. This object can either be an independent external entity (objekt) or an entity that is merely present to one's mind (gegenstand). The constitution of one's world is dependent on the fluxing of different objects coming into the focal point of their intentions. However, Husserl asserts that objects can only ever appear to us among the backdrop of potential objects of our intention. When one's intention is directed towards an object it is necessarily contextualized in the horizon of possible experiential objects. This horizon is a crucial transcendental mechanism in Husserl's phenomenology. Not only does the background of the horizon consist of hyletic contexts (sensory data) but also noetic contexts (concepts) that allow our objects of intention to obtain meaning (Husserl 23-29).

I will establish the function of the horizon by first explaining how an objekt appears to us among the background of potential hyletic data according to Husserl. Consider, for example, a cup on a table: as we commit the intentional act of visual awareness of the cup, it appears to us among the visual appearance of the table that rests beneath it and the wall behind it. The table and the wall are both objects in themselves that have the potential of being my object of intention; however, in that moment they are a context used to perceive the cup. If one were to intend the table, then the cup would subsequently fall into the horizontal background. There is not a possible experience in which one could intend on the cup alone

¹ *Transcendental ego* will be used throughout this paper strictly in the Husserlian sense. This is simply the "I" as consciousness and as the private inner experience. This ego might have certain habits, such as accepting certain truths like the laws of causal relationships, but it excludes character traits. In this way it is distinct from the psychological ego.

for that background is always present. This is more poignant when we extend our analysis of horizons to those that do not hyletically appear to us in that same instance of intention. Returning to the cup, as we intend on it we might have peripheral visual input of the table and the wall in that moment. However, in the same instance the transcendental ego is vaguely aware that the cup is in a room, and outside of that room is a house, and outside of that house is a neighborhood, and outside of that is something else, etc. This is the horizon of our world that is made up of more and more potential objects that we might experience visually. The cup itself only maintains any meaning to its perceiver because it is deeply contextualized in the overall potential world of experience. This horizon is perpetually present to every instance of experience that one has (Husserl 23).

Just as the intended object itself is not restricted to being an external objekt, the structures that exist in our horizons can also be conceptual. This is what Husserl considers to be noetic structures and is rooted in his claim that all acts occur within a noematic structure. Noema is crucial to his phenomenological structure of intentionality because it determines not merely that we act upon an object but the way in which we act upon it (Husserl 36). The noetic contexts are merely ideas, concepts, and presuppositions that structure the forms in which objects come to mind. Let us say that the cup that you are thinking about is pink and covered in cartoon butterflies. As that cup comes to mind it might take the noematic form of being “the little girl’s cup.” This is because of the dynamic interaction between a series of noetic contexts providing you with the conceptual lens your intentions are filtered through. These particular structures are often social constructs such as gender and age.

The horizontal structure of Husserl’s phenomenology extends beyond the perception of objects as they appear to the transcendental ego; it also plays a crucial role in the experience of the other. The other is any other subjective being that is distinct from your own ego. Husserl’s Fifth Meditation in *Cartesian Meditations* outlines the phenomenological experience of intersubjective existence and our constitution of the other. For Husserl, the ways in which the body is contextualized in our horizon directly dictates whether or not we are able to commit intentional acts towards them as equally subjective beings. Husserl however fails to consider the effects of when the horizontal structure denies the other its constitution as a subjective being. He does not acknowledge the phenomenological experience of those that are objectified by others. Further, he does not consider how these tensions might play a role in the transcendental ego’s determination of the self. His horizontal structure does, however, lay the groundwork for further phenomenological analysis of intersubjective existence and experience.

3. Butler’s Framework of Grievability

Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* outlines a perceptual structure called “the framework of grievability.” It was a direct response to the American political climate during the “Global War on Terror” following the attacks on 9/11. During this time, as information pertaining to the specifics of the murder and torture being committed by the United States military made its way into public knowledge, a juxtaposition of moral accountability became glaringly apparent. The treatment of foreign prisoners of war was held to a far lower standard than that which would be expected for the treatment of American soldiers. The gruesome acts

that Americans committed on foreign bodies would have been deemed barbaric and savage if committed on American bodies instead.

Butler explores the fundamentally hypocritical application of moral judgment during times of war and heightened nationalism as she attempts to reconcile the idea of some violence being justified/acceptable and other violence being reprehensible/unacceptable. They assert that the framework of grievability is an inevitable normative structure that dictates the subjectification and objectification of each individual which becomes apparent through the assignment of grievability for a body. Butler states, “interpretation does not emerge as the spontaneous act of a single mind, but as a consequence of a certain field of intelligibility that helps form and frame our responsiveness to the impinging world (a world on which we depend, but which also impinges upon us, exacting responsiveness in complex, sometimes ambivalent, forms)” (33). For Butler, the recognition of one’s vulnerability to violence or their realization of assigning acceptable violence to others is how objectification and subjectification is made apparent to us. It is not until we recognize that these frames are not the reality of the world but merely our responsiveness to it, that we can consider all others as subjective and worth mourning and protecting. Butler analyzes these structures through exploring the societal-wide usage of such structures and asserting the danger it imposes on us when not recognized for what it is. I will use Husserl’s horizonal structure to outline the mechanistic elements of how Butler’s framework of grievability imposes itself on the transcendental ego.

4. Bodies

In terms of Husserl’s horizon, the external body is that which is automatically accepted as an object of perception when one intends on a person because has proper givenness (Husserl 97). This proper givenness means that it stands apparent to the perceiver without any need for consciousness to fill in. However, the body is merely the boundary for which our transcendental ego can extend. It is the housing for the subjective mind that is capable of intentional acts. The transcendental ego of the perceived person itself can never be properly given and must be assumed by the perceiving ego, the ego who is intending upon that person in that instance, prior to entering the horizonal focal point. This is done through a combination of both imagination and empathy. It is through my understanding and constitution of my own monadic sphere² that I can perform the act of constituting the other’s monadic sphere. This act is what Husserl calls empathy and occurs as the self recognizes the similarities between its own animated body (and the sovereignty its transcendental ego has over it) to the other’s animated body. The way in which one understands their ego to be the perspective of “here” permits the conceptualization of the other ego to be the perspective of “there” (Husserl 116). I stress again that the recognition of another transcendental ego is never given to one directly; the other’s subjectivity, a facet of its being a transcendental ego, is always improperly given and requires an intentional act.

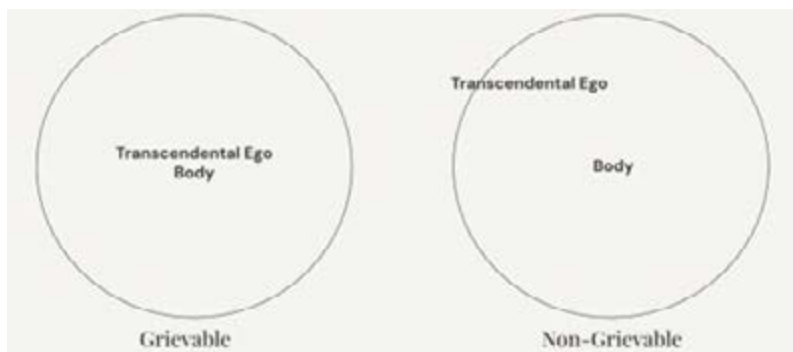
² Monadic sphere is the totality of the realm of one’s experience. This is a Husserlian term that simply stands for the encompassing of all of one’s phenomenological structures and transcendental mechanisms which makes that person an intentional being.

Butler proposes the importance and function of bodies in our perception of the other. Similarly to Husserl, Butler establishes that the body itself is distinct from the transcendental ego that is housed within. However, the treatment and perception of the transcendental ego is subject to the other's capacity for empathy towards particular bodies. The body is what allows or disallows the transcendental ego to be assumed. They state, "How I am encountered, and how I am sustained, depends fundamentally on the social and political networks in which this body lives, how I am regarded and treated, and how that regard and treatment facilitates this life or fails to make it liveable" (Butler 53). The body being properly given means that it is always in a state of exposure to the other. It is always involuntarily apparent to the intersubjective world and thus the social realm establishes and maintains organizational systems in which all bodies are contextualized. These systems are dynamic and one's body can fall into and out of multiple categories at any given moment. Butler is referring to appearing more instantaneous and dictating the fundamental perception that one has of the other.

5. Constituting the Other Within the Horizon: The Phenomenal Act of Objectification

Husserl asserts that all intentional acts that the transcendental ego commits towards an object is contextualized within the horizon. This horizon and the noetic structures that organize it are fundamental in the process of constituting one's world. By synthesizing Butler's frameworks of grievability as a noetic structure with Husserl's perceptual horizon, we can better understand the phenomenon of objectification. It will allow us to introspect on the transcendental experience of being restricted in our capacity to accurately constitute our own world to that of the intersubjective world. When we intend on the other originally, they are only intended as a body. There is a critical moment in which our perceptual horizon, influenced by the framework of grievability, contextualizes the other's ego within that body.

The act of objectification is not the mere complete dismissal of the other's transcendental ego, but the separation of the body and the transcendental ego in the horizon of intention. The other that is constituted as another subjective being, in which one empathizes with and recognizes their perspective of "there" as valid, is one whose body and transcendental ego remain combined during the intentional act. The other that is denied subjectivity and is thus objectified is one whose body enters the focal point of intention. However, their transcendental ego only remains in the background—a point of possible intention that is never truly actualized (see Fig. 1).



(Fig. 1) This figure depicts the intentional horizon. The center of the circle represents the focal point (the object of intention). The outer ring of the circle represents the horizontal background (potential objects of intention). When the other (a person outside of oneself) enters the perceiver's intentional horizon one of the two phenomenal instances can occur.

Butler argues that objectified beings are violable and non-grievable because they were never a life at all. They are those who are perceived as never having been alive (capable of committing intentional acts) and thus are in some way expendable (Butler 38). I would argue that this is not an accurate representation of the act of objectification. When one intends on the other's body, it is impossible to completely ignore its animated and responsive nature—their transcendental ego remains apparent to you in the background of your intention. You always apply some degree of empathy towards the other. However, for the objectified body, that empathy is minimal and only draws minor similarities between the perceiver and the perceived. This amount of empathy is not enough to assume their full subjectivity. This empathy is however, enough to incite fear-like responsiveness towards the other. The fear-like response one has to the awareness of the other's transcendental ego can be understood through Emmanuel Levinas' theory of the face and vulnerability. Levinas suggests that face-to-face encounters with the other stimulate the recognition of shared mortality and encourages ethical decision making in terms of how to act towards the other (Domrzalski). It is the mutual acknowledgment that both "you" and "I" exist involuntarily related and involuntarily exposed to one another. Even those who are objectified and violated are seen in this context.

6. The Transcendental Reflection and the Constitution of World

Just as one utilizes the horizon to contextualize outer objects, the transcendental ego uses the horizon to contextualize itself. The intentional structure ($I \rightarrow \text{Act} \rightarrow \text{Object}$) only gains meaning from the horizon and the act of transcendental reflection focuses on the following underlined: $I \rightarrow \text{Act} \rightarrow \text{Object}$. In other words, transcendental reflection is the act of contemplating yourself as a subject who is capable of committing intentional acts (Husserl 33-37). This reflection is necessary in enacting empathy to constitute the other as explained above. I would even argue that the transcendental reflection is prevalent in every intentional act because within the act itself is the recognition of my own "here." Particularly when we

consider that each intentional act occurs within the perceptual/contextual horizon, there persists a vague awareness that the horizon is dependent on my “here,” and would be different if I were “there.” The fact that the entire world that we constitute around ourselves depends on the acknowledgment of intersubjectivity exhibits that the “I” always recognizes itself as the “I.” Husserl calls this unification of distinct intentional acts into consistent meaningful objects *synthesis*.

This synthesis is detrimental to understanding how the constitution of oneself is dependent on the horizontal structures it perceives within. The framework of grievability as a noetic structure has implications not only for the other but also the intentional subject themselves. Recognizing the objectified other encourages the transcendental subject to assert themselves as grievable. This often means imposing and utilizing this structure to violate the other. It is in the awareness of your own vulnerability and bodily mortality that intensifies the framing intersubjective networks discussed above. There is a measure of comfort that the transcendental ego gains from its awareness of its other possible mode of being perceived—that mode being the objectified body: *I am here and I am grievable. They are there and They are non-grievable. It is possible that I can be perceived the way they are but in this instance I am safely constituted as subjective and worth grieving.*

However, a single individual might be both grievable and non-grievable at any given instance. They might fluctuate on this spectrum depending on how they are being perceived and contextualized through other noetic contexts. Take for instance a woman who visits a foreign country and is charged with some minor crime. That government detains the woman and refuses to let her return to the United States. The U.S. government and its media are outraged over the treatment an American woman is receiving, and they do everything they can to secure her safe return. At this moment they perceive her as grievable and any way the foreign government has violated her or her rights demands justice. Now imagine that same woman never left the States. She is a queer woman in a predominantly Christian and Republican community. Because of her sexuality she is perceived as a non-grievable body and is objectified and harassed constantly. Neither she nor her body has changed between the first scenario and the second. The only thing that has changed is the instance in which the public is intending upon her. It is the contextualization of her being that determines how her body will be constituted: subjectified or objectified.

This is the move Butler makes in regard to growing nationalism and media influenced frameworks. While this noetic structure affects people on an individual level, there is a larger cohesive dominant constitution of the world. This intersubjective world (the dominating Western world) has its own horizontal structures that it imposes on its citizens. When the woman was detained in a foreign country there was the prominent notion that *she is one of us*. Thus, we ourselves would want to be protected and acts upon us should demand moral accountability. This is the same notion that permitted the moral justification of the U.S. military to do whatever it takes to rectify the attacks on 9/11. Butler states, “Nationalism works in part by producing and sustaining a certain version of the subject...through powerful forms of media...in which they are able to render the subject’s own destructiveness righteous and its own destruction unthinkable” (47). This is how it is possible for a wide-scale and general constitution of entire populations to be non-grievable and objectified.

7. The View from the Horizon and the *Poems from Guantanamo*

This project has been an exploration of the frameworks of grievability as a noetic structure that contextualizes our experiences. I have discussed how one's horizon utilizes this structure to constitute the other and how one's use of the horizon determines how they constitute themselves. Further, I have explored how regardless of individual horizons, there is a dominant, socially determined horizon that makes generalized, objectifying claims over certain peoples. An aspect of this phenomenological study that cannot be overlooked is the experience of those who are considered to be objectified within the dominating culture's horizon. The phenomenological experience for one whose transcendental ego is nearly permanently separated from their own body within the perspective of those in power is significantly different from those who are permitted to be actualized.

A fundamental part of that person's life will be dedicated to insisting on its own grievability. Their existence will be defined by the dissonance of how they constitute themselves as a subjective being and how the world constitutes them as an object. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses the implicit knowledge one has that their selfhood is both in relation to others and encased in one's body. It is in one's encounter with their oppressors that the socially objectified being must become aware of their perceived inferiority—become aware of their bodiliness and how that body can allow them to become imprisoned in certain social schema. Fanon discusses the internal desperation he felt to be seen as a man, not just as a black man, for he recognized that in every instance in which his ego was being intended upon, it was doing so in relation to his blackness. He states, “I progress by crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare” (Fanon 116). This is the experience of one whose body is the only aspect of themselves that is allowed into the focal point of the horizon.

When feminist activists plead with the masses for them to care about violence against women they often say, “She is someone's mom. She is someone's daughter.” These kinds of pleas are to remind the public that her transcendental ego is still present and has merely been set aside into the background of the horizon. Her permittance to be actualized as a subjective being is determined entirely by her potentiality to matter to someone. Just as Fanon explains, it is egregiously apparent to the objectified being that their claim to selfhood hinges on their relation to others—that others seem to hold the ability to determine their subjectification regardless of how they encounter themselves. Husserl states, “I was ‘already given,’ already there for myself continually as an object of original intuition...I am given, in any case, with an open infinite horizon of still undiscovered internal features of my own” (101). This givenness, however, has no effect on how the dominating cultural horizon will constitute one's body—you are always vulnerable and determinable.

Butler finishes their essay by discussing the *Poems from Guantanamo*. This is a series of 22 poems that escaped the prisoners of war camp in Cuba, where nearly 800 men and boys have been held. One reads,

I was humiliated in the shackles.

How can I now compose verses? How can I write?

After the shackles and the nights and the suffering and the Tears,

How can I write poetry? (Falkoff 41)

Butler discusses how these poems are the manifestation of marginalized individual's desire to be reconsidered in the social realm. The prisoners inadvertently discuss the discordance between how they perceived their own "I" and how the world treated them as an "it." It is important to note that only 22 poems out of hundreds written actually made it out of the camp because many were censored by the U.S. Department of Defense for being a threat to national security. These poems pose a threat, but not to national security; the poems disrupt the dominating horizontal structures and, more specifically, the frameworks of grievability that the U.S. has championed for its own gain. It is impossible to refrain from reflecting upon the ways we constitute the other and what allowances we will make for their denigration when we can—for just a moment, even for a few stanzas—see the world and themselves from their horizon.

Butler states, "The body breathes, breathes itself into words, and finds some provisional survival there. But once the breath is made into words, the body is given over to another, in the form of an appeal" (Butler 61). This appeal finds itself in solidarity as the voices of those objectified make up an interconnectedness forged in mutual reconstitution of the self. There is no one who has not experienced themselves falling into the horizon of another's phenomenal intention—no one who has wholly avoided objectification to some degree. When one finds themselves as the objectified body, isolation and dehumanization occurs. It is through the words of the marginalized who live within this objectified realm as a mere constant state that we find comfort in knowing we are not alone in our vulnerability. It is most apparent to those whose self-constitution is an act of rebellion that we exist precariously. Their stories and voices share the empathy and wisdom for how to reconcile with this inescapable phenomenal experience.

PAIGE KIM is a first year student in CSULB Master's of Philosophy program. Paige's areas of interest include phenomenology, philosophy of mind, and social philosophy (specifically feminist theory and feminist existentialism).

Work Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect." *Frames of War*, Verso, 2016, pp. 33–62.
- Domrzalski, Ruth. "Suffering, Relatedness and Transformation: Levinas and Relational Psychodynamic Theory." *The University of Chicago*.
- Falkoff, Marc, editor. *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*. U of Iowa P, 2007.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 1986.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorion Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff, 1960.

Joining in Nowhere: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Poetics of Precarity, Chaos, and Relation

Suhyoun Kim

How best to serve the memory of Reggie Jordan? Should we use the language of the killer—Standard English—in order to make our ideas acceptable to those controlling the killers? But wouldn't what we had to say be rejected, summarily, if we said it in our own language, the language of the victim, Reggie Jordan? But if we sought to express ourselves by abandoning our language wouldn't that mean our suicide on top of Reggie's murder? But if we expressed ourselves in our own language wouldn't that be suicidal to the wish to communicate with those who, evidently, did not give a damn about us/Reggie/police violence in the Black community?

—June Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan”

This article starts with a question: *What sets us apart and what brings us together?* In her 1985 essay, poet and teacher at SUNY Stony Brook, June Jordan, is faced with the task of teaching a class on Black English while Reggie Jordan, the brother of her student Willie Jordan, is killed at the hands of the Brooklyn NYPD. Jordan and her students, in their attempt to collectively respond to the matter, arrive at an impasse: the illegibility—and effective *illegitimacy*—of Black English, of Black experience, of Black death, to those speakers and perpetrators of Standard English—namely, the NYPD and *Newsday*—that are the audience of their address.¹ This illegibility complicates their writing process: conforming to Standard English—“the language of the killer”—would constitute a “suicide” in the class’s reclamation of their own language, while adherence to Black English would be

¹Jordan uses the term “Standard English” to signify the United States’ version of White standards of English, which “control our official and popular judgements of verbal proficiency and correct, or incorrect, language skills, including speech” (364). She differentiates this singular notion of “standard” English from the English/languages used in India or Nicaragua, noting that “White English, in America, is ‘Standard English.’” I read Jordan’s “Standard English” alongside Ntozake Shange’s conceptualization of “american english” as a “straitjacket” over American consciousness, one that La Marr Jurelle Bruce describes as “a structure of domination that violently constructs ‘american’ imagination, enshrines white supremacist logics, propagates antiblack grammars, thwarts insurgent expressions, and chokes demands for freedom” (Shange xii; Bruce 135).

communicationally “suicidal” in that the message would fail to deliver, especially in a world where the recipients simply “did not give a damn about us/Reggie/police violence in the Black community” (Jordan 372).

In her course “The Art of Black English,” Jordan and her students choose the latter option, even as they “realized that [their] decision in favor of Black English had doomed [their] writings,” because it is only through Black English that they may “*stick to the truth: Be who we been. And stay all the way with Reggie*” (372). They write—to the news, to the police, to the public—and as Jordan and her students have already anticipated, this communication fails: “*Newsday rejected the piece. [. . .] Reggie Jordan is really dead*” (373). While this short sentence, which ends Jordan’s account of the case of Reggie Jordan and precedes her introduction of an essay written by her student Willie, is staggering, I would now like to ask, tentatively, a modification of the question posed at the beginning of Jordan’s article: what sets us apart, and what brings us together, *in our language, through our words, through writing*? Can there exist a kind of writing that reaches across racialized illegibility, that persists through incomprehensibility, so that the chasm of difference may, impossible as it seems, be bridged? And if so, why? For there most definitely exists within writing a desire for relation, for something that reaches across illegibility, persists despite incomprehensibility. There is a glimpse of it in Jordan, because even within their “doom,” she and her students write. There is a glimpse of it in Willie’s essay, because even though he “[believes] that [. . .] justice may only exist as rhetoric,” he, painstakingly, writes (374).

I read a desire for intimacy in the writing of Jordan and her student—something that has long been theorized in Black thought, namely that of Audre Lorde, as materialized through the erotic: a space of vulnerability and desire which “forms a bridge between the sharers” and holds the potential to “[lessen] the threat of their difference” (56). Alongside Jordan’s frustration with the problem of language as a double-edged sword, which in order to wield one must first become vulnerable. I read a desire to reach across, and to persist, despite “the wish to communicate” (372). While I distance myself from the victim-blaming logic of responsibility, where the oppressed must take it in their own hands to “educate” the oppressor, to *get one’s point across*, I read in both June Jordan and her student Willie a desire for communication that renders them vulnerable to the im/possibility of relation. Hence, the repetition of ‘but’s in the epigraph; the struggle to place oneself in contact with the other in a way that relation may become possible—that one may communicate, not through a linguistic suicide, but through a mutual precarity.

It is on the basis of this desire that I turn to Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a collection of poems, essays, and images that comprise a book-length poem that is coined by Rankine as “American lyric.” Through this self-proclamation of genre, Rankine situates herself within the American tradition of lyric poetry, calling upon questions of poetic subjecthood and the notion of an American ‘national poetry.’ Reading Jordan’s position as teacher and poet of Black English as being in struggle with language and both its violent manifestations and radical potential for relation—a struggle that Lorde may describe as that of being in “the master’s house”—*Citizen* emerges as a continuation of that struggle where the tools of writing, such as genre, pronoun, and subjectivity, are torqued in an attempt to fulfill this desire (110). Through the manipulation of the I-you binary that I propose works on the

level of the self-other binary and effectively renders it opaque, I read *Citizen* as an invitation to the other to join the self in precarity. This invitation involves a vulnerability mediated through language, carried out chiefly through Rankine's use of the second-person pronoun "you" both as the primary narrator of the text and as a space that the listener/reader/witness-inevitably an other-is invited to inhabit, to embody, to participate in.

My reading enters existing discussions of Rankine's use of the second person pronoun: Yolanda Manora has defined as Rankine's "you" as the "dialectical you," wherein the white reader and racial other are thrust into the position of "not you" as an unfamiliar othering in the Western hegemonic literary tradition, while Jeffrey Clapp reads the "you" along the lyric tradition of apostrophe, somewhere between direct address and narrativized prose, as an escape from the racialized dichotomy of invisibility/hypervisibility (Manora 147; Clapp 179-181). Following these lines, my reading of the second person in *Citizen* draws from Émile Benveniste's linguistic theory of subjectivity in language and psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou's concept of exigent sadism to propose a second-person "you" that both results from and makes use of the status of the "you" as a removal from egoistic subjecthood. Following Benveniste's definition of the "I" as constitutive of subjecthood and its privileged status over the "you," I read *Citizen*'s "you" as an invitation to the reader to inhabit a fractured subjectivity, an invitation that I characterize as precarizing-rendering precarious. In the latter section of the article, I utilize Saketopoulou's framework of exigent sadism to demonstrate the precarizing force the text inflicts upon the reader, rendering precarious the reader's subjecthood. Ultimately, the encounter between the text and the reader, occurring in the form of an encounter between "you" and "you", exists within a space that is "nowhere": a space of vulnerability and chaos, as in the Lordean erotic, where the self/other binary is come undone (73).

"You are in the dark, in the car. . .": "You" and Precarized Subjecthood

A large part of *Citizen* comprises a collection of racialized encounters—ones that Rankine has said are from the poet herself and gathered from acquaintances—that Rankine documents primarily in the second-person perspective.² "You are in the dark, in the car," states the narrator, and the reader is transported to the darkness of a nighttime drive (10). "You begin to think," states the narrator, and the reader nervously shifts in their seat, looking around: *have they* "[began] to think" (24)? "Maybe erroneously," the narrator adds, and now we are *really* uncomfortable (24). *Am I thinking this? Really? Am I wrong?* While I admit that my slippage from "the reader" to "we" to "I" is somewhat clumsy, I argue that Rankine's choice of pronoun, as Manora and Clapp have previously explored, is not: in this case, the second person

²From this section on, I mirror Rankine's use of the second person pronoun "you" in *Citizen* in an attempt to exhibit what I propose to be the effects of this use: through a situation in the once-removed subjecthood of the "you", the reader's notion of their own subjecthood is disrupted. Therefore, instead of definitely differentiating the reader of the article, from the reader of *Citizen*, from the poetic voice expressed as "you" in *Citizen*, I slip from "the reader is", to "'you' are;" similarly, instead of writing, for example, that "the poetic 'you' is recalling a scene," I write that "'you' are recalling a scene." My intention is that this slippage, and the confusion that may thus arise on the part of the reader of the article, may emulate, to some extent, the reading experience of *Citizen*.

“you” functions as a removal from the linguistic-egoistic proximity to subjecthood provided by the first person “I.”

Émile Benveniste in “Subjectivity in Language” describes the relationship between language and (hu)man’s subjectivity as interdependent: without language, the man cannot “[constitute] himself as *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality” (224). Yet subjectivity, while enabled through language, is not a given, rather, it is a “*capacity* of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject;’” in other words, while language constitutes selfhood, it is the speaker that must—actively—utilize language to “posit himself” as subject (224, my italics). Ntozake Shange further complicates this relationship between subjectivity and the “I” with her notion of “american english” as a “straitjacket”: language itself is not neutral, not free from “white supremacist logics” (qtd. in Bruce 135). Within “american english,” the “black ‘i’ and [. . .] her black ‘self’ [. . .] confront a history of antiblackness embedded in the language” so that “every black ‘i’ uttered in ‘america’ cites and recites material, symbolic, and psychic violence inflicted on black people” (Bruce 135-136). Benveniste’s account of linguistic subjecthood as a capacity is confronted by the racialized experience of objectification, thingification, commodification—all pertaining to an exclusion from subjecthood. Thus the Benvenistian position of selfhood through the linguistic “I” is not available to all. For some—in this case, Black Americans in an anti-black America—entry into the “I” is guarded, hurtful, traumatic. And Benveniste himself acknowledges the hierarchical, as well as reciprocal, relationship between the “I” and the “you.” Even as he purports that “reciprocally *I* becomes you in the address of one who in his turn designates himself as *I*,” to the speaker and his subjecthood, it is acknowledged that the “I” maintains superiority: the “I” is what holds the “ego,” which “always has a position of transcendence with regard to you” (224-225). Thus the I-you relationship can be read on two levels: they are *dialogic*, in that they are co-constitutive and the one is presumptive of the other; they are also *hierarchical*, where the “I” holds a subjective superiority to the “you.”

In what follows, I propose that *Citizen* activates the “you” on both levels: the hierarchical relationship is activated through the placement of the reader in the narrative “you,” while the dialogic relationship is activated through poetic exhortation—directly calling upon the reader, “you.” Ultimately, the reader, as the radically different other, is brought to inhabit the racialized precarity held by the second person “you.” As a result, the self-other boundary, through the deconstruction of the I-you boundary, becomes murky, resulting in a chaos of self-otherhood that opens up tentative possibilities of relation. The beginning of *Citizen* sets up the scene of its second person perspective, easing the reader into the position of the “you”:

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. [. . .] and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor. (5)

Situated within the “you,” the reader soon finds herself “[falling] back” into an experience of racialized discomfort that is metapoetically “reconstructed as metaphor” through the poetic account: “you” are recalling a scene from childhood at a Catholic school, where a white girl asks for “you” to assist her in cheating on an exam, later remarking that “you smell good and have features more like a white person” (5). *Citizen* goes on to account situation after

situation of “you” feeling uncomfortable, feeling attacked, insecure, confused . . . racialized. “You” are mistakenly called by the name of a friend’s “black housekeeper” (7). “You” are watching Serena Williams’s “offensive [. . .] outburst” at multiple tennis matches, yet, “you” find that “it is difficult not to applaud her” (29). A glance at the conventional connotations of the second person perspective as narrative technique, often associated with choose-your-own-adventure plotlines, yields that this perspective allows “the reader to ‘be’ the central character in the story [. . .] enhancing what is at stake for the character and reader” (“Point of view”). There is “more at stake” for the reader to accept this invite to “‘be’ the central character.” Considering the Benvenistian account of the “you’s” relative lack of proximity to subjectivity and Shange’s racialized problematization of the black “i,” *Citizen’s* narrative “you” can be read in two ways: First, as a linguistic manifestation of the precarity of the Black life as a continuing experience of microaggression. Second, as functioning to precarize the reader’s subjectivity through embodiment of the “central character of the story”—this “you.”

However, the reader, positioned as “you,” is jolted once again through the address. While the line is often blurred, legible through the both/and rather than the either/or, *Citizen’s* “you” oscillates between the nominative case (“you are in the dark”) and the vocative (“hey you—”), between the “you” as narrator (“You are friends so you respond”) and as interlocutor (“What do you mean?”). “You” are assumed, tentatively settling into this space; then, all of a sudden, “you” are called out—alienated once again. The “calling out” of the “you,” being addressed as a participant in a conversation, the recipient of a question, an accusation, an interpellation, engages the reader in a *dialogic* relationship with the text where the text is asking, and the reader expected to reply. In his monograph *Forms of a World*, Walt Hunter explains the exhortative mode in contemporary poetry as a conjuring of a “crowd to come”: a desperate poetic attempt to call together a “we” when the figurative “crowd” of collectivity has been erased in the face of racialized and gendered global capitalism (2). *Citizen’s* vocative call upon the “you” compounds with its nominative statement of the “you” that the reader is led to position herself in, conjuring a “we” that consists of multiple “you’s. At the same time, *Citizen’s* use of the vocative “hey you” functions also as a reminder that “you” are “you” outside of the text, being called in. These moments of exhortative intervention leave the reader, despite being invited to *inhabit* the poetic position of “you,” unable to yet fully *identify* with it, one ego subsumed by the other. Whether narrator or addressee, the egoistic “I” is withheld from both the poetic voice and the reader brought to identify with and called out by it, so that the transcendent position of subjectivity is ever inaccessible. Unlike the observant distance of the third person or the individualized self-account of the first, *Citizen’s* narrative “you” functions to implicate the reader, page after page, in “your” feelings, thoughts, and racial encounters. Through *Citizen’s* placement of the reader in the “you”, not only is the reader cut off from the ego of the “I” they are subjected to the double-layered precarity of the racialized “you.”

“Talking back, saying please”: Desire, Intimacy, Precarity

Among the many accounts of “you” being subject to racialized experiences of hurtful language, the interpersonal encounters that culminate as microaggressions are nonetheless motivated by a desire to engage. This idea parallels Jordan’s “wish to

communicate” with the white, antiblack society, as well as Willie’s commitment to writing despite its inherent incommunicability. Rankine cites Butler to further highlight the exploitative force of language:

Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. (*Citizen* 49)

After listening to Butler’s talk, the narrative “you” realizes that “[language] that feels hurtful,” rather than erasing, “is intended to *exploit* all the ways that you are present” (49; my italics). The painful realization continues: “your desire to engage actually demand[s] your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please” (49). The act of speaking is understood as an opening of oneself; “your desire to engage” demands you to “talk back” even when you are being subjected to hurtful language. The speaker’s “desire to engage” is inexplicable, “insane”: it entails a radical vulnerability, a “saying please” to what might be a self-shattering utterance.

Citizen activates this “desire to engage” alongside the precarization of the reader as “you” to reach for a poetics that is self-undoing and intimate. Rita Felski, discussing class identity, acknowledges the importance of the “ubiquity of the desire to be recognized,” emphasizing the role of literature in the struggle for recognition in that it provides a space for “the opacity of persons and the fundamental limits of their accessibility to each other,” and further proposes that literature may move from simply portraying these struggles to enacting them (101-102). Proposing that “an aesthetic tie can compensate for an absent social tie—or call it into being,” Felski makes room for cross-class recognition within the literary space. This potential that resides within the literary for certain “ties” to be imagined is what makes the “you” in *Citizen* a precarizing force. These ties—as well as Lorde’s bridges and Jordan’s insistent communications—are manifest in the intimacy created through the use of the “you” in *Citizen*, where to be seen you must be present, to be addressed you must talk back, and to be together, you must risk opening yourself up.

Intimacy, as is language, is a zone of precarity: as a relational force, it exposes the self to the other. Lauren Berlant characterizes intimacy as “a kind of wild thing” which, while seemingly existing within the proximate, the inner, of the self, is ultimately relational, reaching out into the public (284). It is through this proximity with inner life that intimacy gains its world-building power: “it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation” (Berlant 284). Here we may read an echo of Lorde’s theorizing of the erotic, in that intimacy enables unexpected, even impossible relations to form, for it is possible within intimacy that subjects and their subjecthood may become opaque and the “fundamental limits of their accessibility to each other” blurred (Berlant 282). All the while, intimacy always holds a potential for failure, for the making of “a life” through intimacy is also to risk that very life—to put oneself at the mercy of another: “We suffer from the condition of being addressable” (Rankine 49).

I have discussed *Citizen*’s use of the second person pronoun “you” as a manifestation of, and implication of, the reader with the precarity of Black life in racialized America. The “you”

as an undoing of the egoistic proximity of the “I” is made explicit in the following section of *Citizen*:

You said “I” has so much power; it’s insane.

And you would look past me, all gloved up, in a big coat, with fancy fur around the collar, and record a self saying, you should be scared, the first person can’t pull you together. (71)

“You” are aware of the power that “I” holds, yet also aware of its inability to “pull you together.” Bundled up in all one’s might, having “tried and tried” to enter the “I” and the self-assured security that it guarantees, and having failed, “you” have had no choice but to settle down into the “you” that navigates the poetic world of *Citizen*. You have asserted your presence, looked up, talked back, said please; yet the first person has failed to “pull you together.” In this way, *Citizen*’s “you” embodies a self undone, both linguistically and existentially.

And it is within this undoneness—this fractured self—that *Citizen*’s “you” extends a hand to the other, for a few lines down, “you” say: “Anyway, sit down. Sit here alongside” (71). Now you are in murky territory—who is speaking? Who is being addressed? There are at least three “you”s: a “you” that is speaking, a “you” that is being addressed, and a “you” that is the reader, but these “you”s are enveloped and merged with the second person, the chaos of the fractured self-removed subjectivity, definable and addressable only through “you.” The Benvenistian sense of the address as a relation between the “I” and the “you” is usurped, creating a new set of relations in which both participants concede to exist as “you” in their “limits of accessibility to each other” (Berlant 282). Among the blurred lines that constitute the dialogue-monologue of the you-you speakers, the “I” is no longer of importance, brushed aside by “anyway.” Instead, the poem encourages “you” to sit down, let go, be undone—“[drag] that first person out of the social death of history, then we’re kin” (Rankine 72). Again, through the imperative, the vocative sense of the address is re-evoked and “you” are called upon to reciprocate. Returning to Felski’s literary optimism and Berlant’s understanding of intimacy as creating alternative spaces and relations, *Citizen* is both a poetic space and a perilous one, outside of the concrete stability of the “I.” Nonetheless, or perhaps *thus*, *Citizen* is a space where “you” and “you” may become “we,” and that “we” may discover ourselves as “kin” (Rankine 72).

“Join me down here in nowhere”: Chaos, Possibility, and Exigent Sadism

You have cast away the first person pronoun, entered the “you.” But soon enough, you—the reader—realize that *Citizen*’s “you” is telling you to “sit here alongside,” and, on the other side of that invitation, “you” are hesitating: “[w]hy are you standing?” “you” ask. And then “you” ask again, extend your hand, expose yourself: “Join me down here in nowhere” (72-73). Within these lines, I read the invitation of the “you” into this “nowhere” as an invitation towards the reader to inhabit a space of chaos and intimacy—or rather, a *situation*, for the reader, addressed as “you,” finds herself always already implicated as “you”: even as you remain standing, resisting, perhaps, to depart the “I,” “still you are in here and here is nowhere” (73). Furthermore, I propose that this invitation-situation performs what

psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou describes as an act of exigent sadism, within which the self and the other, having both set aside their ego, “give themselves over to the other, though not to the other’s subjectivity but to the other’s opacity—and to the opacity in themselves” (184). Harkening back to Felski’s optimism regarding the transformative forces between the literary and the real, Saketopoulou invokes Adorno to demonstrate how certain works of art preclude the “comfortable distance of spectatorship” assumed by the reader/audience, by demanding that the “viewer ‘to lose himself, [to] forget himself, [to] extinguish himself in the artwork’” (Saketopoulou 17; Adorno 17). Thus, Saketopoulou provides the foundation for an aesthetic work that escapes the unilateral “affinity of the beholder and the beheld” and enables the beholder to be transformatively affected by a work of art (17).

Furthermore, Saketopoulou, acknowledging the “ego’s investments [. . .] of resisting the foreign,” proposes an alternative potential of relation for those whose proximity to the ego—their sense of subjectivity, the “I”—are compromised (9):

Those who are minoritized by virtue of their sex, race, nationality, gender, and so on may more readily be willing to risk disturbing the conservative forces of their own egos. To put this differently, is it possible that persons who do not get to be “at home” in the world may be more susceptible, more readily receptive to the disquiet of their own opacity? (10)

According to Saketopoulou, there is a potential in the minoritized body, already once removed from the ego, to recognize the possibilities that “the disquiet of their own opacity” holds. That is, those who have experienced their sense of self rendered opaque through forceful removal or denial of subjecthood are, in a sense, at an advantage to tap into the potential that this disquiet holds—paralleling Lorde’s discovery of a transformative power in the “chaos of our strongest feelings” within the space of the erotic (54). I hasten to clarify that this argument does not intend to underplay the racial/sexual/national politics that mediate this removal. Rather, I interpret Saketopoulou’s argument as a critique on the hegemonic and stabilized ego’s aversion to that which is different, an aversion which has so often been wielded as the rationale of racial, sexual, and otherwise binarized othering. Saketopoulou’s exigent sadism proposes alternate methods of relation with the (white, male, Standard, Subject-adjacent) other which I read as a space of potential. This may, rather than a Black reclamation or assertion of a self-assured ego, serve as “[intervening] against mastery” of the ego itself (181). Rather than adhering to existing critiques that characterize sadomasochism as a sexual act that represents or reifies racialized and gendered social relations of power and hierarchy, Saketopoulou’s exigent sadism insists upon a relation that is mediated by desire, intimacy, and experience: exigent sadism, in other words, “neither denies that historical and structural circumstances that condition such desires nor surrenders perverse sexual appetites to the cold shower of ethics or good politics” (37). Those who are minoritized and are thus potentially “more readily receptive to the disquiet of their own opacity,” then, in moments of intimacy with the other who, in turn, may be less “readily receptive,” are capable of acts of exigent sadism that may allow for a “giving over” of the self to the other, and vice versa, in a way that leans toward mutual opacity rather than concrete subjectivity (10).

Let us return to the definition of the second person narrative wherein there is more “at stake for the reader.” If we read *Citizen*’s situation of the reader in the “you” as an act of exigent sadism, the stakes at hand for the reader, the object, are requisitely high. However, Saketopoulou emphasizes that exigent sadism is also an undoing act for the sadist, for it proceeds not “from the sadist’s ego but from her very dispossession, that is, from her capacity to bend her will” (184). For this purpose, we may recall the aforementioned moment in *Citizen* where the nominative and vocative case are transposed—where the “you” is inhabited by both the speaker(s) and the reader—as an instance where the exigent sadist may also be read as the “you” who is the recipient of this act, undergoing a dispossession of the sadist’s ego. In other words, the poetic “you” is putting herself on the line—giving herself over—to the reader “you” as much as she is inviting the reader “you” to give herself over to the text.

In implementing Saketopoulou’s definition of exigent sadism, I now turn to a particularly ambivalent, even perverse, moment of racialized tension in *Citizen* where the nominative “you” is used to retaliate to a stranger who has “referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers”:

They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

Now there you go, he responds.

[...] There I go? you ask, feeling irritation begin to rain down. Yes, and something about hearing yourself repeating this stranger’s accusation in a voice usually reserved for your partner makes you smile. (16)

It is notable that *Citizen* prefaces this interaction as being unexpected, for “you” were “not necessarily expecting him to turn to you” when you responded to the man’s comment by saying “hey, I am standing right here” (16). Your “talking back” has, once again, exposed you to, activated your condition of addressability. And something about your talking back, your activation of the “desire to engage” which may or may not be taken up, and it *having been taken up* by this man, a stranger, and repeating his accusation “in a voice usually reserved for” an intimate partner, “makes you smile.” This extraordinary moment of overlap between the hurtful speech act administered by the white man, racialized irritation and exhaustion that is experienced as rain, and the erotic intimacy and erratic pleasure manifested in “you[r] smile,” indicates an opening in the normative matrix of racialized encounters. Compiled with how the text has conditioned the reader to uneasily inhabit the space of the “you,” this moment functions as a moment of exigent sadism from the text onto the reader that is characterized by its opacity, vulnerability, potentiality: “you” enter a conversation, as a result of which “you” experience hurtful language, yet this moment gives “you” a sense of pleasure. I take extreme caution in relating “your” smile in this moment with erotic and intimate pleasure, for many of the encounters narrated in *Citizen*, including this one, are hurtful, exhausting, disorienting. However, I emphasize this moment as it demonstrates how “putting yourself on the line” (Saketopoulou 182) does not have to be exclusively implicated with pain, fear, and exhaustion—“your” smile and its reminder of intimacy while “you” are calling out a racialized microaggression indicate that certain acts of giving yourself over to the other, and,

in turn, demanding the other to give themselves over to you, on the level of “your” encounter with the stranger, and the level of the reader’s encounter with this disorienting text, hold unexpected possibilities that *may* be intimate, and *may* be violent, and *cannot but* be, always opaque, always waiting, always vulnerable.

As much as “nowhere” is a space of opacity and unsurety, it holds emotion and memory: “each body is a strange beach, and if you let the excess emotion in you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads” (Rankine 73). These memories are not unilaterally given to the “you,” nor does the project of joining in nowhere pertain to a definitive or anticipated result—as is the dynamic of exigent sadism (Saketopoulou 184). Rather, this time in the vocative case, “you” are invited to go through an experience, and the speaker, having extended this invitation, is left waiting. It is up to “you,” now, hovering on the edge of nowhere, to open yourself up to the “excess emotion” residing within. Lorde’s definition of the erotic as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” opens up a reading of the peripherality, or beginnings, of one’s sense of self as a skin, a boundary, which may become permeated through linguistic address. And while the erotic is a connection to the power within the self, within one’s “deepest and nonrational knowledge,” Lorde characterizes it as a primarily relational function: “providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (53, 56). Rather than an egoistic proximity to subjectivity, the power of the erotic stems from giving oneself over to its inner chaos—that which, when shared with the other, holds possibilities of relation, mutuality, and even joy. It is, thus, in *Citizen’s* “nowhere,” a place detached from the rational knowledges and self-contained subjectivities where a chaotic, self-shattering encounter comes to be: an encounter between the “you” and the “you,” built not out of rational consent between uncompromised individuals, proximate to subjecthood, but out of ethical commitment, mutual recognition, and the opacity of a self that is always already shattered.

In closing: “Directed by desire”

The question may then be asked: if “you” jump off the ledge of selfhood into this “nowhere,” giving yourself over to the “you,” to this other, are you committing suicide? But you may recognize, once again, a slippage on my part: in Jordan, it is not the “you,” the reader, jumping off the ledge, hovering between death either way, but the writer. Suicide, on the one hand, to compromise and adhere to white standards of language that are destructive to our “we,” and suicide, on the other, to keep to the “we” and sacrifice communication. But there is an imbalance in this illegibility, which is that, while we are given no choice but to jump either way, they, “evidently, [do] not give a damn” (Jordan 372). And I am back to where I started: can there exist a writing that reaches across illegibility, that persists through incomprehensibility, so that the chasm of difference may, impossible as it seems, be bridged?

June Jordan’s poetic persona—which I believe to be inextricably entwined with her teaching practice as well as her struggle with the English language—is characterized as one that is “directed by desire, moving between longings for a physical person and for a wider human solidarity” (Rich). While Jordan’s essay on the death of Reggie Jordan resides on the former end of this spectrum, it is undeniable that the desire that motivates her writing inclines toward an intimacy that is interpersonal as much as it is pan-social. Likewise, in

Citizen, Rankine addresses a “you” that ranges between lover and stranger, speaker and reader, calling “you” into a poetic space that is chaotic, self-compromising, and irresistibly intimate. In the world of *Citizen*, jumping off the ledge of selfhood is only suicidal in that it requires a departure from a version of a world, this version, in which “I” do not give a damn about “you.” *Citizen*, insane as it is, asks you to. It has already laid itself bare. It is looking up, talking back, saying please. Startled at its vulnerability and simultaneously its audacity, you step back, look around. You are already there.

SUHYOUN KIM is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in English and American Literature at New York University, specializing in 21st century American/Anglophone poetics. Suhyoun’s points of interest include poetic subjectivity and space, political poetry, relation, intimacy and care, breaking boundaries, and queer and feminist studies

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. & Robert Hullot-Kentor. "Situation." *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 16–45.
- Benveniste, Émile. "Subjectivity in Language." *Problems in General Linguistics*. University of Miami Press, 1971, pp. 223–230.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 281–288.
- Bruce, La Marr Jurelle. *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*. Duke University Press, 2021.
- Clapp, Jeffrey. "Surveilling Citizens: Claudia Rankine, From the First to the Second Person." *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, edited by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay, Springer International Publishing AG, 2017, pp. 169–184.
- Felski, Rita. "Recognizing Class." *New Literary History*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 95–117.
- Hunter, Walt. "The Crowd to Come." *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization*. Fordham Scholarship Online, 2019.
- Jordan, June. "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie Jordan." *Harvard International Review*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1988, pp. 363–374.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press, 2007.
- Manora, Yolanda M. "The Dialectical You, Representin' I/i, Signifyin' We: A Pronouns Primer for Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and the Black Arts Movement's Grammar of Resistance." *ANQ*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2024, pp. 146–50.
- "Point of View: It's Personal." *Merriam-Webster Grammar*.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Greywolf Press, 2014.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Directed by Desire: An introduction to the collected poems of June Jordan." *Poetry Foundation*.
- Saketopoulou, Avgi. *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*. New York University Press, 2023.
- Shange, Ntozake. *Three Pieces*. St. Martin's Press, 1981.

To Be a Woman in Exile: Etel Adnan's Queer Diasporic Longings

Nicole Prucha

*To be the woman who cannot call a place her home. ~~having too many of them, and none~~. To be, never, never, all in one piece in a given place.
To be the exile and the shelter, and the point of arrival...*
—Etel Adnan, "To Be a Woman in America"

In 1995, the Lebanese writer and painter Etel Adnan penned an essay titled "War, Voyage and Exile," in which she reckons with her own experiences of exile as a Lebanese immigrant and as the product of war and displacement. Recalling the war in Lebanon in the early 1980s, she writes, "Such catastrophe, for what? That constatation makes one bitter and bitterness creates loneliness. Bitterness takes you back, creates distance between you and the other, between you and history. It therefore gives rise to a deep sense of exile, an almost metaphysical sense of exile" (Adnan, "War, Voyage and Exile" 12–13). In this essay, and across much of her writing, Adnan personifies exile not just as a state of being, but a complex experience legible through affect and sensation. Bitterness, loneliness, and other related emotions crop up in her writing, revealing exile to be "saturated with affect, [a] site of personal and social tension" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 11). These affects, however, are not stagnant or attached to a single moment, time, or place. Rather, following Sara Ahmed's theorization of the politics of emotion, the affective contours and details of exile embodied in Adnan's writing have intention, movement, and subsequent orientations. They not only leave their traces on her writing, but move her to imagine what is possible both within and beyond the "irretrievable loss" that is exile ("War, Voyage and Exile" 13).

In its attention to Adnan's felt experience of exile, this paper joins scholars of affect, queerness, and women of color feminism such as Ahmed, Aimee Carrillo Rowe, and Francesca Royster. They recognize queer women of color's historical contributions to the field of affect studies and argue for the "generative force of negative affects" (Carrillo Rowe and Royster 243). Being herself queer, both in romantic partnership and social orientation, Adnan's

formative entanglements with loss and her subsequent longings for home as an exiled Lebanese immigrant are far from resigned; rather, as she writes in her own words, “exile does not kill passion. To the contrary. It enhances it but makes it utterly desperate” (“War, Voyage and Exile” 13). This affective enhancement and utter despair are not only apparent in her writing, but, as this paper argues, are foundational to her melancholic philosophies as an Arab immigrant in America and her framing of exile as a collective space of liminality and therefore possibility. To do so, I take up and analyze two distinct, underexplored essays by Adnan—a 1989 contemplative essay called “To Write in a Foreign Language” and an undated handwritten piece titled “To Be a Woman in America” from her archived collection of papers—by engaging interdisciplinary conversations across the humanities and social sciences, including racial theorizations of melancholy and queer conceptions of diaspora and the region. I thus argue that Adnan negotiates an irreconcilable sense of loss, a form of racial melancholia, by reframing the negative space of exile as a one of queer possibility.

A Queer Method of Affect

My analysis of Adnan’s work contributes to scholarly conversations about queerness in multiple senses. First, and perhaps most legibly, queerness is alive in Adnan’s story in terms of sexuality, given her identity as a lesbian and the unconventional lifestyle she led with her partner, Simone Fattal who is also a Lebanese American artist, born in Damascus, Syria and almost twenty years Adnan’s junior. Although the two did not openly identify as lesbian until the late 70s, once they met in Beirut in 1972 they quickly became a couple and remained life partners until Adnan’s passing. For almost five decades, they pursued their careers in art and traveled the world in shared exile, fleeing back to the Bay Area together when the civil war broke out in Lebanon and continuously unrooting and re-rooting their life from then on. Their love for one another was certainly queer in gender identity and sexual orientation. However, as Sara Ahmed asserts in *Queer Phenomenology*, a queer orientation is not just about the direction of desire, but how a body is oriented towards and away from others in the world. The queerness of Adnan’s relationship with Fattal is thus also legible in its radicality and transcendence of expectations: from their mere existence as two lesbian Arab women to their commitment to art, philosophy, and liberation which brought them in contact with other queer women of color and allowed them to make something of their state of suspension, together. Their love also made this paper’s critical encounter with Adnan’s archive possible. As the two explored their respective artistries together, Simone founded the Post-Apollo Press, publishing numerous pieces of Adnan’s writing while she was alive. Their lives and work were thus so intertwined that Adnan’s archival materials were featured along with the archival materials of the Post-Apollo Press that contained Simone’s traces as well. Because of their overlap, the archivist who brought these two collections to the Bancroft Library claims that it only “made sense to process them at the same time” (“Power Couples in the Archives”). Their queer love thus persists beyond the limitations of life itself, continuing to resist hegemonic expectations even in Adnan’s absence.

This paper also engages queerness conceptually and theoretically, heeding Kadji Amin, Amber Musser, and Roy Pérez’s call for “queer methods of critique” that “offer a rethinking of historical and formal method” by reaching across texts and time and refusing to be

“deterministically structured” (231). I do so by considering two essays by Adnan that have yet to be written about together and cannot feasibly be linked historically due to their distinct forms: the first being a published, widely circulated essay, and the latter being an undated, unpublished collection of personal musings. Their connection is thus thematic, sensory, and felt, drawn out through readings that are attuned less to form and fact, but instead to her deeply affective writing style and the role of affect in shaping her political, social, and philosophical dispositions. Such readings reveal Adnan’s alternative way of thinking through—or queering—the region, a spatial category that, in its national and colonial uses, is often harmful in its enforcement of lines and structures of oppression. As José Muñoz models for us in his own work on minoritarian negotiations of life, a critical attention to affect allows us “to chart a provisional de-universalizing of reason for the express purpose of imagining and describing multiple modes of being, feeling, and knowing in the world” (*Sense of Brown* xii). Thus, as Adnan’s senses of loss and diasporic longing stretch across the very lines of nationhood that produce harm and lead to displacement, I aim to draw attention to the space of belonging she fashions for herself in the interstices of space, time, and language. In doing so, I emphasize “the structural queerness of [Adnan’s] mode of belonging over particular sexual or erotic practices” (Ellis 5).

Finally, critique “through the route of affect” also gives way to the personal attachments and identifications that often inform scholarship on minoritarian life (Muñoz, *Sense of Brown* xii). In the words of queer diasporic scholar Gayatri Gopinath, “a turn to the regional is quite often a turn to the personal and the autobiographical”—that of our subjects’ and ourselves (10). Therefore, as I turn to Adnan’s personal writing in this paper, I also let my own affective entanglements with her archive inform my writing, identifying semblances of my own relationship to place and home in Adnan’s work. Her loss is mine, as it is my mother’s and my grandfather’s, as it belongs to countless others. It spans oceans, words, and generations, having many beginnings and no endings. In this way, I aim to show that Adnan’s depiction of exile as a generative, liminal space offers a blueprint of how to feel our way through loss and towards the possibility of something else.

Etel Adnan’s Introduction to Exile

Born in 1925, in Beirut, Lebanon, to a former Ottoman officer and his young Greek wife, Etel Adnan first came to know a sense of exile through words, or rather, through a lack thereof. Though she attended a French convent school, she was raised in a household that blended broken Turkish, Greek, and Arabic as a result of empirical histories that made both her parents refugees: her mother growing up in Smyrna, a city of the Ottoman Empire that would burn to the ground in 1922, and her father equally devastated by the fall of the Ottomans. Driven to Beirut at the end of World War I, Adnan’s parents lived under French occupation, which challenged not only a sense of belonging in their own land but made it increasingly difficult to preserve the Ottoman Turkish and Greek languages of their origins. As a result, Adnan’s introduction to language was filtered through her parents’ distressed relationship to place and history, and as she and her family were pushed to incorporate the French language more into their everyday lives, they were forced to contend with “the irreparable loss of a sense of steady origin, which accompanies the acquisition of language—

any language” (Braidotti 42). As Jennifer Scappettone writes in her analysis of Adnan’s painted poetry, “The notion of linguistic nativity is thus braided with contradiction for Etel Adnan,” a contradiction that was borne out of a loss, yet it would ultimately lead her to seek new languages and methods for reckoning with a sense of cultural disbelonging and placelessness (17).

Adnan reflects on her relationship to language in a 1989 essay called “To Write in a Foreign Language,” recounting both the tenuous origins of her many tongues, as well as her subsequently inventive approach to language. She begins the essay writing, “Languages start at home; so I will start with the history of my involvement with many languages and with the way the use of languages which were not the ones I should have normally spoken or used in writing poetry and prose, affected me” (Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language”). As she recalls, her relationship to language began with a negation, with an awareness of her words not being the right ones and the imposition of “the essentialist biological trope of the mother tongue” (Scappettone 17). And although she would go on to learn French, English, and Arabic “more or less efficiently” (Adnan, “To Write”), the initial tension that arose from being caught between languages would continue to grow, resurfacing across her poetry, paintings, and philosophical prose throughout her career as a writer and painter.

In 1955, for example, Adnan landed in California to study philosophy at the University of California in Berkeley, after spending some time at the Sorbonne in Paris. This move to California, as she would go on to recount, was both another beginning and another loss. First, as “a sense of discovery,” piqued by the American language, as she called it, but also by the world immediately around her (Adnan, “To Write”). Jazz records, baseball games aired on radios, car rides on highways, nature. The saturation of her senses left her writing very little during this period, less affected by the tensions of words and language or what she had left behind in Beirut. This period was short lived, however, as she found herself confronting “a problem of a political nature” when her desire to write poetry again, which she had previously done mostly in French, coincided with the Algerian war of independence from France (Adnan, “To Write”). Her reliance on the French language led her to feel complicit in the violence abroad and served as a reminder of the colonial powers at play in the Arab world. In an effort to cope with this moral dilemma and express a quiet resistance, Adnan resorted to evading language altogether, suspending her poetry and prose writing in French upon realizing that she “couldn’t write freely in a language that faced [her] with a deep conflict” (“To Write”). Again, her lack of a native tongue and acquisition of a new language contributed to a sense of irreparable loss resembling what David Eng theorizes as racial melancholia, “a psychic state of suspension between ‘over there’ and ‘over here’” (115–6). Building on the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud, Eng considers immigrant stories and experiences within a melancholic framework, arguing that “the immigration process is based on a structure of loss”—of home, place, language, property, community, identity—and therefore leaves immigrants vexed by an identification with a perpetual sense of loss. This state of suspension is legible in Adnan’s relationship to language, which was predicated on her parents’ encounters with immigration and displacement, continuously leading to a sense of inner turmoil. Furthermore, her decision to refrain from speaking and writing in French can

be read as an embodiment of that psychic state of suspension: an acceptance of being without either a native tongue or an acquired tongue with which to meaningfully express herself.

Despite her apparent linguistic struggle, Adnan did not resign herself to it. Determined to circumvent both complicity and complete silence, she picked up a paintbrush while teaching a course on Philosophy of Art and, with a sense of urgency, found a new way to reckon with the conflict of her origins. She recalls the beginning of her career as a painter with relief and resolve: “I didn’t need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic” (Adnan, “To Write”). Painting became a new language through which her poetry and spirit could manifest; it was “an open form of expression” that, for her, did not contain the same colonial ties of “a language-oriented culture” or implicate her as an emotional participant in the war (Adnan, “To Write”). It is worth noting here that this newfound medium was sparked affectively through her sensitivity to the political violence in Algeria and its threat to a sense of growing Arab unity in the mid-twentieth century. Though occurring elsewhere, the grief of witnessing war and resentment of speaking French was personal and therefore emotional, and as difficult feelings arose, Adnan was moved to find another means of expression, a way to feel something else. That is, when words failed her, Adnan took to a different sense to reckon with feeling and her identity as a French-speaking Arab woman, finding relief in the visual realm.

In her description of why painting was such a freeing medium, Adnan references its unlimited directionality, compared to that of language. “My spirit was loose,” she writes, “I understood that one can move in different directions, that the mind, unlike one’s body, can go simultaneously in many dimensions, that I moved not on single planes but within a spherical mental world, and that what we consider to be problems can also be tensions, working in more mysterious ways than we understand” (Adnan, “To Write”). Her experience of painting as boundless exemplifies her contending with the melancholia associated with immigration and language by reorienting herself completely. Suspended between a here and a there, a native language and a colonially acquired one, Adnan sidesteps a singular plane and embraces the multidimensional nature of painting. As Ahmed writes of encounters that redirect us, “Such sideways moments might generate new possibilities, or they might not. After all, it is often loss that generates a new direction” (*Queer Phenomenology* 19). For Adnan, a new direction emerged from the liminality of exile and oriented her not simply toward past or present, one language or the other, “toward a home that has been lost, [or] to a place that is not yet home” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 10). Rather, she likens her new direction to a sphere, which geometrically and even geographically can be considered a symbol of infinite direction. Loss and its other melancholic relatives, then, can be said to have turned her away from language, a regional, imperial form of belonging and expression, and instead turned her towards a queer mode of being in the world that contains multiple horizons of possibility (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1).

As she demonstrates through her poetry, essays, letters, and paintings, Adnan’s use of sense and sensation for self-discovery—moving through loss inventively and artistically, in community and certainly affectively—is characteristic of her capacity as a queer diasporic artist. When I evoke queerness here, I refer less so to her identity, than her ability to expand beyond the limits of her own exile. In her own exploration of the aesthetic practices of

queer diaspora, Gopinath suggests that we “ask what emerges when we see queerness not as homecoming, or as finding our true selves or our proper paths, but as a process of both dwelling in those off-center spaces and of staying lost, and thereby perhaps even stumbling into new worlds of possibility” (61). In Adnan’s case, with regards to language, her journey into painting can be considered such a process of dwelling in an off-center or in-between space, and the generative relationship she then formed to the Bay Area in California is what emerged from that process. Despite losing her home of Beirut, and even after leaving the PhD program that brought her to Berkeley, California, Adnan committed to staying lost in the Bay. She acquired a teaching job in Marin County, across the Golden Gate from San Francisco, and settled down for a while. It was there that she first learned to paint, with the mountains and shades of the northern California coastline as her muse. It was also during this period that she returned to writing poetry, but again with a different language: English.

Similar to her painting, this new linguistic endeavor was precipitated by a period of social and political turmoil, this time associated with the Vietnam War and the cultural revolution it ignited in America. Adnan writes of being “particularly affected by the war images on the television screen, and was tired and dispirited” (“To Write”). Feeling a familiar sense of helplessness, she turned to English to not only reckon with that feeling, but to encourage others to be moved by the grief and atrocities of war. This manifested as an anti-war poem titled “The Ballad of the Lonely Knight in Present-Day America,” which she submitted and published in 1965 inside an ephemeral local magazine called the *S.B. Gazette*. Though this is no obvious trace of the poem itself, it was the first of many poems she would write against the war in Vietnam and sparked the start of her career as both an English poet and a politically engaged artist. For the rest of her life, her writing and paintings would continue to address the stakes and horrors of colonialism. Sometimes directly, through essays that explicitly opposed ongoing wars; other times more abstractly, through visions of an *Arab Apocalypse* painted as poetry on scrolls or metaphors of a *Journey to Mt. Tamalpais* that honored indigeneity and imagined life apart from war. No matter the form, the art Adnan created upon immigrating to California works against a colonial project of borders, singular spaces, and restrictive modes of expression. In her written and painted explorations of exile, she engages multiple languages and orients herself multi-directionally, so that she might stumble into new spheres of possibility.

Reading the Personal and Reimagining the Regional

Though some scholars across literary, art, and diaspora studies have taken up Adnan’s published meditations on exile, focusing most often on her first novel *Sitt Marie-Rose* or the painted poetry of *Arab Apocalypse*, seemingly none have situated their focus on her archived and unpublished writings. In an effort to expand literary engagement with Adnan’s work to include her archival materials, I turn now to an unpublished essay of hers that has yet to be written about, recently tucked away among her papers in Berkeley, California, just before her passing in 2021. I found the piece by chance, coming across a manilla folder of more than sixty pages of handwritten prose—mostly in English, some in French—during a research trip inspired by my own sense of despair. I had traveled to the Bay Area soon after learning about Adnan, seeing myself reflected in her identities as a queer Lebanese poet, as well as her

affinity for the Bay and the acute sense of longing that laced her work. Not knowing what to expect or what I was looking for, I peeled through folders of ephemera in a cold, serious room of UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, sifting through magazine clippings, photos with students, handwritten letters, printed out emails.

The trip to Berkeley's campus was itself emotionally charged. It was just after the one-year mark of Israel's latest genocidal invasion of Gaza and Berkeley's iconic political orientation was palpable on and around the university campus. Flyers demanding justice were posted along Telegraph Avenue leading up to the campus's south entrance; a few student groups had set up tables and tents near Sproul Hall, the school's admissions building, with Palestine's flag hanging visibly. If you lingered near Sather Gate long enough, you would likely hear someone demand justice for Palestine through a megaphone. This was also a homecoming, of sorts—a return to the first place I let myself feel lost in. I had grown up running around the same campus and made it my own at eighteen, exploring my love for words in the English department, tumbling the word “queer” around in my mouth, and marching in protests alongside professors, all for the first time. Berkeley's historically important university, known for being a hotbed for political movements and a mouthpiece for revolutionary stances, was thus the starting place for so much of my own life and critical thinking, making a return to it years later feel necessary and inevitable for this work.

Finally, given that “the region is clearly an affect-laden category,” this trip carried a distinct emotional weight as a place we have all called home at one point (Gopinath 27). Adnan, my mother, myself—we have all stood at the base of the Campanile and stared at the Golden Gate Bridge across the water, watched fog settle in among eucalyptus trees and fire trails, made friends and broke bread in a city by the Bay. From Berkeley's campus to the East Bay suburbs to the top of Mount Tamalpais, the Bay Area saw each of us at different stages of our lives and points in time and was a container for our losses all the same. For my mother and for Adnan in particular, the Bay was part of a diasporic trajectory spurred by displacement. This region—ان تيبو—has been both one of refuge and of exile, somewhere to build and dream of something else while still reckoning with what was lost. As Gopinath writes, “Claims to regional belonging, particularly when they originate from the diaspora, are often bound up in nostalgia for lost origins..., a deeply felt sense of rootedness, a fierce identification with (or, conversely, a rejection of) place” (27). In other words, as an immigrant from a region bound up in colonial turmoil, Adnan—ي ت دلو لثم—arrived in the Bay with a fervent desire to belong, and this sense not only shaped her work, but, because of my own personal encounters with diasporic longing, affected my engagement with her archive as well.

All of this was present as I sifted through the first of four boxes of Adnan's papers, halted early on by the penciled writing on the tab of the third folder in the box: “To Be a Woman in America.” The first page in the folder is a white sheet of printer paper with the number one written in the top right corner in pencil. Almost all of its square inches, except roughly a one-inch margin on the left side of the page, is covered with Adnan's handwriting. Black pen at the top of the page begins, “To be a woman in America is to be a woman with wings. To be veiled by the others: the father, the mother, the neighbor” (Adnan, “To Be a Woman in America”). Only, a combination of black and red ink, along with pencil marks, corrects the lines to read, “To be a woman in America is to be a winged creature veiled by the

others,” and continues, “To be unveiled and in Beirut. To live behind a veil of flesh” (Adnan, “To Be a Woman”). The rest of the page is made up of the same free-flowing, half-cursive handwriting, occasionally edited with strikethroughs and words scribbled in the margin or the space between lines. Small, yellowish-brown spots of a long-dried liquid dot the page sporadically—tea or juice, perhaps—and a couple ink smudges further down the page, evidence of her life beyond the page. The writing itself consists of a series of philosophical lines that read like both poetry and prose, Adnan’s seemingly candid thoughts about being a woman in America, but also about Beirut and a variety of other contexts. She repeats the phrase, “To be a woman,” six times on this first page, as if meditating on the experience from different angles, methodically, visually, sensorially. And on the left side of the page, scribbled in pencil in a different handwriting, as if an afterthought, are the words, “A woman in Beirut & California” (Adnan, “To Be a Woman”). The final lines of the page read, “To be a woman in a hospital. Under scissors. Knives. Doctor’s eyeglasses. To be a woman bleeding on a white sheet” (Adnan, “To Be a Woman”). Though the page seems to begin hopefully with the image of a winged creature and the possibility of flight, Adnan quickly reimagines a woman with a veil and by the end of the page, she is bleeding under scissors and knives. The tension introduced on this first page thus presents being a woman as a complex, malleable, and violent experience and sets the tone for the following pages, raising questions about the context of the piece itself. What instantiated this piece in particular, and who was her audience? As in other instances, was there a specific inciting incident, an act of warfare in her region of origin, that inspired her to reflect? What year was it?

Despite not being able to answer certain questions fully, the format of the pages themselves might hint at their answers. With occasional line breaks every few lines, large enough to signify a paragraph break or change in stanza, the structure and genre of Adnan’s writing is unclear, and perhaps that in and of itself is an indication of the piece’s context. Perhaps it was never meant to be read, intended only to be a relieving stream of consciousness or the draft of something that led to another published piece like *Of Cities and Women*, for example, which compiles a series of letters written to a fellow exiled Lebanese writer and friend, Fawwaz Traboulsi. The remaining pages of the folder support this probability, reading similarly to this first one: meandering, rich in sensory details, geographically personal, and complex in its depiction of womanhood. For all these reasons, along with its honest tone and the piece remaining unpublished, reading through the pages of the folder felt like reading a journal, an unfiltered glimpse into Adnan’s mind, conjuring an image of her writing at a desk in her home in Sausalito, California, with the view of mountains outside her window and her partner Simone Fattal in the next room over. Its long length and abrupt changes between pen and pencil, accompanied by shifts in pace and tone, suggest that Adnan wrote this piece in more than just one sitting, perhaps even over years, returning to it as new allegories dawned on her and as she experienced more life as a queer woman in America. There are no dates on any of the pages to confirm that the writing was done while Adnan lived in the Bay or that it was meant for a journal; yet, as Pavithra Prasad writes, “The negative space where details are expected but do not appear, are significant not only to honor issues of privacy, but also because their absence marks their political relation to the norm” (114–5). Whether out of necessity or choice, the negative spaces of Adnan’s writing in this folder not only preserve

the saliency of her philosophies as an Arab immigrant in America; the absence of certain details also serves to refute the demands of the hegemonic archive, which insist on revelation, explanation, and knowability.

Even still, for all the context that the contents of this folder lack, the handwritten pages offer a detailed, affective understanding of how Adnan thought through her being in California and from Beirut. Written almost entirely in the infinitive tense, with the words “To be” repeated on almost every page, the piece straddles the linguistic lines of an epic poem, a manifesto, personal writing, and a nonfiction essay. It is at once assertive, often describing what it means to be a woman as a declaration, and also inherently fluid, moving from one thought to the next without lingering too long with any of them or minding if they were contradictory. At times in the writing, she ventures through space and history, gesturing to “Navaho ruins beside a highway,” “thinking that Oregon will wash away,” and dreaming “of a warm bed in Southern Spain” (Adnan, “To Be a Woman”). Yet, she always returns to both California and Beirut, two places she called home and longed for in her work, seemingly to be perpetually at home and at a loss of one; and, she often returns to them at the same time. For example, she writes on pages 8 and 9:

To be a woman in an airplane: to be a transition. To be the distance that runs from Beirut to California, and to love that waste, that desolation. The tension that squeezes your mind and makes you shriek silently. To be, constantly, a body kept apart from itself, a system of sorrow, and to look sideways, through the windows, at nothing. at all. There is a smell of gasoline to hangs on women travelers, and much cunning on their faces, such treachery! So many snares are prepared by women when they move, such strategy for survival. (Adnan, “To Be a Woman”)

With a line space before this section and an indent in the lines after it, this excerpt forms its own paragraph and thought. It begins in motion, with the image of an airplane suspended in air and moving away and towards somewhere. It is no surprise that she begins this passage with a metaphor of suspension, given that her relationship to both places was shaped by mobility and immobility, dislocation and relocation. Despite the “tension and “sorrow” caused by this state, Adnan frames that state of suspension as generative; she negotiates and underscores the possibilities in being neither here, nor there, and her embodiment of a transitional state can be read as a refusal of the present and a resolve to move towards something else. This description of movement and liminality as an Arab woman in exile conjures Muñoz’s conception of queerness as a horizon of potential, “a longing that propels us onward Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough” (*Cruising Utopia* 1). Looking “sideways” and away from here, Adnan’s depiction of exile here is therefore queer in its suggestion of an alternate way of being.

As she does in other moments, Adnan situates herself—an immigrant woman from Beirut—in between. Not in Beirut or California, but as the distance between, which she calls a waste and desolation, words associated with nothingness and connoting despair. But the word that stands out in contrast against these two words is “love,” used here as an infinitive verb, signifying both the object of her choice and the act done to another object, the waste and desolation. Her choice to love this space of absence signifies something more than acceptance

of it, but an intentional orientation towards and identification of the sense of place she is missing. In this passage and the piece overall, I read Adnan's embrace of what she has lost and her inhabitation of the negative space left behind as what Gopinath might call a "queer evocation of the region from the place of diaspora" (27-8), or an alternative way of "seeing (and sensing) space, scale, and temporality made available by this collision of the regional and the diasporic" (20). For Adnan, to be an Arab woman in America is to be constantly suspended between two regions, forming and sustaining fraught affective relations to each region. In her simultaneous rejection of and longing for both regions, Adnan imagines a new region altogether in the space between them, one that defies the bounds of space, time, and even language in its aesthetic and reliance on affect in determining its shape. To borrow Gloria Anzaldúa's description, she crafts a "timeless, spaceless no-place" ("Speaking in Tongues" 170). Ultimately, her choosing to love the waste and desolation is a queer act of emplacement in the face of displacement—being "a body kept apart from itself, a system of sorrow." And this act, she writes, is not just "cunning"; it is necessary for "survival." As an exiled woman of the Arab diaspora, forced to survive, Adnan thus embodies and aestheticizes what Nadia Ellis calls "queered diasporic belonging," a mode of belonging that is predicated on loss, yet contains glimpses of a queer utopian horizon (3).

The following passage further visualizes this new region as affectively rich, sensorially diverse, and spatially multiplicitous:

To be a woman in the fields of California, comparing the sun to what it used to be, there, over there, elsewhere, when the sun was full of words, when it spoke like one's mother, when it brought young men to the table, when it undressed you, carefully, and threw you to the sea, and then brought you back, to orgasm, to sleep. To be in California, while in lebanon, and in lebanon, while on the Pacific! (Adnan, "To Be a Woman")

First, Adnan envisions being in California, contemplating somewhere else "when the sun was full of words," again conjuring the image of a distance to be traversed and personifying the sun as a place to be longed for. That is, rather than name Lebanon right away, she redirects her longing towards a celestial body instead of a geographical location. In doing so, she circumvents the expected bounds of regional space—the literal space, as well as the social and political landscapes that stand between California and Beirut—and longs for an object that simultaneously exists in both regions and yet, remains perpetually at a distance. For example, she gives the sun a voice, one that speaks like her mother, signifying the very mother tongue she lacks and writes about. The sun also brings "young men to the table," figuratively suggesting a state of abundance and power through youthfulness and masculinity. It then "undressed you, carefully," pairing aggression with vulnerability and tenderness while shifting the sun's reach to "you." Though a specific "you" is elusive in the context of this piece, it is clear to her that this "you" experiences life through the senses—"you" can feel the disempowerment of being undressed and thrown to the sea, as well as the relief of being brought back and the excess of pleasure of an orgasm. As the extreme affective oscillations in Adnan's piece suggest, I argue that one's capacity to feel the depth of their absence, to look

“through the windows, at nothing” and be thrown to the sea, to endure loss and the loneliness of exile, enables a greater capacity for the love and connection in its wake.

Queering Exile, Staying Lost

To be an Arab woman in California, longing for another time and place is to feel, deeply and widely, a range of conflicting and complementary affects. To be a woman in and of exile, as Adnan was, is to be suspended in that longing and thus determined by it. It is to be open to the viscosity of belonging everywhere and nowhere all at once. As the passage above concludes and Adnan specifically works out through her work, it is to be in more than one place at the same time—“in California, while in Lebanon, and in Lebanon, while on the Pacific!”—to challenge the logics of region and therefore what it means to be in or from some place. Akin to Anzaldúa’s description of a *mestiza*, a mixed woman of European and Indigenous heritages, Adnan’s representation of being Arab American sees herself “continually walk[ing] out of one culture into another,” existing “in all cultures at the same time” (*Borderlands* 254). Adnan’s depictions of herself both suspended and in motion, not quite here and not yet there, evidence her queering of exile—her acknowledgment of being perpetually at a loss and her imaginative approach to staying lost.

As Gopinath gleans in her own scholarship, the movement and placelessness of diaspora reveals how affect, region, and the archive are interrelated. These seemingly contradictory features of the diaspora, as scholars like Gopinath, Anzaldúa, Ellis, and others underscore, are also structurally and theoretically queer. This is legible across Adnan’s writing and paintings, as her works embody and personify exile as a space borne from and shaped by loss, subsequently boundless in its orientation, direction, and possibility. And while Adnan’s atemporal, aspatial, and affective way of thinking through exile is not entirely new, very few scholars have taken up her work as exemplary of a queered diasporic belonging. However, given the current state of violence in Palestine and beyond, and the ongoing oppression of Arab people—on account of the same instruments of capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy—it remains imperative that we as scholars continue to breathe life into the stories and art that emerge from the rubble and exile of the Arab world. Finally, as a “mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the ... present,” queerness offers us a starting place for envisioning another world, both in terms of identity and orientation (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1). In this way, Etel Adnan’s queer relationship to the world around her—her fractured sense of home and ability to create many, the lack of a native tongue and her capacity to learn new ones, her entanglement with loss and her willingness to stay lost—models for us how to orient ourselves away from what is missing and towards a more utopic future.

Nicole Prucha is a PhD Candidate of English at UCLA and an interdisciplinary literary scholar of affect theory, queer of color critique, and performance studies. Her research explores the role of loss in minoritarian kinship, solidarity, and survival.

Works Cited

- Adnan, Etel. "To Be a Woman in America." *Etel Adnan Papers*, 1961-2018. BANC MSS 2018/206, box 1, folder 3. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- . "To Write in a Foreign Language." *Electronic Poetry Review*, 1996.
- . "Voyage, War and Exile." *Al-'Arabiyya*, vol. 28, 1995, pp. 5-16.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- . *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Amin, Kadji, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez. "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social." *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2017, pp. 227-39.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed., Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- . "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th ed., SUNY Press, 2015, 163-72.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Bryer, Marjorie. "Power Couples in the Archives, Pt. 1: Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal." *Berkeley Library Update*, University of California, 1 Jan. 2019.
- Carrillo Rowe, Aimee, and Francesca T. Royster. "Loving Transgressions: Queer of Color Bodies, Affective Ties, Transformative Community." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2016, pp. 243-53.
- Ellis, Nadia. *Territories of the Soul*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- Eng, David L. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Muñoz, José. *Cruising Utopia*. New York University Press, 2009.
- . *The Sense of Brown*, edited by Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o, Duke University Press, 2020.
- Prasad, Pavithra. "In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2020, pp. 113-119.
- Scappettone, Jennifer. "'Fog Is My Land': A Citizenship of Mutual Estrangement in the Painted Books of Etel Adnan." *Reading Experimental Writing*, edited by Georgina Colby, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 15-50.

“But the Horror Held Her”: Haunted Bodies, Religious Terror, and the Gothic Entrapment of Black Female Desire in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*

Jade Saffery

For Helga Crane, the biracial female protagonist of Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand*, marriage and motherhood have no place in the future she envisions for herself—at least for most of the novel. Despite her relentless urge to relocate and reinvent herself in each new setting to which she travels, her resistance to religion, marriage, and procreation steadily endures. Throughout the text, she openly criticizes these institutions. Individually, they act as constraints on the desire and autonomy that enable her constant movement; collectively, they serve as mechanisms for perpetuating extensive systemic oppression. Helga steadily refrains from yielding to restrictive domesticity until the novel’s final act, wherein she stumbles into a storefront church teeming with religious fanatics eager to free her from sin, falling face first into a sudden religious awakening; enters a hasty marriage with the first man available to her; moves back to the South as a newly appointed reverend’s wife; and bears a number of children said to be gifted to her by God. Helga’s sudden and uncharacteristic reversal of her positions on religion, marriage, and motherhood is just one thread contributing to the unsettling tone in the final section of the novel. The ending teems with chilling visions, meditations on the “picturesque aspects” of death, frenzied religious possession, bodily decay, and spiritual imprisonment—all of which heighten the overwhelming sense of inevitable doom she faces at the novel’s close (Larsen 110). Helga’s body, eventually trapped in a perpetual cycle of sickness and childbirth, transforms into a vessel of slow, inescapable decay, her existence drained to nothingness by the same domestic plot she once so fervently resisted.

The horrors that pervade Helga’s life by the novel’s end unmistakably gesture toward Gothic aesthetics, yet *Quicksand*’s treatment of Black female sexuality is rarely examined within the framework of this literary tradition. Johanna M. Wagner’s reading of Larsen’s other novella, *Passing*, notes that its Gothic elements—namely, Clare as the protagonist Irene’s doppelganger, the figurative psychological architecture that Larsen describes within

Clare's mind, and Clare's sublime yet unsettling appearance—evoke Irene's "anxieties of race and sexual attraction," helping to "explain what a number of readers find ambiguous, unpredictable, or problematic" in the novel's depiction of identity and desire (146). While Wagner's reading positions *Passing* within a psychological and symbolic Gothic tradition, I expand Wagner's discussion on Larsen's use of Gothic aesthetics by turning to *Quicksand*, where horror takes on a more tangible, concrete form. Unlike Irene's psychological terror in *Passing*, Helga's suffering in *Quicksand* is brutally physical. She is battered by violent storms, swamped by frighteningly wild zealots and, finally, tethered to the relentless agony of childbirth. While these horrors, like those depicted in *Passing*, still stem from ideological oppression, Larsen allows them to manifest in the body itself in *Quicksand*, enacting control over Helga's physical form and transforming her into a figure of Gothic entrapment and decay. Critics like Jeanne Scheper, Claudia Tate, Anne E. Hostetler, and Anne duCille recognize *Quicksand*'s critique of compulsory heteronormativity, but few situate it within the Gothic tradition. By invoking the Gothic, Larsen transforms the implications of this forced heteronormativity into tangible horrors that take a visceral toll on Helga.

In this paper, I will draw upon the works of scholars Fred Botting and Bridget Marshall to help define elements of the traditional Gothic and Southern Gothic, respectively. As Marshall notes, "[t]he term 'Southern Gothic' has long been used to refer to a particular subspecies of American Gothic, which itself is a subspecies of the Gothic, a genre of much-contested boundaries" (3). Though the Southern Gothic "evinces a particular focus on the South's history of slavery," the distinction between which tropes and genre conventions might be defined as broadly Gothic or which ones are deemed solely Southern Gothic is not always easy to delineate (Marshall 5). In general, both modes generate a sense of disconcerting ambiguity, hearkening to cryptic pasts and exposing repressed cultural anxieties. Rather than existing in isolation, the conventions of these modes inform one another, blurring together and evolving to broaden the Gothic's boundaries. Thus, I use both Botting and Marshall in my reading of *Quicksand*, honoring the unique features of the Southern Gothic and the greater traditions from which it is derived.

The Gothic aesthetics Larsen palpably deploys are key in the final chapters of *Quicksand*, depicting Helga's body—which she seemingly surrenders in her effort to embrace religious piety—as a site of grotesque horror, born of the suppression of her Black female desire and the revocation of her bodily autonomy. This Gothic framework seemingly intensifies Helga's torment, her undoing rendered into a spectacle readers are horrified by but cannot look away from. In this way, Larsen not only uses the Gothic to compel readers to address the sort of tragic horrors that arise from the suppression of Black female desire under the guise of righteous domestic idealism, but also to offer her own critique of how racial prejudice, misogyny, and religious authority enforces submission to oppressive social norms. Through Helga's dreadful Gothic fate, Larsen urges readers to confront the social forces of subjugation that strip away her autonomy and perpetuate systemic inequality at large.

As a woman unburdened by obligations to a spouse or immediate family members, Helga possesses a unique degree of autonomy—over her lifestyle, her body, and her marital status—that others may not. So long as she has the financial means, she can move freely from city to city or from one suitor to the next as she pleases. Scheper argues that Helga embodies

a modern flâneuse “moving between geographic locations, psychic states, and performative modes,” (682) her capacity for movement “a strategic resistance to the often-destructive inadequacy of social categories that work to fix us within a limiting frame” (693). As Scheper suggests, maintaining her freedom of movement is critical to resisting oppression. Helga actively preserves this freedom, insisting on waiting for a partner she genuinely loves or remaining single, rather than submitting to a mismatched marriage simply because society encourages her to become a wife and mother. When she ends her engagement to James Vayle, another Black teacher at the Naxos school where Helga works at the start of the novel, Helga decides that she “couldn’t have married” him because “she had not loved [him].” She merely “expected to love him, after their marriage,” the way “she imagined” that “[p]eople generally did” (Larsen 27). This bleak reflection emphasizes her resistance to marriage as a means for conformity to social norms. Helga realizes that adhering to societal expectations and merely expecting love to follow is not a sufficient foundation for marriage. Rather than marry James Vayle with the hope that genuine love might develop, Helga would rather wait for a marriage founded on emotional connection.

Helga’s commitment to maintaining her autonomy is further compounded after her move to Denmark, where her Danish aunt and uncle interrogate her about her marital status. Out loud, she remarks that “there’s nobody [in Copenhagen] for [her] to marry,” but internally, she affirms her steadfast “desire not to be” married (Larsen 80). Additionally, Helga rejects the Danish artist Axel Olsen’s marriage proposal—during which he makes clear his view of Helga as his future property—stating, “I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t care at all to be owned. Even by you” (Larsen 89). Here, Helga repudiates the institution of marriage, still maintaining the freedom that is paramount to her social resistance. Her interaction with Olsen elucidates Helga’s awareness of how marriage can be exploited as a form of male ownership of a female partner, a notion she has no interest in because it is so antithetical to her self-determination. Despite society’s relentless pressure, which forces women to succumb to restrictive, socially dictated roles, Helga repeatedly rejects marriage, fighting to maintain her autonomy.

Her resistance to motherhood is more complex: it is not just a personal choice but a deeply political commitment. Helga fears condemning any children she has to the same systemic oppression she endures. Not wanting to be “responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirit, as Negroes have to endure,” Helga firmly condemns childbearing after marriage as a “sinful” act because it “add[s] more suffering to the world” (Larsen 104). For Helga, getting married and mothering children to meet the status quo of an oppressive society would merely perpetuate the same cycles of suffering she experiences daily. Helga renounces the role prescribed to her by a society that continually seeks to oppress her and her would-be children. Her firm stance on motherhood, vehemently expressed in the above passage, makes her turn toward Christian domesticity all the more striking. Helga’s abandonment of the moral clarity she once maintained—a position that affirmed her own agency in choosing whether to become a mother—starkly contradicts the resolve she previously displayed.

Though Helga maintains a strong stance against compulsory marriage and motherhood, she appears more conflicted when grappling with her sexual desire—and

with the recognition of her own desirability. Hazel V. Carby insists that Helga is “the first explicitly sexual Black heroine in Black women’s fiction” (471). However, this sexuality is far from liberated. Helga’s social conditioning incites shameful anxieties surrounding any physical desire she experiences. For instance, as she contemplates her relationship with James Vayle, Helga confesses that her sense of “vanity” is “fed” by the “ancient appeal by which she held him,” yet this awareness of his sexual attraction to her simultaneously “filled her with a sensation almost amounting to shame” (Larsen 12). Helga is frequently caught between empowerment and self-admonishment. While James’s attraction underscores her desirability, it simultaneously triggers a sense of internalized shame shaped by cultural taboos that deem female sexuality unbecoming. Here, Helga demonstrates a deep-seated fear of embracing her sexuality—an apprehension cultivated by her perception of the moral attitudes governing women like her. Helga’s internal struggle with her desire and desirability resurfaces throughout the novel, especially evident when she reminds herself she is not “a jungle creature” after dancing in a jazz club in Harlem or the “disgusting sensual creature” Olsen depicts her as in his portrait (Larsen 61, 91). Ultimately, this persistent tension—between her awareness of her sexual allure and the oppressive cultural taboos that penetrate her psyche and diminish her sense of sexual autonomy—renders Helga increasingly vulnerable to mental unrest, paving the way for the religious awakening that culminates in her eventual undoing.

Despite her qualms with marriage, motherhood, and sex, Helga’s opposition to domesticity is not absolute. Her underlying longing for connection—especially with Dr. Robert Anderson, the principal of the Naxos school where she previously worked, and the only man to whom she seems truly attracted—remains “in a remote corner of her consciousness”: “The thought of love stayed with her, not prominent, definite; but shadowy, incoherent” (Larsen 66). When Anderson, shortly after marrying her friend Anne Grey, furtively kisses Helga in a hidden hallway, Helga admits that she “still [does] not envy [Anne’s] marriage with Anderson” but cannot escape her “uncontrolled fancies,” her “stir of desire,” or her “irrepressible longing” for him (Larsen 106). Helga experiences an undeniable sexual desire for Anderson—a desire that conflicts violently with the constraints set by her social conditioning. When Anderson subsequently attempts to diminish the significance of their encounter, Helga first attempts to play it off calmly, then reacts impulsively and slaps him. This act of defiance is a physical manifestation of her inner agitation. Helga is overwhelmed by shame for experiencing desire for Anderson and by a profound sense of isolation for being physically violated and left to deal with those emotions on her own. This rejection, “perhaps the severest hurt which [Helga] had suffered,” becomes the precipitating event that unravels Helga’s defenses (Larsen 110).

Following Helga’s altercation with Anderson, *Quicksand* takes a sudden turn. Helga, in a moment of religious fervor, resolves to take on the role of wife and mother to which she once opposed—and the text takes on a variety of markedly Gothic elements, heightening the stakes of Helga’s downfall. After seeing Anderson, Helga maintains a sense of alienation typical of Gothic modes: “She felt alone, isolated from all other human beings, separated even from her own anterior existence by the disaster of yesterday” (Larsen 110). Her separation from her anterior existence implies an isolated, fractured self. This existential crisis suggests

that Helga's identity has already begun to erode, foreshadowing the eventual loss of bodily autonomy she will later undergo.

The novel also presents Helga's desire for Anderson as a sort of Gothic haunting, further complicating Helga's inner tumult. That Helga is "haunted" by "voluptuous visions" suggests that her own sexual desires have become spectral threats, likening them to the threatening supernatural forces that typically torment traditional Gothic protagonists (Larsen 110). Helga's Gothic visions elucidate the socioculturally imposed anxieties she feels surrounding her own sexuality. The way Helga's sexual desire "burn[s] in her flesh with uncontrollable violence" (Larsen 110) dramatizes the "psychological stresses that lead to mental collapse" for Gothic characters—"symptoms" which Marshall acknowledges can be "antagonized by the pressures of the grim, even terrifying Gothic setting" (10). Helga's sexuality is likened to an uncontrollable, graphic physical threat, proving just how pervasive her dangerous social conditioning—and how fragile her mental state—might be. In Gothic production, female sexuality operates as "an object for (monstrous) male enjoyment or site of social control" but "retains the possibility for monstrosity, of bodily pleasures, desires, and energy that exceed prescription and containment" (Botting 12). Thus, it is fitting that Helga's predicament aligns with Gothic traditions. In her own world of conflicted sexuality, she walks the delicate line between maintaining her autonomous sexual desire and opting for morally righteous female sexuality under patriarchal social control. In other words, at different points in the text, Helga embodies both Gothic archetypes for female sexuality. By way of this tension, Larsen emphasizes the upsetting impossibility of Helga reconciling her sexual needs with the sociocultural structures that constrain her desire.

Another obvious marker of the shift toward Gothic conventions is the ruthless storm into which Helga races, beginning after her encounter with Anderson and ending with her stumbling upon the fanatical storefront church. Full of "rain and wind" which "whipped cruelly about her" and "black clouds" that "spilled their water with unusual fury," this harrowing storm transforms the Harlem streets into "swirling rivers" (Larsen 111). In works of Gothic literature, nature often "appears hostile, untamed, and threatening," generating an atmosphere where "darkness, obscurity and barely contained malevolent energy reinforce atmospheres of disorientation and fear" (Botting 4). Characterized as cruel and furious, the storm positions nature as a malevolent force ready to assail Helga, positioning her as a prototypically Gothic damsel in distress primed to fall into a horrendous fate. This storm actively generates a sense of mysterious and chaotic foreboding, aptly setting the tone for Helga's imminent downfall. Its unfavorable conditions also align with Helga's heightened emotions, mirroring the inside of a female mind inconsolably reeling after being humiliated for her desire.

Though she spends most of the novel decisively moving from Chicago to New York to Copenhagen, here, Helga sets out "rapidly, aimlessly," bereft of an umbrella, rubber boots, or any "definite destination" in mind (Larsen 111). This sudden lack of direction, coupled with the storm's relentless wrath, imbues the moment with a distinctly Gothic sense of instability. The uncertainty of where Helga might end up, physically or emotionally, mirrors the genre's anxieties about the unknown and uncontrollable. Gothic heroines typically "enjoy an unusual, if daunting degree of independence, often drawn by misunderstanding

and curiosity into situations that lead to a sense of powerlessness and persecution” (Botting 5). Helga’s freedom to move through the storm, driven only by her restless whims, lands her in situations which accelerate the loss of her agency. The grotesque depiction of Helga being “tossed” into a storm drain and subsequently “lying soaked and soiled in the flooded gutter”—a filthy, dehumanizing space—heightens her humiliation and further foreshadows a loss of control over her own body (Larsen 111). Once she emerges from the gutter, a metaphor for the depths to which she has sunken, Helga steps into the chain of events that eventually leads to her ruin.

Like the dreary medieval castles of the traditional Gothic or the Southern Gothic’s “sprawling,” ever “decay[ing]” plantations and mansions with “literal skeletons in the closet,” the storefront church Helga stumbles upon possesses a sense of eerie mysteriousness, cementing it as an ideal Gothic setting (Marshall 7). Helga finds herself “held” against her will by the “horror” she witnesses in the church (Larsen 114). At first, she ridicules what she sees, but later, she finds herself unable to turn away from the unsettling scene. Her entrance into the church is marked by an eerie, almost ritualistic atmosphere that seems alive and all-consuming, as she is greeted by a creepy drone “repeated over and over” and “a hundred pairs of eyes upon her” (Larsen 111–2). Helga grows increasingly aware of the church’s spooky, otherworldly nature, her perception of reality shifting back toward something ancient: “[t] here crept upon her an indistinct horror of an unknown world. She felt herself in the presence of nameless people, observing rites of a remote obscure origin. The faces of the men and women took on the aspect of a dim vision” (Larsen 114). Plunged into a world unknown to her, Helga is noticeably entranced by nameless people and by ritualistic practices that seem to come from another time. Here, the boundaries between past and present are blurred, reinforcing one of the central functions of a Gothic text: the return of a repressed past “as both a repository of the fears of disintegration and the hopes of regaining a sense of unity and value” (Botting 121).

However, unlike in traditional Gothic texts, where the past resurfaces through haunted settings or atavistic characters, in Helga’s situation, the institution of religion itself serves as a vehicle for temporal collapse. The church becomes a gateway to regression, pulling a vulnerable Helga away from a life where she possesses agency over her body and placing her in a dynamic that feels primal, alien, and beyond her control. Larsen repeatedly underscores this temporal collapse throughout the chapter, making it clear that Helga is experiencing a dissolution of her own temporal reality. She is not only witnessing this religious event but dissolving into it, her named self notably replaced by an anonymous “kneeling girl” figure: “[p]eople were singing a song which [Helga] was conscious of having heard years ago—hundreds of years it seemed,” and “[t]o the kneeling girl time seemed to sink back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries” (Larsen 111, 115). At first, for Helga, the idea of far-off simpler centuries evokes a nostalgic return to the past. However, through a Gothic lens, this regression reflects a far more insidious threat: a descent into a primitive, oppressive structure designed to strip women of their autonomy. Larsen complicates the nostalgia of a simpler past by forcing us to address an uncomfortable truth. For Black women, a past devoid of social progress that revokes female independence is not necessarily better. In this way, Larsen employs temporal distortion to gesture toward what

Allan Lloyd-Smith denotes as “the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself” (qtd. in Walsh 21). Larsen exposes how these oppressive structures are not limited to the past but still persist, in Helga’s case, through the Christian extremist moral conventions she gives into here, codes which will ultimately seize the control she once possessed over her body.

Religion, rather than offering spiritual meaning, becomes a mechanism of regression, sealing Helga into a life that only repeats her suffering. This sensation of temporal collapse foreshadows the novel’s close, where Helga’s perception of time is further diminished—not by religious ecstasy but by the relentless drain of bearing her husband’s children. This connection becomes even clearer as the novel later explicitly echoes the church scene’s language of temporal distortion when describing Helga’s childbearing. The text makes mention of “the hideous agony for interminable hours—no, centuries—she had borne” when Helga delivers her fourth, stillborn child, later noting that, to Helga, “it seemed hundreds of years since she had been strong” (Larsen 130, 135). Just as time collapses in the church scene, obliterating Helga’s sense of self and sending her back to times of ancient Christian tradition, the endless pain of bearing more children also stretches time into unbearable lengths. This temporal distortion suggests that her body has been reduced to a mere reproductive tool for forces far older than herself, imprisoning her within the same cycles that exploited women hundreds of years prior.

In addition to arousing repressed fears surrounding the past, Gothic literature frequently also reflects anxieties about sexual transgression, often displacing it within events where desire manifests in grotesque, uncontrollable ways. Sexual energy seems notably displaced onto members of the congregation in the storefront-church scene, which eventually explodes into religious fervor, developing a sort of “Bacchic vehemence” (Larsen 114). In their attempt to join together and redeem Helga, “frenzied women” engulf her, “pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing” (Larsen 114–5). Larsen chooses her words carefully here: women violently “gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered,” as if in the throes of sexual ecstasy. It is notable that these “writhings” are limited to “the feminine portion, which seemed to predominate” (Larsen 114). In other words, in the world of *Quicksand*, female desire is only permitted physical expression in religious contexts that strip women of their autonomy and repurpose it as spiritual devotion. Her “foul, vile, and terrible” experience in the church—marked by “its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions”—bears the same qualities as a literal sex act (Larsen 114). Though this is a church service, the physical intensity alludes to a sublimated sexual energy that cannot be openly expressed and thus emerges in disconcerting forms. Rather than experiencing faith as an internal revelation, these women embody a terrifying, unrestrained physical response—one that mirrors the monstrous female sexuality often feared in Gothic horror. Larsen’s displacement of sexuality into religious hysteria effectively critiques the social structures that suppress women’s desire by revealing how repressed sexual desires can resurface in violent, destructive, and psychologically damaging ways.

Unable to escape, Helga readily surrenders her bodily autonomy to the church. The spiritual hymn the storefront churchgoers sing emulates Helga’s transition toward

relinquishing agency and conducting herself with “less of self and more of thee”—a phrase which signals the surrender of her bodily autonomy to the church (Larsen 113). Once a site of self-governed sexuality, her body is repurposed for the religious mission of marrying and bearing children proclaimed as blessings from God. Helga’s loss of control feels particularly striking when contrasted with her experience in the Harlem jazz club much earlier in the text, similarly imbued with the erotic energies of “violently twisting,” “gyrating” bodies, likening humans to “jungle creature[s]” (Larsen 61). In the club, her sexually desirable body is perceived by others as she dances, but she asserts her control over it by choosing to stop dancing in front of others. The jazz club offers her a moment of agency, allowing her to step away, to refuse, and to decide what happens with her body. In the church, however, Helga emphasizes her inability to escape “the weird orgy” during which she is “possessed by the same madness” of other churchgoers (Larsen 114). In the jazz club, her sexuality is seemingly acknowledged, but it is also something she can refuse. In the church, however, Helga’s desire is displaced onto religious zeal as she succumbs, losing herself in the collective. The movements of those around her dictate her own. She no longer resists, submitting and being absorbed into the crowd. At this moment, Helga’s body ceases to be hers.

As the temporal collapse and loss of self that Helga experiences both indicate, the church—or religion, overall—serves as a Gothic labyrinthine trap that Helga cannot escape; her experience sets her off on a doomed path paved with the promise of salvation, where each subsequent turn appears to lead to something better but instead lures her deeper into the life she never wanted, with no way to turn back. In traditional Gothic fiction, labyrinthine metaphors were “associated with fear, confusion, and alienation: it was a site of darkness, horror, and desire” (Botting 74). Just as a traditional labyrinth confounds its victims in a dark maze full of deceptive turns, the church lures Helga into a fate she fails to fully understand until it is too late. The church presents a far more menacing metaphysical labyrinth than the psychological one that Wagner identifies in her Gothic reading of *Passing*. Unlike the mysterious maze metaphorically constructed within Clare’s mind, the fanatical church in *Quicksand* distorts Helga’s perception, presenting a seemingly enticing singular path that leads her directly into the domestic fate she attempted to avoid throughout the novel—one that ultimately leads to her destruction. In this way, Larsen employs the Gothic labyrinth as a metaphor for the religious doctrines condemning Helga to her inescapable fate, reinforcing the novel’s critique of social structures that continually suppress Black women’s autonomy.

Overtaken by impulses toward religious domesticity, Helga sets forth on her labyrinthine path in deciding to marry Reverend Green as an act of desperation. Still plagued by the shame she feels over her desire for Anderson, Anderson’s rejection lingers in her mind as she contemplates marrying Reverend Green. In remembering Anderson, overwhelming “elation,” an impulse toward “revenge,” and a “need to hurry suddenly obsessed her.” At this moment, Helga decides she “must” marry, and “she meant, if she could manage it, to be married today” (Larsen 118). This desperation reveals that her marriage is not one she enters because of genuine love and emotional fulfillment, ideals she once romanticized in imagining her future marriage. Instead, she marries out of compulsion, in direct reaction to Anderson’s rejection, frantically attempting to overwrite her past humiliation by readily embracing domestic Christian life. Though marriage initially appears to offer a means of

displacing her shame, it only entraps her in a rigid system that demands submission, further inhibiting her agency. In Gothic works, “abuses like enforced marriage” or “sequestration of self” do “remain recurrent, apparent, and abhorrent issues” (Botting 11). By subjecting Helga to both of these abuses, Larsen uses the Gothic to expose enforced marriage as yet another violent, harmful mechanism of social control. The novel’s disturbing Gothic depictions of Helga’s downfall highlight how society not only vilifies female desire but also constructs and reinforces institutions that suppress female autonomy.

No longer her own, Helga’s body is ravaged by relentless childbirth, reduced to nothing more than a vessel for reproduction. She is trapped in a torturous cycle that entirely depletes her, her “children us[ing] her up” until she is left with nothing (Larsen 124). Her existence is governed by constant pregnancy. Only in “the short spaces between the times when she was preparing for or recovering from childbirth” is she safe from the sexual advances of Reverend Green, who “so often gently and patiently reminded her” that childbearing “was a natural thing, an act of God,” never recognizing the “unendurable” toll it takes on her (Larsen 126). Reverend Green’s attitude underscores how Helga has become a mere divine instrument of procreation, now far removed from the free, independent woman she once was. The terrifying implications of Helga’s compulsory motherhood also invoke the Southern Gothic by alluding to forced reproduction characteristic of the South’s “true history,” which includes “the torture, rape, and other crimes committed against black slaves by their white masters” (Marshall 7). Just as enslaved women were denied bodily autonomy and made subject to taxing pregnancies for the benefit of others, Helga too finds herself similarly entangled in a cycle of compulsory reproduction. As Hostetler argues, Helga is “trapped by the social construction of her biology,” her body no longer her own but dictated by societal forces that demand her submission (44). By drawing this parallel, Larsen calls attention to the continued subjugation of Black women, illustrating how oppressive structures, despite the new forms they take on, persist relentlessly over time.

The decay of Helga’s physical body mirrors her internal emotional deterioration, her body entirely destroyed by the demands of motherhood. After her fourth child, whose death intensifies her unraveling, Helga completely shuts down. She lies catatonically still for a week, “[s]ilent and listless,” her condition so alarming that it “worried” her husband and “frightened” her midwife (Larsen 128). The midwife’s fear suggests that even those accustomed to witnessing childbirth recognize that something is deeply wrong and that Helga’s suffering exceeds what is natural or expected. At this point, “[n]othing penetrated the kind darkness into which [Helga’s] bruised spirit had retreated,” revealing the totality of the slow, brutal destruction of a woman who once longed for more from life (Larsen 129). The darkness her spirit recedes into encapsulates the true Gothic imprisonment of *Quicksand*: not a physical space which literally entraps her, but the suffocating confines of a domestic Christian life—one that has consumed her, stripped her of her autonomy, and erased her sense of self—along with the oppressive social structures that forced her away from the life she had and into this one.

What was once a spiritual surrender in hope of some form of relief has become an unending loop of physical suffering, revealing the full consequences of Helga’s inability to escape the structures that seek to control her body and her desire, even before she married the

Reverend and converted to Christianity. According to Marshall, the “Southern Gothic thrives on the theme of deformity,” with “severe physical disfigurements appear[ing] throughout the oeuvre” (13). In *Quicksand*, deformity plagues Helga’s post-childbearing body. At the novel’s close, hardly unable to “[leave] her bed” or “walk again without pain” before birthing another child, Helga has completely lost the mobility she once possessed, trapped forever by a life she never wanted (Larsen 136). Just as she once felt haunted by her own unfulfilled sexual desires, she is now haunted by the agony of pregnancy and motherhood. As duCille writes, *Quicksand*’s “story closes, like a lid on a casket,” and it is entirely possible that “the next garment that will drape the perhaps terminally pregnant Helga is a shroud” (431-32). Her relentless cycle of suffering renders her a shadow of her former self, a near corpse, erased by the domestic life she once possessed the agency to resist but could never fully escape.

Though *Quicksand* is rarely classified as a Gothic text by critics, Larsen deftly harnesses Gothic horror tropes in the novel’s final act to expose oppressive sociocultural forces—especially the predatory religious fanaticism of the church which ensnares a vulnerable, humiliated Helga in its ideological trap. In doing so, Larsen reveals how repressed historical realities of racism and misogyny are deeply embedded in Helga’s present, restricting female desire and autonomy while coercing women into prescribed social roles that uphold the status quo. Helga’s domestic life, which should provide her the fulfillment she craves, instead pushes her to the brink of death, turning her oppression into a grotesque and inescapable horror—one so viscerally terrifying that readers, like Helga in the storefront church, are “held” by the “horror” and simply cannot look away. In forcing us to witness Helga’s slow, inexorable decay, Larsen compels readers to confront the brutal consequences of suppressing Black women’s bodily autonomy, insisting upon our reckoning with the oppressive social forces that perpetually enforce their subjugation.

JADE SAFFERY A wordsmith-in-perpetual-training committed to honing her craft, Jade Saffery is hammering away at her Master’s Degree in English at CSULB after graduating from UCLA. Saffery forges her academic approach by melding interests in multicultural literature, queer theory, disability studies, and music and dreams of one day molding students’ minds as a professor.

Works Cited

- Botting, Fred. *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*. Routledge, 2014.
- Carby, Hazel V. "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Mealley, Columbia UP, 1998, pp. 469-82.
- duCille, Ann. "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1993, pp. 418-44.
- Hostetler, Ann E. "The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." *PMLA*, vol. 105, no. 1, 1990, pp. 35-46.
- Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand*. Penguin Books, 2002.
- Marshall, Bridget. "Defining Southern Gothic." *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature*, edited by Jay Ellis, Salem Press, 2013, pp. 3-18.
- Scheper, Jeanne. "The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." *African American Review*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2008, pp. 679-95.
- Wagner, Johanna M. "In the Place of Clare Kendry: A Gothic Reading of Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Callaloo*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 143-57.
- Walsh, Christopher J. "'Dark Legacy': Gothic Ruptures in Southern Literature." *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature*, edited by Jay Ellis, Salem Press, 2013, pp. 19-34.

Creature of the Night: Robin Vote's Descent into Madness and Monstrosity in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

Aryanna Draeger

Djuna Barnes's decadent, slippery novella *Nightwood* depicts a world that blurs the line between reality and the uncanny. None of the characters within the story embodies this more than Robin Vote, an enigmatic woman who spends her nights drifting through the dark streets of Paris. She is an unsettling figure who defies easy categorization between the binary of human and nonhuman. Critically, she is a contentious character—especially in the last scene of the novel. In this paper, I explore the ways in which Robin transcends her own humanity and instead takes on the characteristics of a supernatural being: a vampire. Robin is a creature of the night, a predator slowly stalking her prey. Her unconventional personality and lifestyle, unnerving animalistic connections and descriptions, as well as her slow descent into madness and monstrosity culminate to explain how she disrupts an already fragmented and bizarre world.

Theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explore the aspects of selfhood that fall into the category of eerie or monstrous. Kristeva draws upon Freud's theory of the uncanny and expands it when creating her theory of abjection—the repulsion of encountering what is otherwise repressed in order to uphold social norms (97). Creed takes both Freudian theory and Kristeva's theory of abjection, expanding upon those ideas further with her theory of the monstrous-feminine (212). The monstrous-feminine examines the victimization of women in the horror genre and the construction of women as monsters due to male anxiety surrounding feminine sexuality. Cohen breaks down the different aspects of what makes up monstrosity amongst different cultures around the world, using a wide variety of monsters from popular culture to illustrate the varying forms monstrosity takes.

When examining the Gothic aspects of *Nightwood*, the following scholars provide clarity to Robin's assimilation into the creepy, supernatural world. Deborah Martin examines the intersection between monstrous girlhood within horror and gothic narratives. Using feminist and Freudian theory, she proposes that feminine adolescence is self-estranged

and potentially plagued by oedipal masculine desires. In *Nightwood*, Robin herself is not an adolescent girl; she seems to be trapped in a youthful stasis, surrounded by toys. Sarah Parker argues the Gothic is deployed to transgress against repressive ideas about lesbianism both in literature and in society. She likens the threat of lesbianism to the cultural order as akin to the taboo of incest—rendering it a lifestyle that has been secluded to the shadows, without articulation; the Gothic is a dimension that allows for repressed desires and fantasies to come to light. Gina Wisker delves into the destabilization caused by female vampires in Gothic literature. Female vampires disrupt the cultural norms and ideals placed on what femininity is—passive and nurturing, living for her family, and creating future generations. Therefore, female vampirism is the antithesis of those values, and Wisker investigates the tug-of-war between celebration and castigation female vampires face.

Additionally, Carrie Rohman, Anna Christine, and Dana Seidler illuminate otherwise dark corners of *Nightwood*. Rohman deconstructs gender, race, and sexuality within *Nightwood* through a posthumanist lens, where Robin's "non-identity" serves as a "form of subjectivity, where the nonlinguistic, the undecidable, and the animal serve to revise what counts as human" (57). She also looks at the linguistic choices Barnes makes in creating a world that is filled with beasts, alienation, and ultimately, futility. Christine theorizes about the affective-aesthetic idea of cuteness within the context of the highly eroticized, abject environment of *Nightwood*. She uses the affect of cuteness to examine how it complicates the ideas of humanness and non-humanness, specifically pertaining to the queer bodies of the characters in the novella. By constantly shape-shifting between human and beast or human and doll, cuteness "reveals the porous and contingent borders of humanness and the human body" (186). Seidler contends that the human-beast hybrids throughout *Nightwood* signal a fear of modern sexual perversity through a "degeneration narrative" where "the body is produced as an ekphrasis of sexual perversion" (526). Christine believes the queer, cute body allows for the proliferation of the uncanny because instead of inciting feelings of love, they evoke feelings of disgust (180-1). Seidler, on the other hand, argues the narrative is a "lucid, self-contained animation of the grotesqueries of modern life" (526). All three scholars bring attention to the nonhuman state that Robin inhabits: a liminal identity that falls between bestial and human.

Unstable Self: Robin's Humanity in Question

Throughout *Nightwood*, Robin's selfhood is suggested to be in a state of instability. Instances of her instability include her gender presentation, detachment from social structures, emotional aloofness, and her deep connection to sleep. Robin's existence in liminal spaces adds to the instability of her identity. One such example is her unconventional gender presentation and the challenge it presents to societal norms, especially during the period in which the novel is written. She is described throughout as dressing "like a boy." The distinction of a "boy" rather than a "man" is key; not only does she present on the masculine side of the gender binary, she is youthful in her masculinity. This pushes her further into the margins because of her inability to mature; she lives in the grey area between adolescence and matrescence. When faced with oncoming motherhood, Robin seeks salvation by taking Catholic vows. The nuns regard her as a "tall girl with the body of a boy," straddling the strict

binaries of gender presentation (Barnes 50). Her youthful masculinity comes into play again later in the scene, as Robin “found herself worrying about her height. Was she still growing?” (50). Her mind cannot seem to conceptualize the idea of her unborn child, and instead it sees her bodily changes as nothing more than a childish growth spurt, which indicates her masculine pubescent state of mind. Martin explains, “[M]asculinity can be read not simply as a projection of male reader or viewer, but as the uncanny experience of the feminine adolescent herself” as a person “reckoning with the residues of her masculine self, with her ambiguity as a gendered subject” (141). Robin’s ability to slip between binaries and exist in the liminal spaces of a world already filled with offbeat, marginalized individuals makes her identity so unstable. She is trapped in stasis, an eternal youth that is not simply physical like most vampires but also mental.

Robin’s nomadic lifestyle and detachment from social structures stands in stark contrast to all of her ex-lovers. Felix, Nora, and Jenny each crave something from Robin that she simply cannot give them: a version of domestic bliss. Robin’s detachment from regular modes of existence is unusual even amongst the cast of misfits, as she drifts from place to place, collecting no worldly possessions or emotional attachments. Soon after giving birth, “Robin took to wandering . . . to intermittent travel from which she came back hours, days later, disinterested. People were uneasy when she spoke to them; confronted with a catastrophe that had yet no beginning” (Barnes 52–3). The alien nature that is her mode of existence causes the people who do try to engage in conversation with her to instantly feel the innate uncanniness of who she is. Her vagabond nature suggests that she lives an existence outside human desires and needs. Her lack of integration into societal norms reinforces her role as an outsider; she is a creature of the periphery, unable to stop her nightly wanderings that ultimately stand in for real companionship.

The impermanence of Robin’s bonds with other humans reinforces the argument that she is not of the human realm. Unlike every other character in *Nightwood* who yearn for deeper human connection and intimacy, she cannot seem to withstand someone piercing through her outer shell and into her gooey, emotional center. Her succession of relationships follows a similar trajectory; intense, fleeting, and, ultimately, destructive. She leaves her husband, Felix, and their child because she cannot perform typical femininity; she lacks both maternal instincts and compassion. Moreover, her affair with Jenny Petherbridge is fraught with abuse and violence. Her romantic pursuits seem to fill an unfillable void, fizzling quickly while leaving a trail of wreckage in their wake. As Jenny ends their explosive, cruel relationship, she “accuse[s] Robin of a ‘sensuous communion with unclean spirits’” (Barnes 177). Jenny is hinting at a self-indulgent intimacy with the demonic, a stain on Robin’s soul that only grows larger and larger due to her impure affinities. Robin cannot transcend the emotions of human relationships the same way she transcends her humanity, as she lacks empathy and the emotional depth to reciprocate true feelings that are necessary to create lasting relationships. Her interactions with others are often self-serving and manipulative, showing that she is a beast living with a different set of rules, driven by primal desire rather than genuine emotional connection. Robin’s fundamental emotional detachment further transcends her humanity, positioning her as monstrous, a being on the fringes of the human experience, tethered to life by nonhuman desires.

The first introduction of Robin's character harkens to the truest, most valuable relationship in her life: the deep connection between herself and sleep. The periods of unconsciousness Robin experiences are unsettling, as they bring the idea of rebirth after death to the surface:

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness . . . making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface . . . the troubling structure of the born somnambule. (37)

Instead of inciting images of Sleeping Beauty waiting to be awakened by "true love's kiss," Robin provokes the impression of life leeching off the decay of bones long dead. Her earthly form is in the process of breaking down due to the fermenting "fungi" that oozes from her "porous" flesh. Her body is in active decay, a carcass in the liminal stage between genesis and necrosis. Kristeva's rhapsodizing of dead bodies and the feelings of abjection that they trigger fit perfectly with Robin's characterization in this scene, as the corpse, "[S]een without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (97). Robin's slumber is a kind of portal to the Other Side—the realm of life after death, a venture that takes her further from her humanity every time she returns to the land of the living. Her moratorium of consciousness is a "decay fishing her beneath the visible surface." She spends her nights roving, searching for something that is just out of reach, and her days comatose like a nocturnal animal awaiting the moon to once again rise. Her extended periods of dormancy imply how her state of being is vastly different; the cyclical pattern of renewal brings her further from her humanity each time. Her relationship with sleep underscores her enigmatic nature and her connection to a world that her peers can never quite grasp. Robin is the ghost of the once-living turned corporeal again, a phantasma that will consume and destroy those who love her the most.

Monstrous Feminine: Robin's Vampirism

Robin's vampirism reveals itself in multiple ways, including the emotional, the animalistic, and lack of maternal feelings toward her child. The emotional vampirism is exemplified by the emotional wreckage she causes her partners due to her complete indifference to each of them. The most volatile of her relationships is with Jenny, a passionate affair that devolves into cruelty and abuse. Jenny's nervous disposition cannot handle Robin's attention straying from her for even a second, as she knows the pattern of Robin's apathy. The pivotal scene in a carriage showcases the viciousness with which they attack each other: "'Shut up,' Robin said. . . . 'Shut up, you don't know what you are talking about. You talk all the time and you never know anything . . . ' . . . Then Jenny struck Robin, scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking, clutching and crying. Slowly the blood began to run down Robin's cheeks, as Jenny struck repeatedly" (Barnes 82-3). However, Robin does not react like a woman trapped and scared in a violent relationship. She accepts the blows through a

mental detachment from her physical form. She does not defend herself or cry out in pain; she does not beg for Jenny's strikes against her to end. This detachment further exemplifies her descent into monstrosity and vampirism and is reverberated throughout the rest of the novella. The detachment she has toward other humans aligns also with a detachment from her physical form. Her pointed barbs and cruel tauntings toward Jenny are merely a pastime for her, a larger game wherein Jenny and her other lovers are pawns that excite the predator in her. Ironically, Jenny is an emotional vampire herself. Robin's relationship with Jenny exemplifies a larger part of her existence—her monstrous intent that rattles even the bizarre emotional landscape that Barnes nurtures throughout.

The uncanny nature of Robin's relationship with animals adds another dimension to her monstrous feminine, vampiristic identity. The animals she comes into contact with throughout the novella innately understand that she is closer to them than she is to being human. Nora's first moments with Robin occur at the circus when the animals have a befuddling reaction to her: "Then one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite [Robin], she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl . . . her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface" (Barnes 59–60). The lioness understands her role in the food chain, and when looking upon Robin, the lioness grasps that Robin is the ultimate predator. She bows in deference to the creature assuming the form of a woman in front of her. Looking into Robin's eyes is like looking into a distorted image of a beast, a creature whose next move cannot be known by a mere human being. Seidler hypothesizes, "'becoming animal' . . . ironizes the relations between woman and animal, pervert and beast" (554). To become the amalgamation of animal and woman is to transfigure the normal bounds of identity and to grant those signifying words fluidity in that transformation. Robin exhibits a disturbing intimacy that oversteps the normal boundaries of human and animal. The continuous challenging of easy categorization makes her obscene, perverted, and ultimately, a monstrous feminine figure.

Furthermore, the beast that lives within Robin is made evident to readers almost immediately after she is first introduced. Felix's first gaze at her eyes evokes a curious description: "Felix, who had been looking into [her eyes] intently because of their mysterious and shocking blue, found himself seeing them still faintly clear and timeless behind the lids—the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye" (Barnes 40–1). Her physicality is rendered such that she has a monster lurking beneath the surface of her human form. The animalistic gleam in her eye seems to both excite and unsettle Felix; perhaps this is what drove his initial fancies for Robin. He recognizes that "sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human" (41). The bestial nature of her body incites a primal desire within Felix to consume her, the ache of cannibalism pressing up against fear and ultimately muddling the horror of monstrosity. The manifestation of this appetite is shown through the feelings that are brought forth by Robin's presence as "the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning" (41). Rohman believes that the hunger to consume her alludes to a move toward cannibalism, a move that rejects humanity and its dogmas, disconnecting human beings from their humanness and bringing them toward the animal through the taboo of eating flesh (67). Simply existing near Robin brings out the beast in

her peers. She is akin to the biblical serpent from Genesis coming to tempt Adam and Eve into committing vile acts. A vampire's blood has to be swallowed by their prey in the act of creating another, so to consume her is to stop repressing one's carnal desire and give into a life of hedonistic delight.

Robin's descent into madness first begins after she gives birth to Guido, which conjures images of postpartum depression/anxiety. If her awakening in "La Somnambule" was the beginning stages of her metamorphosis, the birth of her son is her entering a metaphorical cocoon before emerging changed entirely. She is described as "lost, as if she had done something irreparable," suddenly realizing that motherhood does not suit her sensibilities (Barnes 52). Her violent tendencies toward even her own child are revealed when Felix comes upon her "holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down" (52). The lack of attunement with her new maternal role is made perfectly clear by Barnes's use of the word "it." Guido is not a person to Robin—he is a plaything that could be dashed down if it so strikes her fancy, a victim of her lovelessness. Robin's refusal to join motherhood is her "symbolically refus[ing] to accept her role as a passive exchange commodity" (Parker 12). Without giving birth, it is possible that she would not make a full transformation into a creature of the night; rather, she would have had an unrealized malignancy that resides just under the surface of her skin.

The final scene of the book is not only a drastic stylistic departure from the rest of the novella, but it is also the most obscene and distressing. Robin has fully embraced her monstrosity, seeming to be possessed by a force greater than herself. The chapter itself being titled "The Possessed" alludes to this fact. The crescendo of unmitigated personal realization begins when Robin encounters Nora's dog in a chapel that resides on Nora's property, the perimeter of which Robin had been stalking, "circl[ing] closer and closer" (Barnes 177). She transgresses even more boundaries when she stops merely resembling a beast and fully begins to transform into a dog. Her descriptors mirror those of Nora's dog, with "her hair swinging, her arms held out . . . dragging her forelocks in the dust, she struck against his side" (179). Her shift into a canine feels very much like witnessing a transformation sequence in a horror movie, her physical body changing into something nonhuman, something vampiric. Her body is "on all fours now, dragging her knees. The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms" (179). Although Christine believes that Barnes "infer[s] fellatio" as Robin descends down, I argue that Robin does not interact with the dog in a sexual manner but instead reproduces the effect of an alpha wolf to dominate and show her prowess (182). The dog is described as "quivering," and "whimpering," "let[ting] loose a howl of misery," attacked by Robin as she finally stops inhabiting the liminal space between beast and human and fully commits to the life of a predator (Barnes 179). The last paragraph of the book wherein the two beasts (transformed Robin and her defeated victim) lay exhausted together in a heap, the dog cannot stop crying with "bloodshot" eyes indicating that she has not only won, but stolen his life force (180). She has finally made the leap from emotional vampirism to physical bloodsucking.

While Robin's vampirism and her residence within the monstrous feminine are not widely accepted by critics, the symbolic markers fit her. Her characteristics align with Cohen's monster thesis, "The Monster is a Harbinger of Category Crisis," as Robin is a hybrid

of difference, “a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). Creed’s theory of the monstrous-feminine positions femininity, specifically its association with the body and sexuality, as able to be constructed through the lens of monstrosity because it upsets typical patriarchal order. Monstrous femininity disrupts societal norms as well as boundaries between women and animals. Creed further defines the monstrous feminine as “constructed in the modern horror text . . . grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious ‘abominations’: sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest” (213). Robin falls into many of these “religious abominations” throughout the course of her descent into monsterhood, especially with the mindset of a reader from the 1930s. Wisker’s definition of vampires, specifically female ones, is evocative of Robin; Wisker writes, “[T]hese female vampires are self-centered, duplicitous, voracious and desperate for longevity and eternal youth . . . The threat of each is highly sexualised, invasive, non-conformist; each is demonised. . . . Some drain babies and men of their lifeblood, some drain anyone available of their life force” (152). Robin’s vampirism bleeds dry everyone in her orbit through her sybaritic lifestyle as she has little regard for anyone’s vitality that is not her own. She disturbs the status quo with her everlasting youth, her near heretical disobedience in maintaining a unified categorization of identity, and her uncanny magnetism that invites people in only to end their previous modes of existence.

Final Form: Eternally Liminal

Nightwood’s Robin Vote is an unknowable beast, always slinking into the shadows instead of stating clear intentions, a transcendent being living in liminal realms instead of firmly residing in strict binaries. She is alternately a woman and a beast, blurring the lines between human and monster. Her predatory manner, nocturnal habits, and youthful disposition all suggest that she exists in a domain of her own, a vampire stalking the fantastical streets of Paris, an enigmatic character even among a cast of outcasts and societal aberrations. She is an unbound creature of the night—independent, aggressive, and wholly singular. Robin emerges from her transformation as a powerful force that disrupts normalized notions of femininity, sexuality, and the fragmented world she inhabits. *Nightwood* pushes the boundaries of the Gothic genre due to Robin’s eternal stagnation, her inability to mature, acting as an anti-bildungsroman. She never successfully pieces herself together or sews the pieces firmly to form herself into one solid being. Her transgressive body affects not only the pages she resides within, but also the larger issues of societal normativity and dominant systems of behavior.

Aryanna Draeger is currently pursuing her MA in Literature at California State University, Long Beach. Her research interests include monstrosity, gender and queer theory, as well as Medieval & Gothic literature. When not toiling away at her studies, you can find her hanging out with her dogs or watching horror movies.

Work Cited

- Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. New Directions Pub., 2006.
- Christine, Anna. "I Wanna Be Your Puppy": Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and the Queer Cute Body." *Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature*, edited by Kara Watts et al., U.P. of Florida, 2019, pp. 172-191.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Creed, Barbara. "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, U of Minnesota P, 2020, pp. 211-225.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, U of Minnesota P, 2020, pp. 95-107.
- Martin, Deborah. "Feminine Adolescence as Uncanny: Masculinity, Haunting and Self-Estrangement." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2013, pp. 135-144.
- Parker, Sarah. "'The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roosts Her Heart': Lesbians, Desire and the Gothic Genre." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, pp. 4-19.
- Rohman, Carrie. "Revising the Human: Silence, Being, and the Question of the Animal in *Nightwood*." *American Literature*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2007, pp. 57-84.
- Seitler, Dana. "Down on All Fours: Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire from Frank Norris to Djuna Barnes." *American Literature*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2001, pp. 525-562.
- Wisker, Gina. "Female Vampirism." *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, Edinburgh U.P., 2017, pp. 150-166.

“Why, Is It Such a Bad Thing to Die?”: Yeong-Hye’s Return to Nature in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*

Christopher Yeung

For the women existing at the peripheries of society in South Korea, Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2015) acts as a rallying cry against the patriarchal violence that they continue to face into the twenty-first century. As the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, experiences violent dreams brimming with meat and blood, she finds herself increasingly detached from the expectations traditionally held against the woman’s body—both socially and physically—in patriarchal Korea as she moves towards her true desire: becoming a tree. My paper dissects the novel from a psychoanalytic lens to make sense of this seemingly strange decision. I apply this specific theoretical approach because it allows us to render Yeong-Hye’s dreams into a sensible structure for us to understand the message of this novel. Unraveling her unconscious, we discover that Yeong-Hye is, above all, a martyr who dies an eternal death that symbolizes both the possibilities of the modern day Korean woman and the tragic fates of those who rebel. Her death awakens Korean women to the violence stemming from their country’s patriarchal roots. Finally, my paper aims to place *The Vegetarian* within the fascinating development of Korean women’s literature, in which women writers have been inspired by ecofeminist theories to write stories that respond to the collective trauma that they have faced.

Constructing Korean Womanhood In *The Vegetarian*

There is one conspicuous feature to the novel’s structure that we must begin with: the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, is “voiceless” during her waking state and speaks exclusively to the reader during her dream state. In the absence of her first-person voice, the narrative is instead a non-linear restitution of three distinct third-person novellas told from the perspectives of her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister. This led to my first question: why must Yeong-Hye’s story be told by those around her?

Hakyoung Ahn attempts to explain this narrative decision by analyzing the second act of the novel, where Yeong-Hye repeatedly engages in sexual intercourse with her brother-in-law. As Ahn explains, Yeong-Hye becomes the object for her brother-in-law’s video projects,

in which “the brother-in-law’s profound struggles . . . are deflected onto Yeong-Hye in his desire for transcendence” (Ahn 286). It is here that we discover that Yeong-Hye illustrates “the structural objectification of women in art...largely discussed in terms of the male gaze,” in which women are “unconsciously structured upon patriarchal ideas and values, reflecting and satisfying the male unconscious” (Ahn 286–287). For Ahn, Kang’s choice of a third-person rather than first-person retelling of Yeong-Hye’s story becomes a necessary part of this story’s structure, especially when it is set in a Korea where women still exist to satisfy the long standing tradition of the male gaze. Furthermore, when Yeong-Hye’s decision to take “the form of a plant is actually an idea first presented to her by the brother-in-law’s video-art concept,” her transformation “fails to be empowering” and instead “demonstrates her lack of agency within larger social circumstances” in South Korea (Ahn 284). Paradoxically, Yeong-Hye’s voicelessness is her voice when she is already “embedded within a social framework in which women’s sexuality is objectified and exploited” by those around her (Ahn 284).

In contrast to Ahn’s views, Rose Casey views Yeong-Hye’s transformation into a tree as an empowering one. For Casey, the transformation displays “Yeong-Hye’s will to arboreality” and becomes her approach to “transnational feminist world-building” (Casey 348). Specifically, Yeong-Hye’s performance of “feminist world-building” subverts the expectations created by her husband’s male gaze. Danielle Sands’s analysis of the novel expands upon this idea by placing focus on how patriarchal societies are upheld by the “self-declared separation between ‘human’ and animal’ and the devaluing of ‘woman’ through her association with animality or the natural world” (Sands 326). Unlike her brother-in-law, whose gaze fixes upon Yeong-Hye’s body as a site of possible transcendence, for her husband, “[Yeong-Hye’s] transformation symbolizes the disintegration of the distinction between human and animal...which scaffolds his worldview” (Sands 328). The violence inflicted by Yeong-Hye’s husband can now be understood as a direct response to his “terror at the existential threat that she poses” on Korea’s patriarchal foundations (Sands 328).

The existing scholarship highlights a divide that questions whether Yeong-Hye’s “arboreal turn” is an empowering decision or not. For Ahn, the decision was never hers to begin with; therefore, Yeong-Hye only serves to emphasize the male gaze and the lack of agency of the woman’s body in modern day Korea. For Sands and Casey, the same choice is instead a powerful one that allows Yeong-Hye to perform an ecofeminist worldview, one which allows her to subvert patriarchal expectations. My paper attempts to combine both perspectives. I argue that Yeong-Hye’s unique practice of self-effacement should be viewed as an expression of her power *amidst* her powerlessness. I further argue that this may be the only agency she has when she must die as an eternal archetype for the women existing at the peripheries of modern day Korean society. Furthermore, in combining both the dreams she experiences with her naturalistic practice of feminist world-building, I attempt to place Kang’s novel within a burgeoning ecofeminist movement in Korean women’s literature. That is, *The Vegetarian* is not alone in turning towards grotesque depictions of the woman’s body, and has in fact built upon a burgeoning literary canon where women writers have chosen to write similar stories to respond to the trauma that they have faced.

Rethinking *The Vegetarian* as a Lacanian Detective Novel

In response to Descartes’s immortalized statement, “I think, therefore I am,” it was Jacques Lacan who first said, “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not” (Lacan 136). This captured his belief that he extended into literary studies, in which he called for critics to not just understand what was directly written on paper, but what was—perhaps more significantly—left unwritten. For Lacan, if “in the unconscious is the whole structure of language,” then literary texts functioned almost as palimpsests for this language of the unconscious (Lacan 113). This is why I turned to a psychoanalytic analysis of the text of *The Vegetarian*. Yeong-Hye’s desire to turn first towards vegetarianism, before further descending into the ground as she aims to become a tree, fuels this story’s plot. However, Yeong-Hye never speaks in her waking reality. Rather, she “speaks” to the reader through her dreams. Cathy Caruth, a leading figure in trauma studies, details, “trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). She further explains how, in her work with patients suffering from trauma, she discovered that the characteristic quality of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were the “often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 58–59). Yeong-Hye’s dreams, which repeatedly center around meat, blood, and violence inflicted upon animals, are nothing but traumatic. When understood through the lens of trauma studies and the Lacanian theory of the language of the unconscious, it becomes clear that the truth of *The Vegetarian* would not be discovered in Yeong-Hye’s waking reality. My paper therefore attempts to dissect her dreams in order to unbury the origins of her trauma.

I created the following diagram below to illustrate the theory—based on the works of Ferdinand Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan—which I use in my analysis to make Yeong-Hye’s insensible dreams sensible.

meaning	representation	relation	movement
S (signifier)	metonymy	contiguity	displacement
s (signified)	metaphor	similarity	condensation

Fig. 1

Hugh Bredin emphasizes how fundamental Saussure’s definition of the sign is to modern linguistics. In Saussure’s definition of the sign, “the internal structure of a sign is binary,” made up of the “sound-image” and the “concept” (Bredin 67). From this perspective, “a particular sound-image . . . combines with a particular concept to yield a particular sign” (Bredin 67). Modern day semiotics is specifically indebted to two terms that appear throughout Saussure’s work: the “signifier”—the sound-image component of the sign—and the “signified”—the conceptual component of the sign (Bredin 68).

Linguist Roman Jakobson is considered to be the first to connect Saussure’s binary nature of the sign in semiotics to language. Specifically, in his revolutionary studies of patients suffering from aphasia, he found that speech patterns seemed to reflect this “bipolar structure of language” (Jakobson 256). For these patients regaining speech, Jakobson established that “metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to

the contiguity disorder” (Jakobson 254). Jacques Lacan would later take this idea further by connecting metaphor with Saussure’s idea of the signified, and metonymy with Saussure’s idea of the signifier (Lacan 124).

The final column of the diagram I have drawn above brings us to Sigmund Freud’s understanding of the movements within the dream state, which are essential to Lacan’s psychoanalytic explanation of language that I use in this paper. Scholar Ernest Jones details how Freud separated dreams into two components: latent and manifest content. For Freud, latent content was to be understood as “the underlying dream thoughts” unavailable to the subject, whereas “manifest content is to be regarded as an allegorical expression” of the latent content which crystallizes the meaning of the dream for the subject (Jones 285). This brings us to the Freudian ideas of condensation and displacement, which track the movements of latent content that transform into manifest content. Specifically, condensation can be defined as the moments during the dream state in which the chain of latent content becomes “fused into one, thus forming a new unity” (Jones 287). On the other hand, displacement can be described as the contiguous movements that allow latent content to be connected to other latent content. This chain of latent content allows seemingly unrelated signs to be “made use of in the dream-making to represent more significant ideas,” which come to fruition in the dream state’s manifest content (Jones 289).

Finally, it is Lacan who applies these theories in semiotics, linguistics, and dreams—as captured by Saussure, Jakobson, and Freud, respectively— to the language of the unconscious. Specifically, he defined the “locus of this unconscious” as $\frac{S}{s}$, in which “S” represents the signifier and “s” the signified (Lacan 132). Lacan then draws parallels between Saussure’s signifier and signified with Jakobson’s ideas of metonymy and metaphor. Not only does he establish this connection between signs and language, he applies the Freudian movements of condensation and displacement in dreams to the structure of a text. As Lacan emphasizes, condensation is akin to “the structure of the superimposition of signifiers” which brings us to “the field of metaphor,” while displacement is “closer to the idea of that veering off of meaning that we see in metonymy” (Lacan 129). We have finally come to a comprehensive understanding of what Lacan meant when he said that the unconscious was structured like a language, which I have captured in the diagram above. Given the core role of Yeong-Hye’s dreams in the plot of this novel, I apply the Lacanian definitions of signifier and signified, (signifier over signified) as it pertains to Yeong-Hye’s unspoken language. Above all, *The Vegetarian* is an example of what Caruth calls the story of trauma: “it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth 4). Bringing us to Lacan’s idea of the meaning of the text, Caruth emphasizes, “this truth...cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (Caruth 4).

This is where I believe we can think of *The Vegetarian* as a Lacanian detective novel. The structure of the novel first centers around Yeong-Hye’s trauma, before moving to her dreams, and finally ends with her return to nature as she attempts to find meaning. This mirrors Slavoj Žižek’s ideas of the structure of the detective novel. In his analysis of Sherlock Holmes, he compares the detective to the psychoanalyst, in which “the detective’s domain” like that of the psychoanalyst is “thoroughly the domain of meaning” (Žižek 57). Echoing Lacan’s idea

on the language of the unconscious, Žižek explains how, for Sherlock, “the scene of the crime analyzed by the detective is by definition ‘structured like a language,’” in which Sherlock is tasked to create meaning from the clues given to him (Žižek 57). In Sherlock Holmes’s case, it is the scene of a murder that acts as the trauma that unfolds before his eyes as he attempts to find meaning amongst the clues. Similarly, Yeong-Hye’s role in *The Vegetarian* is to be the Lacanian detective. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, it is not the murder of another person that is the traumatic event, but her own trauma as she faces the violence subjected to women in contemporary Korea. Just like Sherlock, she must “resymbolize the traumatic shock” found only in her unconscious and integrate it into her lived reality (Žižek 58). Yeong-Hye’s dreams of meat are the first clues she is given in this novel and therefore serve as the starting point for this analysis.

Deciphering Yeong-Hye’s Dreams of Meat

The novel begins as Yeong-Hye tells her husband of her dreams containing bloody images of meat (Kang 10). To her husband’s dismay, she begins to throw away “beef and pork, pieces of chicken, [and] at least 200,000-won worth of saltwater eel,” as Yeong-Hye attempts to get rid of all meat around her (Kang 10). This dream formally begins Yeong-Hye’s departure from her husband’s values. Understanding the distinctive connection between meat and man in Korean history begins with the recent debates around dog meat consumption. During the early twenty-first century, “animal rights” came into conflict with “cultural rights” (Oh and Jackson 49). Sociologists Minjoo Oh and Jeffrey Jackson detail this controversy in which the politics of dog meat have provided “an avenue for challenging the consumption of meat generally” (Oh and Jackson 49). To the dismay of those in the country that view the practice as inhumane, supporters of the practice “asserted a ‘right’ to defend a cultural practice,” with dog meat functioning as “a marker for national identity” (Oh and Jackson 52). The latter phrase should be further explored, as it reveals “indigenous habits” that have undeniable masculine ties (Oh and Jackson 40). Traditionally, the soup which utilizes the meat, *boshintang*, has been eaten by men to “enhance their stamina, and more recently . . . as a way of enhancing sexual prowess” (Oh and Jackson 41). Despite facing opposition, the consumption of dog meat has stayed, reflecting the more holistic trend of continued patriarchal nationalism within the country.

In Yeong Hye’s recurring nightmares, she describes the violence inflicted upon animals by male figures in her life. Throughout the first part of *The Vegetarian*, she specifically describes a dog that has been “chained up” to her father’s motorcycle and “made to run” until death by exhaustion (Kang 41). Here, we find that Yeong-Hye’s dreams begin to draw the connection between the bodies of animals and the bodies of women. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams speaks of how both the bodies of women and animals function as “absent referents” for the language of violence intrinsically connected to both the consumption of meat and the consumption of women’s bodies (Adams 66). In the consumption of meat, live animals act as absent referents because they must be made absent in both “name and body” for meat to exist (Adams 68). The transformation of the live animal into an absent referent “permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity” (Adams 68). Similarly to live animals, women are “the absent referents when the language of sexual violence is

used metaphorically, recalling women's experiences but not women" (Adams 68). After Yeong-Hye's dreams begin in the first chapter, she refuses to have sexual intercourse with her husband. One night, her husband is so frustrated that he rapes Yeong-Hye. Just like the live animal, Yeong-Hye now knows she is the absent referent to her own rape. Her husband describes the aftermath of this scene, with Yeong-Hye laying there "as though she were a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services" (Kang 32).

This overlap in the language used when describing the violence done to both women and animals is further explored by Adams. Victims of rape often describe themselves as being "treated like pieces of meat" (Adams 81). This mirrors the language used to describe the forced insemination of animals in the meat industry, which are performed on what are called "rape racks" (Adams 82). In both cases, the violence inflicted against both women and animals respectively convert their bodies into spaces for the male gaze to act upon. Whether it is literal or figurative consumption, Adams argues that their bodies are collectively "prepared, reshaped, [and] acculturated to be made consumable in a patriarchal world" (Adams 81-83). When Yeong-Hye refuses to have sex with her husband, she in fact speaks of this connection between meat and man when she says to him, "your body smells like meat" (Kang 17). After her rape, her unconscious state reflects her reality as she begins to see "animal eyes gleaming wild...rising up from the pit of my stomach" (Kang 33). It is as if Yeong-Hye knows that she herself has become the animal; just as the animal is the absent referent for meat, she is now the absent referent for the sexual violence that falls on her and other women throughout Korean history.

Specifically, Yeong-Hye points to a dark history in which Korean women were subjected to traumatic sexual violence. Pyong Gap Min details how, during the first half of the twentieth century, nearly 200,000 Korean women were "forced to engage in sexual servitude by the imperial Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War (1932-1945)" (Min 938). After World War II, these women continued to be ignored as they became a marker for national shame, and were forced to "keep silent for half a century" (Min 950). Beyond the sexual violence that Korean women faced under Japanese colonial rule, Korea's own patriarchal customs during the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) speak to a long-standing pattern of control over women's bodies at a societal level. During this era, sociologists Insoon Han Park and Lee-Jay Cho discuss how women were expected to follow a national patrilineal code, best known as "the rule of the three obediences" (124). This rule laid out the expectation that "a woman was required to obey her father, husband, and son, in that order" (Park and Cho 124-125). Professor Ruth Williams likewise speaks of how the Confucian-inspired rule of the three obediences has reemerged in modern day Korea, where women like Yeong-Hye are still expected to adhere to "three rigid roles: *ch'yōnyō* (처녀/virgin), *ajumma* (아줌마/middle-aged woman/mother), and *halmōni* (할머니/grandmother)" (Williams 396). Hidden within these roles is the gradual progression of a woman's life as one perpetually intertwined in servitude of a "different [male] master", in which women find themselves underneath first the rule of their fathers, then their husbands, and finally, their sons (Williams 397). When Yeong-Hye's husband remarks that "it was sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes" (Kang 14), or when her father speaks of her defiance as a child when Yeong-Hye refuses to eat meat (Kang 27), they are speaking to their

surprise at her continued challenges to a patriarchal society that contemporary Korea is still founded upon.

The Vegetarian as an Ecofeminist Tale: Does Yeong-Hye Live Happily Ever After?

Yeong-Hye leaves the first part of *The Vegetarian* separated from her husband and abandoned by her father. By analyzing the connection between animals and women in Korea, we discover that she functions as a symbol for the marginalized women of Korea today; like other Korean women who live “outside of these defined roles” of *ch’yōnyō* (처녀/virgin) and *hajumma* (아줌마/married woman), she is labeled as a “crazy woman” and as a “*manyō* [마녀/witch]” (Williams 397). In the second part of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye continues to be haunted by dreams of meat, but as she is cast away to a sanatorium due to her perceived hysterics, she attempts to escape into the forest around her in order to fulfill her desire to become a tree. While this decision confounds those around her, I argue that applying ecofeminist theory alongside the psychoanalytic lens I have used makes her decision understandable to Korean women also subject to this patriarchal structure.

The diagram below is based on the ideas of psychoanalysis explained earlier in this paper, and covers the primary signs presented to Yeong-Hye as she finds meaning through her dreams. The words in the top row represent the signifiers which begin each signifying chain of her evolution. In contrast, the words in the bottom row represent the condensed signified form after the latent chains of signifiers have undergone their displacements. Subsequently, each arrow in the diagram traces the movements made between the previous chain’s signified form with the first signifier in the following chain that moves us closer to Yeong-Hye’s final form: the tree. As the diagram makes clear, everything must begin with Yeong-Hye’s birthmark, which also formally marks the start of the second part of this novel

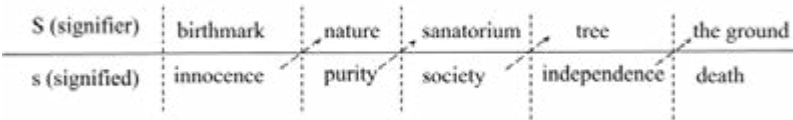


Fig. 2

Yeong-Hye’s birthmark is described as appearing on her buttocks, a “Mongolian mark” usually “fading away completely long before adulthood” (Kang 157). This multi-colored birthmark allows us to first establish its metonymic relation with her childhood. As her sister In-Hye recounts, Yeong-Hye’s trauma began during this time, when she was “the only victim of their father’s beatings” (Kang 71). We learned in the first act that this continued into adulthood with her husband, most notably with her rape, ultimately ending in the final dinner scene of the first act when her father violently force-feeds her meat. This birthmark ultimately represents Yeong-Hye’s original innocence, one which she has been deprived of through the violence she experiences from the men around her.

After Yeong-Hye's force-feeding of meat by her father, she is so shaken that she has to be rushed to the hospital by her sister's husband. Previously "nothing more than an object of pity," Yeong-Hye now becomes the object of his fascination (Kang 69). Before the second act, we learn that In-Hye's husband's video art lacks color as it centered around "the monochrome world" that he found severely suffocating. However, "after hearing about her [Yeong-Hye's] Mongolian mark" and discovering that the mark resembled a flower blooming with color, his work as a video artist starts to dramatically change (Kang 72). It is "the image of that blue petal-like mark" which begins a marked change in his work, as his video art increasingly depicts images from nature blooming with color (Kang 100). As Ahn notes in her analysis of *The Vegetarian*, In-Hye's husband's video art is a crucial development for Yeong-Hye. In the second part of this novel, his art becomes the conduit for Yeong-Hye to make sense of the clues previously buried in unconscious. As his video art begins to include trees and flowers, both he and Yeong-Hye start to feel a peace and purity which only nature seems to provide (Kang 83). Ultimately, In-Hye's husband is not satisfied with simply depicting images of nature. Yeong-Hye's body eventually becomes the site of his drawings and she allows him to draw petals, trees, and flowers, all beginning from her Mongolian mark. When he finishes this final project, Yeong-Hye is described to appear as "one body, a hybrid of plant, animal and human" (Kang 113). When her sister In-Hye discovers what her husband has done to Yeong-Hye, she does not see the purity in this image, only the madness that must have overcome both her sister and her husband to perform such an act. This image becomes the justification for In-Hye to place Yeong-Hye in a sanatorium, where she is moved to the physical peripheries of her society.

As both Casey and Sands emphasized in their analysis of *The Vegetarian*, this final video art project, in which Yeong-Hye's body becomes the image to behold, is essential in the novel's transition into a distinctly ecofeminist tale. As philosopher Trish Glazebrook explains, ecofeminism found its beginnings in 1974 when French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne emphasized the "necessity for women to bring about ecological revolution" (Glazebrook 13). As d'Eaubonne witnessed both what she viewed as the patriarchal depletion of natural resources and the depletion of the women's body as a reproductive system, she wrote out this ultimatum still used by ecofeminists today: "feminism or death" (Glazebrook 13). Adams, who is outspoken on the connection between the violence inflicted upon women and animals, has also contributed to ecofeminist theories on the control exercised by patriarchal systems on both women and nature. She specifically notes the "connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature" which has led to the development of "feminist-vegetarian communities" throughout the world (Adams 126). For these communities, animals' suffering is part of a "larger critique of the maltreatment of the natural world" (Adams 127). For Adams, these communities align themselves with vegetarianism as a means of protest against "the environmental profligacy of meat production" which they perceive to be committed by the patriarchal structures around them (Adams 130). As Park and Cho emphasize, in a Korea which has transformed from an agrarian to a fully industrialized state in just one generation, this association between environmental and feminist causes has never been more relevant (Park and Cho 120). Ecofeminist theories in fact allow us to bridge the

gap between Yeong-Hye's alignment with animals in the first part of *The Vegetarian* and her alignment with nature in the second part of this novel.

Most importantly, we discover that Yeong-Hye's return to nature becomes her most profound source for healing from the trauma she has faced throughout this novel. After In-Hye's husband paints flowers and trees all over Yeong-Hye's body, she tells him that she did not "want [the paintings] to come off," since his artwork was able to "stop the dreams from coming" (Kang 97). After Yeong-Hye's ecofeminist turn, she remarks that she is "no longer scared" of the images of tortured animals that appear in her dreams (Kang 115). However, when In-Hye stumbles upon the images of her sister, they instead become proof that Yeong-Hye needed to "remain in the closed ward" of a sanatorium (Kang 138). To be clear, this is no act of grace by her sister. In-Hye is said to be "unable to forgive [Yeong-Hye] for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross" (Kang 143). Here, Kang clearly speaks to the boundaries established by the country's patriarchy. While In-Hye has been obedient to her father's and husband's wishes, Yeong-Hye has done the opposite. What is unforgivable to In-Hye is also reflected in the larger cultural distaste towards a movement in Korean women's literature that has focused on depicting the grotesque elements of the woman's body. In what Ruth Williams calls "the poetics of the grotesque," Korean women's writers have chosen to depict female bodies which "overflow with blood, sweat, vomit, decay, and death" (397). Unable to cross into this boundary herself, In-Hye represents the societal view that has continued to confine both the writing and bodies of its women under the weight of its patriarchal values. In response to a society that still expects women's writers to tell beautiful stories, these women's writers, including Kang, "force readers to confront the true product of patriarchy: the woman whose body and self are monstrously distorted" (Williams 412). Just like the grotesque bodies depicted in the work of other women's writers, in Kang's story, the power of Yeong-Hye's newfound arboreal body is "precisely because it falls into the in-between space, outside of boundary and order" (Williams 398). The confinement of the sanatorium can now be crystallized as the condensed metaphor for patriarchal Korean society that still holds women like Yeong-Hye and writers like Han Kang to these neatly defined roles.

Contrasting Yeong-Hye's behavior is In-Hye's absolute conformity to those pre-conceived roles: "as a daughter, as an older sister, as a wife and as a mother, as the owner of a shop . . . she had always done her best" (Kang 139). Specifically, In-Hye owns a successful cosmetics shop in Seoul. Not only does she allow her body to follow patriarchal customs that stem back to Korea's Choson dynasty, she also proselytizes its transition into modern day Korea as the owner of a cosmetics shop. A deeper understanding of Korean cosmetic practices is important to understand In-Hye's culpability here. While the exposure of a woman's body is now acceptable in Korea, Taeyon Kim clarifies that plastic surgery reflects the subjectless bodies of this country's women, as they are uniformly reconstructed into "the increasingly popular 'Eurasian' look" (T. Kim 102). Kim argues that cosmetics and plastic surgery are indicative of the shift of the "utility of their [women's] bodies from national labor production to national consumption," in which only the women willing to follow the rules of patriarchal society are allowed to participate in (T. Kim 103). This phenomenon is captured in a Korea which no longer sees a woman's body as a means to "reproducing the family body," but instead

as a means “linked to capitalist success” (T. Kim 100). For Korean women now wanting to be a part of the workforce, there are “real sanctions and rewards to women who do or do not manage their bodies appropriately” (T. Kim 109). In this society, the use of cosmetics is not encouraged so that women can find independence and expression. Instead, it is promoted by In-Hye and others in the beauty industry as a way to conform to an ideal beauty standard which provides them access to capitalist success. We have now come to understand that this “legacy of the *subjectlessness* of the Korean woman” is one In-Hye is doubly culpable in both personifying and advancing (T. Kim 104). It is this same relic of Neo-Confucianism which leads to Yeong-Hye’s determined resistance within the sanatorium by adapting the grotesque.

As Williams details, once Yeong-Hye sheds her “plastic flesh” and becomes a tree, she reveals to In-Hye what this flesh conceals: “a rotting core” which both she and her sister must now confront (401). Already existing in the margins, it is this grotesque form which now unveils Yeong-Hye’s independence to her sister. As In-Hye tells us, “before Yeong-Hye had broken those bars, she’d never even known they were there” (Kang 143). Though hidden behind the walls of a sanatorium, Yeong-Hye’s decision to become a tree inspires her sister, as she remarks that it is in this moment that she realized “she had never lived” (Kang 162). After Yeong-Hye enters the sanatorium, In-Hye begins to experience the same dreams as her sister. She begins to have dreams where her eyes ceaselessly weep with “blood [that] always refused to be wiped away,” as if she is finally seeing the violence that surrounds her in this society (Kang 177). It is only after she is awoken to Yeong-Hye’s trauma in her own dream state that she can understand this dual imprisonment imposed on both her and Yeong-Hye in which there is no escape: the walls of the sanatorium which confine Yeong-Hye are simply exchanged for the metaphorical bars of society which confine In-Hye.

At the end of the novel, In-Hye is finally aware of the “*subjectlessness*” of her body in modern day Korea, which Kim speaks of as reflecting the historical view that a “woman was most valued for her body” (101). Ultimately, she realizes too late what she has done to her sister. Unable to make sense of Yeong-Hye’s behavior, the staff of the sanatorium become increasingly violent in their treatment of her. When she is stumbled upon by a nurse deep in the wilderness, this moment—with Yeong-Hye found rooted “in an isolated spot deep in the woods” standing resolutely, “as if she herself were one of the glistening trees”—serves as an illustration of being both the closest she gets to her desire and her subsequent failure in attaining it (Kang 125). Right after she is found, In-Hye witnesses her sister being bound up and force fed—alluding to her father’s abuse during the family dinner at the end of the first act. In the process, Yeong-Hye’s throat is cut fatally, and she is sent to the hospital, this time by her own sister.

In response to d’Euabonne’s ecofeminist battle cry, “feminism or death,” it is Yeong-Hye’s words to her sister at the end of the novel where we can find her fateful response: “Why, is it such a bad thing to die?” (Kang 157). *The Vegetarian* provides no happy ending for Yeong-Hye as her metamorphosis into a tree leads to her burrowing deeper into the ground and closer to her death. On one hand, *The Vegetarian* documents Yeong-Hye’s fatuous struggle for independence through ecofeminism as she lives in Korea, where the patriarchy unequivocally oversees its dominance on animals, women, and nature. Within this system, escape is futile for Yeong-Hye and other Korean women. On the other hand, her attempts in

transforming into a tree illuminate the innate power of the female grotesque. The depiction of the female grotesque as it relates to the poetry of influential Korean poet Ch'oe Sung-ja provides the most clear parallel to *The Vegetarian* in which we can understand Yeong-Hye's power in embracing the grotesque. In the poem, "Went to the Sea in Winter," Ch'oe describes a woman floating in a polluted sea, in which "pale and sickly children poured out from her open vagina" (Williams 403). Similarly, near the end of the *Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye roots herself into the ground forming a handstand. She then tells her sister In-Hye—as she opens her crotch and spreads her legs wide—that she desperately "wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch" (Kang 148). It is this hope that both works share: even when seemingly powerless, the works illuminate the "regenerative power of the grotesque as an exclusive quality of the woman's body, despite its socially marginalized position" in Korean society (Williams 402). In the words of Williams, by taking on this degraded form, Yeong-Hye forever remains "powerless, yet powerful," reaffirming the belief that, even in death, she still succeeds by awakening In-Hye to both of their demises (Williams 402). More holistically, for Korean women still chained to Neo-Confucian bodies, she demonstrates in her grotesqueness that there is no longer a need to "cling to the old, acceptable way of doing things" (Williams 403).

Rushing Yeong-Hye to the hospital, In-Hye whispers to her in the ambulance, "I have dreams too, you know . . . but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some time, don't we?" (Kang 182). It is an ending that befits a story in which its entire meaning is founded upon an unconscious which, contrary to what In-Hye believes, "does not cease in the waking state" and instead permeates the entire structure of this text (Lacan 132-133). From this foundation, *The Vegetarian* uncovers the destructiveness of the force of patriarchal trauma upon Yeong-Hye and the bodies of the women around her. Suddenly, the enigma that is Yeong-Hye's final form is clarified to be no mystery at all. For a trauma that exists as "the paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival, she must embrace the powerless yet powerful form of a tree (Caruth 58). Most of all, when trauma is at the very root of her inexpressible desire, Yeong-Hye must bury herself deep into the earth and die. She must become the martyr for marginalized women in contemporary Korea.

CHRISTOPHER YEUNG is a graduate student in Virginia Tech's M.A. in English program. His thesis project explores divine femininity and the ritual of the lyric poem in the works of contemporary American poets Li-Young Lee and Linda Gregg.

Works Cited

- Adams, Carol J. "Ecofeminism and the Eating of Animals." *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1991, pp. 125-45.
- . *The Sexual Politics of Meat (20th Anniversary Edition): A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. A&C Black, 2010.
- Ahn, Hakyoun. "Empowerment and Exploitation: Sexual Dynamics in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2024, p. 277-293.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. JHU Press, 2016.
- Casey, Rose. "Willed Arboreality: Feminist Worldmaking in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2020, pp. 347-60.
- Glazebrook, Trish. "Karen Warren's Ecofeminism." *Ethics & the Environment*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2002, pp. 12-26.
- Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian: A Novel*. Hogarth, 2016.
- Kim, Taeyon. "Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women's Bodies in Korea's Consumer Society." *Body & Society*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, pp. 97-113.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious." *Yale French Studies*, no. 36/37, 1966, pp. 112-47.
- Min, Pyong Gap. "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class." *Gender and Society*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2003, pp. 938-957.
- Oh, Minjoo, and Jeffrey Jackson. "Animal Rights vs. Cultural Rights: Exploring the Dog Meat Debate in South Korea from a World Polity Perspective." *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2011, pp. 31-56.
- Park, Insook Han, and Lee-Jay Cho. "Confucianism and the Korean Family." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1995, pp. 117-34.
- Sands, Danielle. "Interrogating 'Feeling Politics': Animal and Vegetal Empathy in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2023, pp. 324-34.
- Williams, Ruth. "'Female Poet' as Revolutionary Grotesque: Feminist Transgression in the Poetry of Ch'oe Sŭng-Ja, Kim Hyesoon, and Yi Yŏn-Ju." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2010, pp. 395-415.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. MIT Press, 1992.

“No Body to Speak of”: Asexuality, Antinatalism, and Alternative Maternity in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*

Erica Snelgrove

For generations, Thomas Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure* has fascinated readers and critics alike with its complex explorations of marriage, religion, and history. One character in particular, though, has proven to be a troubling puzzle. Sue Bridehead has been conversely characterized by critics as a hysteria victim, a New Woman, a merciless coquette, and a Victorian prude (Linde 81; Wiet 1132). Claire Jarvis, for example, claims that Sue’s resistance to Phillotson’s sexual advances, even after they are married, “make[s] the case for her sexual frigidity” (90). Zane Linde reads against these claims, instead making a compelling argument that Sue is asexual. Other critics, including Aaron Matz and Emily Steinlight, focus on the antinatalist undertones of the novel, suggesting that Hardy imbues the novel with intense anti-reproductive sentiment while Victoria Wiet suggests that Hardy prizes intellectual development over reproduction. I intend to unite these two concepts, exploring how Sue’s asexuality influences and is influenced by the antinatalism of the novel, and argue that this interplay ultimately leads to the advocacy for alternate forms of motherhood, including adoption and collective care-taking. Examining the novel in this manner can deepen our understanding of the ways in which Hardy’s work evokes modern discourse about reproductive freedom, voluntary motherhood, and the marginalization of asexual people.

Asexuality

Asexuality can be most simply defined as a lack of sexual attraction for others, though not necessarily the absence of sexual desire or activity (Brunnering and McKeever 497-8). While Sue never directly states that she identifies as asexual—the language to do so simply did not exist at the time—she is often accused of lacking typical human sexual attractions. For example, Jude claims that Sue “has so little animal passion” that she is free to act in ways that those with higher levels of sexual passion cannot (Hardy 250). Later, after Jude and Sue have begun a sexual relationship, he laments, “I seduced you. . . . You were a distinct type—a refined creature, intended by Nature to be left intact” (Hardy 332). This suggests that Jude knows,

at least on some level, that Sue's apparent sexlessness is innate, not a choice she is making, which lends strength to the argument that her resistance to sex is an orientation rather than frigidity. These statements about Sue's absence of attraction are often tied to her body, or lack thereof; Widow Edlin claims that Sue has "no body to speak of" and evokes a spirit more than a human being, while Jude calls her a "phantasmal, bodiless creature" (Hardy 382, 250). The fact that this embodied sexlessness is often misconstrued as frigidity aligns Sue further with understandings of asexuality, as "asexuality has been pathologized extensively [and] linked with frigidity and other disorders of sexuality" (Brunner and McKeever 509). Sue's character, therefore, clearly meets the basic understanding of asexuality.

Sue's asexuality manifests in various ways, most obviously her intense resistance to physical touch. This is seen most clearly with Phillotson, whom Sue claims she has a "physical objection" to, despite the fact that he is a gracious and respectful husband (Hardy 201). Sue sleeps on the floor of a cramped closet rather than endure any proximity to Phillotson, prompting him to exclaim, "What must a woman's aversion be when it is stronger than her fear of spiders" (Hardy 213). This aversion comes to a head when Sue jumps out of the window upon being surprised with Phillotson's unexpected closeness (Hardy 218). Even when Sue ultimately decides to begin a sexual relationship with Phillotson as penance for the death of her children, it is no easy feat for her to convince her body to act according to her wishes. When discussing the matter with Widow Edlin, Sue states, "I have nearly brought my body into complete subjection," suggesting a concentrated effort to overcome her physical aversion (Hardy 377). These instances demonstrate that Sue's resistance to sexual activity is not an effort to be callous, as she is sometimes charged, but instead results from physical reactions often beyond her conscious control.

Even in her relationship with Jude, for whom she does not have the intense physical aversion that she holds for Phillotson, Sue resists physical contact. In addition to the many times she pulls away as he tries to touch her, Sue is also more comfortable when there is a physical barrier between her and Jude. For example, when Jude visits her at the Shaston schoolhouse, Sue's anxiety is lessened after Jude steps outside of the building: "Now that the high window-sill was between them, so that he could not get at her, she seemed not to mind indulging in a frankness she had feared at close quarters" (Hardy 197). The predatory connotation of the phrase "get at her" reveals that it is not that Sue is afraid she will not be able to stop herself from touching Jude or expressing inappropriate affection but that he might do so to her. Physical distance and barriers allow Sue to achieve the kind of intellectual and emotional intimacy she craves without the threat of physical contact. Jarvis contrasts this distanced relationship between Sue and Jude to his exchanges with Arabella, claiming, "While his interaction with Arabella very quickly moves from image to action . . . his interactions with Sue always hold off physical contact" (102). The fact that this delay of physical contact is maintained primarily by Sue lends strength to an asexual reading of her character; physical touch and its connection to sexual activity make her intensely uncomfortable.

This resistance to physical touch allows Sue to build other forms of relationships that better align with her asexuality. For example, she describes a former relationship in which she lived with a man by saying, "when I was eighteen I formed a friendly intimacy with an

undergraduate at Christminster, and he taught me a great deal, and lent me books which I should never have got a hold of otherwise" (Hardy 141). While others—the undergraduate included—might have expected that a relationship such as theirs would become sexual in nature, Sue values it instead for the intellectual growth it brings her. As Linde points out, this reveals that Sue "does not perceive the interaction between two people of the opposite sex as necessarily having sexual implications" (83-4). For much of their relationship, this remains true for Jude and Sue. Wiet argues at length that Jude and Sue's relationship is "a plenitude of pleasure valued for its own sake and its capacity to facilitate intellectual development" (1124). Sue has read more widely than Jude (Hardy 141, 195) and is able to fulfil the role of mentor in the tradition of Greek love, thus stimulating Jude's intellectual development (Wiet 1124). This purely intellectual and emotional relationship is one option often sought after by asexual people. As Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever describe, "sexual attraction is just one form of attraction amongst others" (507). Sue is able to maintain a sexless relationship with Jude because her intellectual and emotional desires are being fulfilled. Even Jude, with his stronger sexual impulses, seems to recognize the value of this kind of relationship, if only momentarily, when he reflects, "if he could only get over the sense of her sex, as she seemed to be able to do so easily of his, what a comrade she would make" (Hardy 147). In other words, if Jude could lessen his sexual desires, his relationship with Sue could be infinitely rewarding. Sue's asexuality has already allowed her to recognize this discovery and to form intimate, sexless, relationships.

The fact that Jude and Sue's relationship does eventually become sexual may, on the surface, appear to undermine the validity of an asexual reading of Sue's character. However, many asexual people are sexually active, particularly when with a partner they love (Brunning and McKeever 501). Further, the two sexual relationships that Sue has are both initiated under duress. Sue and Jude maintain their sexless, intellectually driven relationship for a significant amount of time, and it is clear that Sue would continue indefinitely in this way, as she states, "I think I would much rather go on living always as lovers, as we are living now, and only meeting by day" (Hardy 249). This peace is disrupted by the arrival of Arabella asking for Jude's help (Hardy 253). Only when threatened with the possibility that Jude will leave her for his former wife does Sue agree to marry him and begin a sexual relationship (Hardy 256). After this fateful conversation, Sue "return[s] Jude's kisses in a way she had never done before" (Hardy 257-8), suggesting that the fear of losing her companion enables her to overcome her dislike of physical intimacy. Had Arabella never reappeared, it is reasonable to assume that Sue could have lived the rest of her life in a solely intellectual communion with Jude. As Linde points out, it is not unusual for an asexual woman like Sue to be expected to put her partner's "physical needs ahead of her physical and emotional comfort" (85-6). Perhaps even more disturbing is Sue's next sexual relationship after she has remarried the schoolteacher Phillotson. In this case, Sue begins a sexual relationship under her own volition, but only due to the misguided belief that it will serve as penance for the death of her children (Hardy 341, 382). Thus, while Sue does engage in sexual activity in the course of the novel, both instances occur due to external pressures that force Sue into sexual relationships rather than demonstrating any internal sexual attraction of Sue's.

Antinatalism

While asexuality is undoubtedly an innate orientation, it is also true that “sexual attraction, desire, arousal, and activity are often said to be fluid over the lifecycle and shaped by various contextual features. This means that sexual identity can change over time and might be shaped at least partly by the environment” (Brunning and McKeever 502). In the case of *Jude the Obscure*, Sue’s asexuality interacts in interesting ways with the antinatalist themes of the novel. By presenting asexuality as a valid alternative to the prescriptive heteronormativity of the time, Hardy advocates for intimate relationships that do not result in reproduction.

Throughout the novel, Hardy makes a compelling case against procreation, most obviously because of a Malthusian lack of resources. Jude and Sue are simply unable to provide for their three, soon to be four, children. They are turned away from multiple rental spaces in Christminster because of the children (Hardy 319), prompting Little Father Time to recognize the economic and social difficulties that so often accompany having children. Even after they find temporary lodging, there is not enough food, space, or even instruments of suicide—Little Father Time hangs himself on a nail while his younger siblings hang from garment hooks (Hardy 325)—which Steinlight argues “confirm[s] a disproportion between the number of people and the provisions to support them” (224). Little Father Time’s heartbreaking suicide note, “*Done because we are too meny*” (Hardy 325), similarly points to a lack of resources, making his decision to kill himself and his siblings appear to be simply a numbers game; there are too many of them for the amount of resources available to them. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why Little Father Time laments his parents having another child, “when [they] needn’t have done it till we was better off” (Hardy 323). Although Little Father Time does not fully understand the sexual nature of reproduction, he nonetheless captures the antinatalist argument that it is unethical to have children when there are not enough resources to care for them.

It is not just the lack of resources that informs the antinatalism of the novel, however. If it were, “procreation . . . would be a problem only concerning the poor, only those children who represent an unwanted and destitute surfeit in the population” (Matz 8). Rather, Hardy suggests that any kind of reproduction is unethical on moral grounds. Little Father Time gives voice to this claim when he innocently questions “but we don’t ask to be born?” to which Sue replies “no indeed” (Hardy 323). Seen in this light, reproduction “means foisting the difficulties of existence onto beings without their consent” (Steinlight 1123). To do so, knowing that those beings will suffer, is what Matz calls procreative vanity, in which parents’ self-regard is the basis of their regard for their children, turning reproduction into a selfish act (25). Sue expresses this sentiment when she exclaims, “it seems such a terribly tragic thing to bring beings into the world—so presumptuous—that I question my right to do it sometimes” (Hardy 301). Little Father Time’s question, then, only confirms Sue’s anxieties that it is immoral of her to have children.

This anxiety is further compounded by Jude and Sue’s fear that their family is cursed to have unhappy and tragic marriages, an idea introduced early in the novel when Aunt Drusilla claims, “the Fawleys were not made for wedlock; it never seemed to sit well upon us” (Hardy 65). For Jude and Sue to have children would, as Jude puts it “duplicate the adverse

conditions, and a tragic sadness might be intensified to a tragic horror” (Hardy 84). This “specter of hereditary pathology” (Steinlight 231) is not enough to prevent Jude and Sue from eventually reproducing, but it nonetheless raises doubts about morality of having children that will potentially undergo such suffering, particularly when the parents are fully aware of the likelihood of this pain. When considered in combination with Sue’s asexuality, this resistance to reproduction calls into question the morality of a sexuality that is intrinsically associated with reproduction.

Further, Hardy expands upon this moral dilemma and uses it to criticize the institution of marriage and its inherent link to sex and reproduction. After all, Hardy’s novel intensely advocates for the legalization of divorce, something that is only possible when “no new interests, in the shape of children, have arisen to be looked after” (Hardy 214). The arrival of a child acts as an outward signal of a couple’s sexual relationship, which, in the case of Jude and Sue, leads to dangerous results (Jarvis 95). With the arrival of Little Father Time and their subsequent biological children, they can no longer hide their unmarried, sexual relationship, causing their community to shun them. Jude is forced to abandon his job restoring the Ten Commandments in a local church, for example, after the contractor receives complaints about the immorality of unmarried lovers working in a holy space (Hardy 292). Sue struggles with this kind of rejection and judgement, exclaiming “I can’t *bear* that they, and everybody, should think people wicked because they may have chosen to live their own way” (Hardy 291-2). This ultimately leads to Sue and Jude’s family adopting a nomadic lifestyle, moving from place to place before the community can discover the true nature of their relationship.

Jude and Sue’s struggles, while unique to their situation, are nonetheless representative of the dangers of marriage: marriage, in heteronormative society, means sex, and sex “is dangerous precisely because it has the ‘natural’ tendency to multiply the bodies within a relationship. The couple, given enough time, becomes a trio” (Jarvis 112). Societal expectations that marriage inherently requires sex seem to be something that Sue had not considered before marrying Phillotson, as she states “before I married him I had never thought out fully what marriage meant” (Hardy 206). Her new knowledge of sexual expectations may help to explain why she resists marrying Jude for such an extended period of time. This helps to further strengthen the argument that Sue is an asexual woman, as “the view that marriage must involve sex brings marriage and asexuality into tension” (Bunning and McKeever 512). In places where a marriage must be consummated in order to be sanctioned, asexual people who do not have sex are “defined out of nonvoidable marriage, which is arguably harmful if marriage is viewed as a way of expressing and supporting committed romantic love” (Bunning and McKeever 512). Ultimately, Hardy’s critique of marriage serves to further the antinatalist themes of the novel by underscoring the dangers of making private lives public.

Alternative Maternity

Through this interplay of asexuality and antinatalism, Hardy indirectly makes several claims about the nature of motherhood, ultimately proposing alternative forms of maternity. Oindrila Ghosh explains that, in Victorian England, mothers “were expected to make all the sacrifices and unilaterally perform the duties of nurturing as a mother to their children,”

despite the fact that legal custody rights rested primarily with the father (60). Hardy draws this custom into question, demonstrating that the biological mother is not necessarily the most qualified caretaker. This is seen most obviously in the character of Arabella, who never truly embraces the caretaker role for her biological son, entrusting him instead to her parents and later to her estranged husband and his lover. Jing Yu argues that this attitude is a “renegotiation of Victorian expectations of motherhood” (64). By maintaining her sexual desires, Arabella refuses to conform to the limited Victorian understanding of what a mother must be. While admirable in its own right, this nonetheless precludes her from caring for her son. Even after his gruesome death, all Arabella is able to muster is “He was my child, and naturally I feel for him” (Hardy 336)—hardly a convincing display of grief for a mother who has just lost her only child.

This potential unfitness of biological caretakers is not limited only to mothers. Rather, Hardy demonstrates early in the text that a biological relation is not enough to equate to a loving or even cordial caretaker through his depiction of Jude’s childhood. After the death of Jude’s parents, he is sent to live with his aunt who says—within earshot of Jude—that “it would ha’ been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too wi’ thy mother and father, poor useless boy” (Hardy 7). Thus, Jude grows up feeling like an unwanted burden, constantly seeking to get away to a better place. One cannot help but wonder if Jude would not have been better off with someone else, not a biological relative, but someone who wanted him. This reduced emphasis on biological parentage serves to lessen the connection between marriage and reproduction, therefore providing validation for the existence of asexual relationships.

Hardy’s novel also provides suggestions for voluntary motherhood, rather than solely presenting maternity as the inevitable outcome of sexual activity, by hinting towards the possibility of birth control, if not for these characters, then for future women. While the novel does not make direct mention of contraception, readers are nonetheless prompted to consider it when Arabella visits the doctor Vilbert shortly before telling Jude that she is pregnant before ultimately telling him that she was mistaken (Hardy 51–4). It is unclear whether Arabella was truly incorrect, lied about being pregnant to extort a proposal, or if she got a form of abortive medication from the doctor. This lack of clarity may be a result of Hardy’s effort to get the novel past censorship rules, but it nonetheless introduces the theme of contraception into the story. The inclusion of birth control, Yu argues, anticipates later feminist movements during the interwar period (64). Regardless of the specific method, Arabella’s entrapment of Jude feels morally wrong, suggesting the need for safe sex practices to prevent such occurrences. Jude rails against the fact that such a momentary weakness as lust, given the possibility of a child, must result in a crippling, lifelong relationship (Hardy 56). Sue similarly expresses her helplessness in the matter of reproduction during her conversation with Little Father Time, stating, “it—is not quite on purpose—I can’t help it” (Hardy 323). Understood through the lens of Sue’s asexuality, this statement becomes less about an inability to resist one’s sexual impulses and more about the inability to protect against unwanted pregnancy. Therefore, while Hardy makes no direct reference to contraception, he nonetheless advocates for the use of birth control in an effort to make motherhood voluntary.

Perhaps most importantly, Hardy champions non-biological parentage through adoption and collective care-taking. This is most obviously seen when Jude first learns about Little Father time and exclaims:

The beggarly question of parentage—what is it, after all? What does it matter, when you come to think of it, whether a child is yours by blood or not? All the little ones of our time are collectively the children of us adults of the time, and entitled to our general care. That excessive regard of parents for their own children, and their dislike of other people's, is, like class-feeling, patriotism, save-your-own-soul-ism and other virtues, a mean exclusiveness at bottom. (Hardy 264)

Beyond supporting Matz' ideas of procreative vanity, this section advocates for a system of child-rearing in which biology is rendered unimportant, and taking care of the children becomes the utmost priority. In this way, Jude is arguing for a system that he would have benefited from as a child. Sue herself serves as an example of the success of this system, as she takes in Little Father Time and loves him like her own child, despite having no biological connection to him. This demonstrates that motherhood need not be directly tied to biological parentage which, in addition to creating a better environment for children with unsuitable parents, also creates a world in which sex is not a requirement for motherhood. Further, the decentralization of biological parentage is demonstrated through Jude and Sue's own children, who are introduced to the readers through only a short answer from Sue when directly asked by Arabella if they had children (Hardy 300). As Matz points out, "Jude's children with Sue are never allowed to speak, nor are they given any particularity at all—not even names" (24). The procreative vanity is thus disrupted, and the novel is able to make a compelling argument for adoption as an alternative form of motherhood—one that does not require reproduction and is available to both sexually active and asexual women.

Conclusion

Through *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy critiques the dominant cultural narratives surrounding procreation and sexuality, attempting to undermine the relationships between sex, marriage, and reproduction. I propose that viewing these criticisms through the lens of Sue's asexuality allows for a better understanding of the ways in which Hardy advocates for alternative forms of motherhood. When, as Sue desires, intimate partnerships need not—and often should not—lead to sexual relationships, and reproduction is inadvisable on economic, social, and moral grounds, it becomes necessary to take a more expansive view of motherhood. Hardy does so by proposing adoption, voluntary motherhood through the use of birth control, and collective care-taking as more ethical alternatives to biological reproduction. Beyond ensuring that there will be enough resources to care for all children, these alternatives can also save children from being raised by caretakers who do not want them or are otherwise inept.

In reading the novel through this lens, it becomes possible to recognize the ways in which Hardy's novel relates to modern discourse surrounding asexuality and reproduction. In a world where asexual people are still erased and denigrated (Brunner and McKeever 498), Hardy's portrayal of a woman who resists traditional sexual and maternal norms acts as an

important early representation of asexuality and a reminder that asexual people have always existed. Hardy's insistence that Sue's "sexual instinct [is] *healthy*" (qtd. in Linde 83) similarly pushes back against the still-prevalent idea that asexual people are mentally ill. Likewise, the novel's exploration of reproduction and antinatalism remains timely in a world where women are losing their reproductive rights and birth rates are steadily declining. More than a century after its publication, *Jude the Obscure* serves as an important reflection of the ways in which the world has not progressed while it simultaneously advocates for that progression.

Erica Snelgrove Originally from a small town in rural Alberta, Canada, Erica is currently completing her Master of Arts in English at CSULB. When not reading or writing, she enjoys visiting Disneyland, playing board games, and singing loudly (and badly) in her car.

Works Cited

- Brunning, Luke, and Natasha McKeever. "Asexuality." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 38, no. 3, July 2021, pp. 497-517.
- Ghosh, Oindrila. "'Motherly' Men? 'The Fiddler of the Reels' and Hardy's Vision of 'Alternative' Motherhood." *The Hardy Society Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2013, pp. 60-74.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*, edited by Patricia Ingham, Oxford UP, 2008.
- Jarvis, Claire. "Hideously Multiplied: *Jude the Obscure*." *Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex, and the Novel Form*, John Hopkins UP, 2016, pp. 90-113.
- Linde, Zane. "'Intended by Nature to Be Left Intact': An Asexual Reading of *Jude the Obscure*." *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, vol. 27, 2012, pp. 81-88.
- Matz, Aaron. "Hardy and the Vanity of Procreation." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2014, pp. 7-32.
- Steinlight, Emily. "Hardy's Unnecessary Lives: The Novel as Surplus." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2014, pp. 224-41.
- Wiet, Victoria. "'Boyish as a Ganymede': Greek Love and the Erotic Experiment in *Jude the Obscure*." *ELH*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2023, pp. 1123-57.
- Yu, Jing. "Desiring Body: *Jude the Obscure* and Emerging Cosmopolitanism." *The Hardy Society Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2019, pp. 53-72.

Warehouse Ozymandias: The Radical Public Ruin of David Wojnarowicz's "Losing the Form in Darkness"

Nicolas McKelvie

It is so simple: the steel frame of a warehouse in the blinding sunlight, underneath it only the flowing water of the river, adjacent to a brand-new park with an Instagram-ready beach and fashionably-planted gardens of pollinator-friendly species. Through the lens of a phone camera, you discern the bare outline of a lost past as the image is intersected by joggers and cyclists speeding by on the riverside path and a cruise ship drifting past in the background. This is the public art installation *Day's End*, created by David Hammons in 2021 in collaboration with the Whitney Museum of American Art. Hammons's installation takes inspiration from an artwork created in 1975 by Gordon Matta-Clark, who "cut five openings into the Pier 52 shed that formerly occupied the site" (Whitney). With simple yet sleek lines, the warehouse frame is the only thing within sight that hints at what this place used to be, a skeleton of the warehouses that used to line this once-industrial waterfront. However, no context or plaque explains this portrait of the past: it is simply a form, passed by without notice by most who visit the Hudson River Park, which, though still in development, constitutes the largest green space built in Manhattan since Central Park. In order to learn about the actual past that this ghostly frame evokes, it is necessary to turn to the Whitney website, which further describes *Day's End* as "an open structure that precisely follows the outlines, dimensions, and location of the original shed [that] like Matta-Clark's intervention [offers] an extraordinary place to experience the waterfront" (Whitney). While Matta-Clark's works were subversive subtractions in an off-limits space, seen as so dangerous that police issued an arrest warrant for him and he had to flee the city, Hammons's structure is an abstract addition to a publicly sanctioned park. It memorializes the past, but through an enclosure of empty space that cannot actually be experienced beyond looking.

In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, David Wojnarowicz creates a very different memorial of this same space as it was in the 1980s, shortly after Matta-Clark's rebellious artistic intervention. Through a series of essays that Tasia Hane-Devore describes as a "postmodern collection of fragmented social and political commentary and at times

stream-of-consciousness writing,” *Close to the Knives* presents a disorienting, complex, and nuanced portrait of gay life in the 1980s, written in 1991 when Wojnarowicz was dying of AIDS (Hane-Devore 104). His second essay in the collection, “Losing the Form in Darkness,” specifically recounts Wojnarowicz’s experiences in what was then a seemingly-abandoned Hudson River waterfront populated by derelict warehouses, which in reality was appropriated for heterogeneous sexual, artistic, and communal purposes by the queer community of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s.¹

Presenting a host of bodily experiences and sensations that resulted in temporal and spatial disorientation, artistic inspiration and, ultimately, the disintegration of the self, Wojnarowicz mimics the form of ruin in writing, deconstructing the essay’s order and narration to lay bare the subconscious foundations of self and society that normally go unnoticed. He shows that identity formed in the everyday, socially-sanctioned spaces of the city is constrained by pre-existing discourses, such as medical and psychological definitions of homosexuality and illness. In contrast, municipally-neglected spaces like the crumbling waterfront allowed for an experience of alterity that resulted in identity-formation outside of dominant discourses and the realization that subjectivity is inherently fragmented and plural. Wojnarowicz solidifies this depiction of self-ruin with a concluding allusion to Percy Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias,” memorializing disintegration and anticipating the disappearance of a place that briefly offered an alternative possibility to heteronormative, American life. In stark contrast to the public art that exists today on the waterfront, Wojnarowicz highlights how marginalized urban spaces can produce subversive social sensations, and his experimental memoir serves as a purposefully ruin-like work of cultural memory that promotes a critical consciousness of preconceived narratives about the world.

Close to the Knives: The Disintegration of the Urban Memoir

Georg Simmel, an early pioneer of analyzing the psychological effects of urban life, established the influential theory in his seminal essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” that city living results in an urge to self-insulate and exert individuality. Simmel claimed that the chaos of the city forced the “individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence [sic] in the face of overwhelming social forces” and that the metropolitan subject does so through intellectuality, which insulates him from emotional bombardment (47). According to Simmel’s theory, modern life necessitates a mental retreat that, paired with a focus on rationality and precision, results in “a certainty in the definition of identities and differences” (50). Thus, subjects of modernity feel the need to assert their human dignity through a strong sense of intellectual self, an “unmistakability [that] proves that our way of life has not been superimposed by others” (57). In contrast to this metropolitan pressure to self-fortify, Wojnarowicz presents an alternative relationship to the city based on the body instead of the mind. Rather than assert an identity and a clearly-bounded self, Wojnarowicz presents a memoir-dissolving account that melds the individual with the experience of the

¹ In her 2019 book *Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York’s Ruined Waterfront*, Fiona Anderson thoroughly analyzes the queer cruising culture of the Hudson River waterfront during Wojnarowicz’s time, arguing that it was a space of communal and artistic fruitfulness.

city, in a manner reminiscent of the *dérive*, or drifts, of Guy Debord's "psychogeography." Just as in Debord's definition of the *dérive*, in which "one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there," Wojnarowicz lets go of his everyday life and proceeds anonymously through the waterfront, tracing the sensations of himself and others and the ideas that arise in their encounters (Debord 77). In this process, Wojnarowicz demonstrates that traditional narratives of identity and subjectivity are inevitably linked to the proscribed positions of subjects within systems of power, especially for marginalized people who have been defined by dominant social discourses in the interest of containing or eradicating them. As Michel Foucault expresses in *Discipline and Punish*, "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (30). Thus, in contrast to the typical metropolitan desire to individualize and self-solidify as identified by Simmel, Wojnarowicz proposes "losing the form" of one's self to escape the confines of societal definition and to imagine ways of living outside of dominant discourses.

Given that Wojnarowicz subtitled *Close to the Knives* a "memoir of disintegration" and then produced such an unconventional text as to render "memoir" a dubious description of it, much of the critical scholarship surrounding his collection of essays understandably focuses on the role of memoir and autobiography itself. In his analysis of *Close to the Knives* as an example of an "AIDS autobiography," Eric Waggoner asserts that Wojnarowicz narrates first and foremost the anonymous gay body and its experiences as a way of showing how state violence and marginalization try to contain it. Waggoner argues that traditional autobiographical narratives, with their linear structure and use of tropes such as overcoming adversity to achieve success, can ultimately "serve to 'cushion' the potential ideological power of a life-story that runs counter to dominant cultural narratives" (173). Waggoner further asserts that, by focusing on his body and its culturally taboo behaviors, Wojnarowicz liberates "the queer body from discourse that imprisons and attempts to control it" (174). Towards this end, Wojnarowicz begins the book by defying expectations of autobiographical writing, refusing to begin at the beginning of his life, provide history or context, or name himself as subject. Instead, he "fragments the gay body in part to pre-empt its destruction at the hands of the state and in part to preserve the body in all its particularities from a culturally-mandated disintegration that threatens to render it invisible" (187). Rather than inscribe his subjectivity within a sense of pre-defined identity, Wojnarowicz shatters the notion of subjectivity itself; "Losing the Form in Darkness," he does so largely through the body's exploration of a space that is itself disintegrating.

Hane-Devore also analyzes Wojnarowicz's autobiographical technique, specifically focusing on its function as an "autothanatography," a genre of writing about one's own dying and death. She argues that Wojnarowicz complicates the typical subject of autothanatography: "the absence of political and cultural recognition of persons with AIDS (PWAs) as dying subjects entitled to various sociomedical protections (rather than as dying objects of sociomedical disdain) prompts *Close to the Knives* to rely on an inclusive definition of autobiographical subject that takes in not just the author but the reader/community, too" (105). In Hane-Devore's estimation, Wojnarowicz fragments the self not only to preserve his

own body, but also to incorporate it within a communal body and thereby redefine people with AIDS for the broader public. However, she asserts that “despite Wojnarowicz’s persistent argument against the sociomedicalized objectification of the gay male body, his text relies on rhetoric that asserts the underpinning of the homosexual body as dangerous and infective” (103). While Wojnarowicz does at times present the homosexual body in similar terms as the medical community did during the AIDS crisis, the fragmentary and complex nature of his text also forces contradictions onto this essentialized view of queer bodies. “Losing the Form in Darkness,” in particular, demonstrates that Wojnarowicz sought a different goal than Hane-Devore suggests—not to reclaim subjectivity, but to undermine the very idea of it. The impossibility of fully capturing the homosexual body in language reveals how dominant discourses of identity are not only incorrect in their current form, but inherently and eternally incorrect in their monolithic essentialism.

Wojnarowicz’s radical deconstruction of subjectivity is particularly evident in Greta Lafleur and Dana Seidler’s interpretation of *Close to the Knives*, in which they argue that his narration of sexual encounters is useful to a post-#MeToo moment because his experimentation with memoir form calls into question how sex is experienced in the moment and how it is understood afterward. Asserting that *Close to the Knives* “takes a form largely unrecognizable” as memoir (455), Lafleur and Seidler demonstrate that Wojnarowicz continually connects sex and violence to show “how structural violence inflects the cultures and meanings of sex, and especially gay sex, in the midst of a deadly epidemic” (457). Focusing on Wojnarowicz’s depiction of memory and narration, they posit that “‘the subject’ of the narration does not come into view as much as it breaks apart, and so ‘disintegration’ not only operates in the text as a metaphor for living with HIV but for personhood tout court” (458). The form of the text itself deconstructs the idea of personhood, inviting the reader to “engage, and even step into complicity with, the experiment of documentation, to bear witness to the production of a vision of personal and collective gay history that embraces the ephemeral over the immutable, the experiential over the evidentiary” (464). While Lafleur and Seidler are interested primarily in Wojnarowicz’s narration of sex, their analysis clarifies how his depictions of his memory of his body in these moments express the ephemeral nature of the self in opposition to the idea that identity can be fully captured in a narrative. Lafleur and Seidler also point toward how Wojnarowicz experimented with the form of documentation itself to create an experience for the reader that evokes a critically-engaged queer heritage. While Debord argues that “[w]ritten descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game” of the psychogeographic *dérive*, Wojnarowicz uses experimental writing to create a sensation for readers of the experience of drifting through the waterfront, which may in fact give them the “password” for engaging in such acts of drifting in modern life (81).

Jacob Mullan Lipman takes up the idea of the documentation of queer experience, arguing that Wojnarowicz counters heteronormative notions of time. Lipman explains how Wojnarowicz challenges chrononormativity—the idea of heritage enacted through biological reproduction—by producing artistic representations of nonnormative sex practices that open up a “queer potentiality of the horizon space” to imagine a utopian future (363). Extending the analysis of Hane-Devore, Lipman connects Wojnarowicz’s narration of sex with his depiction of subjectivity, observing that “[t]he erotic body experiences a ‘self-shattering’ which, in its

deconstruction of individual identity, allows it to be absorbed into a queer community” (367). This self-shattering is achieved by a “queer psychogeography, tracing the ‘real relationships’ formed among queer communities through their use of shared erotic spaces” (368). However, while Lipman finds “queer potentiality” abundant in the optimistic work of Wojnarowicz’s early career, he also indicates that *Close to the Knives* expresses a more pessimistic view, given that past visions of queer futurity had given way to the AIDS crisis of which Wojnarowicz was a part, and that “AIDS locates the body in a predetermined linear structure which, in its assurance of imminent death, forecloses the prospect of any indefinite futurity” (373). After witnessing the death of some of his closest friends due to AIDS, including his mentor Peter Hujar, and with the knowledge of his own HIV-positive status, Wojnarowicz’s utopian vision had itself disintegrated. However, Lipman draws from Wojnarowicz’s notes and other writings to explain how he did not give up on an alternative temporality but instead engaged in a “process by which art displaces the erotic body, in its construction of a disruptive queer heritage” (380). Wojnarowicz hoped, according to Lipman, to fragment his own body into a queer communal heritage that could be preserved and expressed through art.

While each of these analyses of Wojnarowicz’s work take a wide view of his essays and *Close to the Knives* as a whole, it is in the essay “Losing the Form in Darkness” that Wojnarowicz most clearly disintegrates himself to form a communal ruin, an artistic monument to the community of which he was a part. It is through this account of the derelict waterfront that Wojnarowicz could create a ruin-text that critiques the notion of a societally-imposed identity and that allows readers of the future to re-experience the space of alterity that enabled this realization. As in Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” the empires of the past may fade, but the art remains, even in the form of ruin, to convey the human experience of the past.

The Appearance of a Portrait: A Disorienting Night on the Waterfront

The essay “Losing the Form in Darkness” evokes a single night spent cruising on the Hudson River waterfront, inviting the reader to embody an experience outside of heteronormative city life. In his account of the evening, Wojnarowicz embodies what Simmel calls a “sovereign [type] of personality, characterized by irrational impulses,” who is often at odds with city life, but discovers “the value of life alone in the unschematized existence which cannot be defined with precision for all alike” (Simmel 51). Simmel’s idea of “unschematized existence” is similar to Georges Bataille’s notion of the “heterogeneous world,” which he defines as “everything rejected by homogeneous society as waste.” Both the queer community and the abandoned waterfront were rejected in the 1980s as “waste,” seen as excess to the accepted heteronormative mode of living and unworthy of saving, whether from AIDS or from collapse into the river. Bataille goes on to say that such heterogeneous waste could also include trash and vermin, as well as “persons, words, or acts having a suggestive erotic value” (142). Cruising along the waterfront evokes both an illicit eroticism and the literal trash and pests that would be particularly visible there, given that the abandoned space did not receive sanitation services. However, Bataille also includes in his definition of the heterogeneous “the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses,” which hints at the ways in which Wojnarowicz uses the surreal, the dreamlike, and the drugged to describe an experience that cannot be assimilated by homogeneous society into its narratives of time

and reality (142). The warehouses, cut off from the rest of the city by a collapsed highway and host to a queer subculture, embody the heterogeneity of their position on the periphery, their erotic nature, and their literal excess of waste.² Positioned outside of homogeneous, heteronormative society, these spaces offered Wojnarowicz the opportunity for critical examination of socially accepted forms of life, including how our very definitions of self are shaped by what he calls, at other moments in the book, “preinvented existence,” by which he means homogeneous societal norms (87). Flipping the usual view of the binary between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous on its head, Wojnarowicz argues, “First there is the World. Then there is the Other World,” which he describes as having “calendar turnings” and “the no-smoking signs,” and which he also calls “the bought-up world; the owned world” and the “world of coded sounds” (87). In other words, Wojnarowicz centers the world he is trying to express in “Losing the Form in Darkness” as the primary world, the one that exists before language and societal norms are imposed upon it. While the homogeneous world, in the words of Lipman, perpetuates artificial, “chrononormative structures, it is in the ‘wilderness’ of Queerness—a ‘barren’ space operating outside the procreative drive of ‘reproductive futurism’—that these temporal structures are rejected” (362). Through inhabiting the marginalized, heterogeneous spaces along the river, and viscerally narrating this bodily experience, Wojnarowicz counters marginalizing discourses about queer people and presents an alternative view of his queer community.

Reading “Losing the Form in Darkness” is a disorienting experience; it defies the form of memoir, which typically presents a unified narrative about a single individual. Instead, Wojnarowicz presents a series of anonymous, bodily experiences recalled out of chronological order, leading Waggoner to describe it as “a singularly difficult book to engage as autobiography, largely because of the resolutely visceral nature of its writing and the ‘pasted’ construction of its narrative” (172). Following the first essay in the collection, “Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds,” Wojnarowicz also grapples with portraiture. In this case, it is “the appearance of a portrait, not the immediate vision I love so much” (9–10; emphasis added). Wojnarowicz differentiates between a “portrait” and an “immediate vision” to express how our bodies make sense of the world through our sensations of our surroundings, and how our recollections of these sensations solidify moments into “portraits” that contain meaning. He establishes a focus on how, in the “unschematized” space of the warehouse, he becomes more aware of sensations that lead to impressions, which become encoded within memory as “portraits” and thereby produce an embedded sense of experiences and other bodies that is more ephemeral and experiential, more “real” than the “world of coded sounds” that Wojnarowicz calls “preinvented existence” (87). While everyday life and places enforce dominant discourses onto experiences, in this space of cruising and danger, Wojnarowicz finds himself attuned to his body and its sensations, allowing him to reassess his impressions. He illustrates this process by describing “the appearance of night in

²Anderson argues that, in creating a space of recreation away from homogeneous society, the collapsed highway “did not prevent queer appropriations of the undeveloped waterfront; it encouraged them” (132). In this way, municipal neglect had the effect of allowing for spaces of freedom for the socially marginalized outside of municipal control.

a room full of strangers, the maze of hallways wandered as in films, the fracturing of bodies from darkness into light” (9). The portrait of the night itself, or the sensory experience that led to the appearance of this portrait, emerges in this description of the bodies with whom Wojnarowicz interacts; in the fracturing of these bodies, he expresses, too, how this is a social process, the formation of a communal portrait of life in a peripheral space. Wojnarowicz alludes to film to elicit a mental experience of the visual and aural impressions that appear and disappear with changes in light/darkness and proximity/distance, indicating that impressions and memory are framed by perspective and are not complete or objective. This use of the idiom of film is just the first of several intertextual references he uses throughout the text to indicate the limitations of the written memoir and to make visible the ways in which memories form through bodily experience and associations, references that will culminate in a call for a queer Ozymandias.

Wojnarowicz then demonstrates the instability of this initial portrait of the night by wandering through space, turning to follow a man and finding that “I was losing myself in the language of his movements” (10). He reveals how the form of the self can be lost in a focus on the other and on movement, leading to self-dissolution rather than intellectualized impressions. As the stranger passes “through layers of evening, like a dim memory, faceless for moments, just the movements of his body across the floor,” Wojnarowicz references memory-formation to allude to the ways in which this essay, any essay, is itself a reconstruction based on memory, which can be unreliable, evoking only certain details (11). For example, he describes how he noticed headlights from the highway, recalling their “illuminating the outlines of men, of strangers, people I might or might not have known because their faces were invisible, just black silhouettes” (11). In his continued focus on illumination of forms and their visibility or invisibility (hence identifiability or anonymity), Wojnarowicz elucidates the appearance of the night’s portrait through his spotlighting of particular moments in writing. While the cars sometimes shine their lights on the waterfront as if to force identification upon it, they then turn away, leaving the warehouses as spaces of darkness, of a focus on the body and its fluid sensations, which, in their interactions with other bodies, make the boundary between self and other unstable. By quite literally “Losing the Form in Darkness,” Wojnarowicz deconstructs the process whereby his portrait of the night was formed in his memory, leaving behind a ruin memoir that reveals how spaces provide the context in which individuals experience sensations and make sense of them in their memories. By shining his own memory headlights onto and away from this night, he plays with whether to “make sense” of the experience or to leave it undefined, whether to incorporate his sensations in this marginalized space into his sense of self or to let them remain fractured and ephemeral, thereby allowing readers to make their own sense.

As if to illustrate this conflict between spaces that encourage self-dissolution and self-solidification, Wojnarowicz pivots to the beginning of the night, abruptly placing the reader in the Silver Dollar Restaurant in Greenwich Village. Oriented clearly within space, in a legitimate place of business in a neighborhood that, though host to a queer community, was nonetheless integrated within homogeneous governance, Wojnarowicz takes an amphetamine called “black beauty” and feels “a sudden regret at what might be the disappearance of regular perceptions” (11-12). During daylight hours, in this place where he

might be identified, Wojnarowicz doubts his choice to summon disorientation. He feels that the “beauty that comes riding off each surface and movement,” that later defamiliarization of the senses, “always has a slight trace of falseness about it.” He attributes this “falseness” to his knowledge “that it’s a substance flowing through my veins that cancels out the lines of thought brought along with time and aging and serious understanding of the self” (12). Despite what he presumes will be a beautiful experience, his daylight self reinforces a societally-informed view of drugs and a belief in an inherently “true” reality obscured by “false” perceptions. This brings us back, once more, to the world of rationality that Simmel associates with the metropolis, and to Bataille’s notion of “homogeneous reality,” which he says “presents itself with the abstract and neutral aspect of strictly defined and identified objects (basically, it is the specific reality of solid objects).” What Wojnarowicz will experience, in contrast, is “Heterogeneous reality,” which “is that of a force or shock. It presents itself as a charge, as a value, passing from one object to another in a more or less abstract fashion, almost as if the change were taking place not in the world of objects but only in the judgments of the subject” (143). Wojnarowicz expresses the notion of “serious understanding of the self” that supposedly comes from reflection upon past experiences within a socially-accepted narrative of linear growth, what Lipman would term “chrononormativity,” but he then has “a surge of weariness with the self, then a settling back and the wait for the sensations to begin” (12). The reader experiences Wojnarowicz’s battle with himself over whether to subscribe to a “serious” sense of self built up from memories retrospectively intellectualized and placed within a normative frame of homogeneous life or to simply experience sensations and let them lead to new conclusions. In other words, whether to construct an accepted form, a portrait of himself as an individual, or to let himself dissolve into an alternative, heterogeneous form of life.

Throughout the rest of the essay (and his intoxicated experience), Wojnarowicz rejects this doubtful, daylight self, disintegrating the memoir’s temporal order, narrative perspective, and sense of cohesive subjectivity. Throwing the reader into “Restless walks filled with coasting images of sight and sound,” he makes the essay into a form of a ruin in which “[o]ld images race back and forth” (12). Wojnarowicz attempts to seek the origins of these “old images,” but he cannot specifically remember the senses his earlier self had when encountering these places for the first time. Nonetheless, he writes, “Each desire, each memory so small a thing, becomes a small river tracing the outlines and the drift of your arms and bare legs” (13), conveying the vague persistence of memory, but also its gradual dissolution into ruin, which results in the disintegration of a younger self. Those memories still “outline” the form of one’s self, but they move, like the river, and lose their forms as time passes. This imagery defies the construct of a “serious” sense of self achieved with “time and aging” and incorporated within societal discourses. Wojnarowicz also makes use of second person perspective here to disorient the self of the text and force us to question whether he writes solely about himself or about how memories operate universally in our formation of selves.

Further complicating the process of memorialization, Wojnarowicz interrupts his exploration of spatial impression-forming and presents a future moment in which he sits “over coffee and remember[s] the cinematic motions as if witnessed from a discreet distance” and lays “the senses down one by one” (13). Wojnarowicz makes the very creation of this

memoir in writing visible, framing the form of the essay as a series of conscious choices in retrospect, of including sensations and their ensuing impressions that are remembered from a distance. While the reader experiences similar disorientation at times, the memoir form necessitates that it has been shaped, to some degree, by a future self making sense of its past, even as his heterogeneous experience defies sense- and self-making.

This representational uncertainty plays out in his associational descriptions, such as of the tattoos of a man he meets cruising, which he says are “like frescoes of faded photographs of samurai warriors: a sudden flash of Mishima’s private army standing still as pillars along the sides of the river” (14). He presents multiple layers of mediation that reveal his thought processes and concern with image-making. When they have sex, Wojnarowicz expresses a series of images he sees in his mind and concludes, “In loving him, I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring seas. I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life” (17). His embodied integration of sensations with another person in this alternative space results, then, in mental associations of the fleeting nature of “great houses,” evoking society’s “preinvented existence,” and losing their forms with the movement of time. Allowing himself throughout this sexual experience to free-associate, Wojnarowicz lets himself go from the “interior life” of the “serious” sense of self expected from him and its resultant reserve to achieve a sensation of alternative communication with another person focused on direct bodily experience rather than language, and in so doing, he attempts to achieve communication with the reader by making manifest the sensory components, the foundations, of his conscious experience. While he cannot reach out and touch the reader, through presenting these experiences in such an embodied description, Wojnarowicz invites readers to let go of their own preconceptions of the queer body, to experience for themselves the disorientation of the heterogeneous spaces Wojnarowicz occupies, and to question their own sense of self.

As the end of his account nears, Wojnarowicz then returns to being alone, but his use of intertextual images persists to express how the portrait of this night appeared in his mind. He walks out onto the pier and explicitly orients himself back toward the city, seeing “what looked like a falling star, a photographic negative of one in the night . . . connecting the rooftops of the buildings one after the other” (17–18). From his position at the edge of the city, he sees it as a whole and expresses its appearance in portrait, connected as a unit by a memory-image by which he integrates the homogeneous city into his heterogeneous experience. Just as he makes explicit the manner in which identity is formed of fluid impressions of experiences, he is also able to look at society from the outside and see it as an outlined form, as a structure that he deconstructs and analyzes throughout the rest of his memoir. While he may see the city as a whole, he leaves open the question of whether he can capture the form of this night and of himself without inscribing the experience within a homogeneous order, a conflict that comes to rest in the form of ruin, which holds the promise of defying the constraints of chrononormativity and typical memoir itself.

Nearing the end of his high, Wojnarowicz sees the artwork on the warehouse walls, some of which is likely his own, embodied by the real actions of the men who have come to cruise in the warehouses. In this reversal of portraiture, “the pale flesh of the frescoes come to life. . . . They appear out of nowhere and line the walls like figurines before firing squads

or figures in a breadline in old times pressed into history” (23). The interaction between fresco and place reveals how the medium records what has happened in the space, but also how it could influence the experiences of the people within it. As he straddles the line between intoxication and sobriety, between presence in the moment and retrospective interpretation, Wojnarowicz perceives the men in the warehouse through the lens of history, figures of execution or starvation. The portrait that ultimately appears, then, is of a queer community in disintegration, on the verge of disappearance due to societal persecution and neglect. While the form of self dissolves at moments throughout the text, homogeneous reality imposes its judgment as Wojnarowicz reaches the conclusion. The experience of ruin, however, allows for a liminal space in which both the homogeneous and heterogeneous can come into conversation. The ruin evokes the past while also laying bare its constituent components; it does not present a “pre-invented” whole narrative but reveals instead the chaos and fragments that made it up all along.

Indeed, in the last image of the essay, Wojnarowicz ends his constant movement and returns to intellectuality to consider monuments of ruin and to evoke the poem “Ozymandias”: “Stopping for a moment, I thought of the eternal sleep of statues . . . of the face beneath the sands of the desert still breathing” (23). Returning to “normal” consciousness, Wojnarowicz sees form reassert itself. He sees himself and the people around him “pressed into history” in “eternal sleep” and alludes to Shelley’s description of the statue of Ozymandias, whose “shattered visage lies” in the desert, his expression showing how a “sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things” (Shelley 4; 6). In presenting his readers with this portrait of a night losing its form in darkness, Wojnarowicz reads well the passions of his time and place. As Krishna Daiya explains, Shelley conveys that “empires are wiped out from the surface of the earth and forgotten,” but “there is something that outlasts these things and that is art. Eternity can be achieved by the poet’s words, not by the ruler’s will to dominate” (156). The statue of Ozymandias represents a dead culture that celebrated power and militarism, but Wojnarowicz explicitly memorializes the ruin of the statue—decay itself—by insisting that it is not lifeless: it is “still breathing” in the form of his memoir. The empire of Ozymandias may be gone, just as Wojnarowicz knows that the empires of his own time will fade, but his art remains, and in its form as a ruin, it reveals its fragmented process of construction and its relationship to time itself. Wojnarowicz’s narration in his memoir serves like the “traveller from an antique land” of Shelley’s poem, evoking for readers the experience of his lost community and giving context to the few ruins that remain (Shelley 1).

Wojnarowicz ends this essay from the stance of homogeneous reality, writing and publishing it as he did after the fact, but his experimentation with form gives us flashes, the “force or shock” of Bataille’s heterogeneous reality, that express the subversive potentiality of sensations in derelict spaces, places on the edges of the city and society (143). As the form of these spaces has been lost to the darkness of time, Wojnarowicz’s essay serves as an experiential monument, a ruin that invites the reader to grapple with the artificial nature of self developed in homogeneous life by inhabiting marginal spaces that blur the lines of self/other, structure/decay, past/present, memory/experience and other seeming boundaries by which we construct our portraits of reality. The sense of identity developed through such

spaces and experiences, Wojnarowicz suggests, is a fragmentary one that cannot be separated from the identities of those in the community that surrounds it. This lack of cohesive self might seem frightening from a homogeneous perspective, but Wojnarowicz shows it to be rich and nuanced, a way of being that is embedded and connected, constantly open to change, and which can leave a mark on the world through its construction of art, though that art may ultimately be just a ruin of what once was.

Conclusion: A “Pre-Invented” Waterfront

In the 1980s, driven to action by narratives of violence and queer sex, New York City proposed redeveloping the Hudson River waterfront through the Westway project, an underground interstate highway. However, community activists argued successfully that this project would rid “the Hudson of its rotting pier footings [and] destroy an important breeding ground for the striped bass” (Anderson 131). In other words, the very foundations of the piers, the ruins of the spaces through which Wojnarowicz and others drifted, saved the waterfront from total destruction and ironically exist as a continuing life-giving source. Nevertheless, as the Hudson River waterfront has been redeveloped and incorporated within the fold of municipal and corporate governance, bodily experiences within it have changed dramatically. No longer a heterogeneous place of subversive sensations, it has become a homogenized space of exercise, relaxation, and self-promotion, a place where urbanites might go, in Simmel’s analysis, to escape the emotional bombardment of the city, but in such a way as to reinforce, rather than interrogate or challenge, dominant discourses of life.

While the ruins of the warehouses themselves can no longer be experienced, Wojnarowicz’s evocation of existence within them can still reveal how marginalized urban spaces produce sensations that lead to new and subversive ideas. “Losing the Form in Darkness” now serves as a ruin through which we, as readers, might drift, contemplating what this queer Ozymandias can tell us about the community that used to exist along the waterfront. Rather than take a selfie in front of an abstract art installation that looms like the ghost of a former warehouse, we can read Wojnarowicz’s account, look at the rotting pier footings that still dot the river, and consider how individuals and communities might occupy and experience marginalized spaces in the city today to imagine new possibilities for the future.

NICOLAS MCKELVIE is a second-year Master’s student in the English department at New York University who earned his BS in Secondary Education with a concentration in English at the University of Vermont and his M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction at Boston College. Currently an English teacher at the Robert Louis Stevenson School, his research interests include gender, queerness, performance, materiality and embodiment, and secondary English education.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Fiona. *Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York's Ruined Waterfront*. U of Chicago P, 2019.
- Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Translated by Allan Stoekl, U of Minnesota P, 1985.
- Daiya, Krishna. "The timelessness of art as epitomized in Shelley's Ozymandias." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2014, pp. 154-156.
- "David Hammons: Day's End." Whitney Museum of American Art. *Whitney.org*.
- Debord, Guy. "Theory of the Dérive." *Visual Culture: Spaces of visual culture*, vol. 3, 1958, pp. 77-82.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheriden, Knopf Doubleday, 1995.
- Fox, Tom. *Creating the Hudson River Park: Environmental and Community Activism, Politics, and Greed*. Rutgers UP, 2024.
- Hane-Devore, Tasia M. "Auto/Thanatography, Subjectivity, and Sociomedical Discourse In David Wojnarowicz's *Close To The Knives: A Memoir Of Disintegration*." *Intertexts*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2011, pp. 103-123.
- LaFleur, Greta, and Dana Seidler. "Sex, Violence, and Memoir: David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*." *Biography*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2022, pp. 455-476.
- Lipman, Jacob Mullan. "Queer Heritage/Queer Horizons: Disruptive Temporality in the Works of David Wojnarowicz." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2018, pp. 360-82.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ozymandias." *Shelley's Poetry and Prose, 1977*. *Poetryfoundation.org*.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, edited by Richard Sennett, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969, pp. 47-60.
- Waggoner, Eric. "'This Killing Machine Called America': Narrative of the Body in David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2000, pp. 171-192.
- Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. Knopf Doubleday, 1991.

