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Bamberger Studien zu Literatur,  
Kultur und Medien

Diversity:  
Linguistic, Cultural, and Literary Perspectives  
Student Conference Proceedings 2024

Susan Brähler, Kerstin-Anja Munderlein (Ed.)



University  
of Bamberg  
Press

## **40** Bamberger Studien zu Literatur, Kultur und Medien

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Kultur und Medien

hg. von Andrea Bartl, Jörn Glasenapp, Iris Hermann,  
Christoph Jürgensen, Friedhelm Marx

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**2025**

# **Diversity: Linguistic, Cultural, and Literary Perspectives**

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# 1. Introduction: Diversity, Academia, and the Public Discourse

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Cultural diversity forms part of our “common heritage of humanity” (UNESCO 62) and constitutes a fundamentally human need and a value in its own right. While the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (adopted in Paris in 2001) quoted here prizes diversity as a “source of exchange, innovation and creativity” (62) and eventually one of sustainability, diversity has over the past two decades risked declining into a catch-all term. It has been appropriated by a variety of interest groups for their very divergent agendas. By some, it has been ‘charged’ with activism, while at the same time, it has been institutionalised into BA and MA programmes at a number of universities and thus been demarcated as a study discipline of its own. Ever since diversity has been recognised by HR departments as a factor for economic success – one that can be generated through the synergy effects of pluralistic, international work teams, for example – diversity in the sense of ‘diversity management’ has become frowned upon, e.g. for its tokenism in workforce recruitment (Krell et al. 11). For psychologists and social scientists, on the other hand, *relational* diversity, the variety of one’s relationships and social bonds, has been recognised as an important factor for personal well-being (Nagel 232).

Diversity routinely refers to one or several of the so-called ‘big 8’: “race, gender, ethnicity/nationality, organizational role/function, age, sexual orientation, mental/physical ability, religion” (Krell et al. 9). All of these socially constructed categories of difference are interdependent, which invites for intersectional engagement. While an individual can identify as at the same time LGBTQIA+ and Muslim, to name but one example, “diversity is typically understood as a feature of a group or a collective [...] rather than as a feature of any particular individual” (Vitikainen 74). So while an individual can claim allegiance to a plurality of social groups or identifications, only a group of people can meaningfully be referred to as ‘diverse’. Diversity thus becomes a relevant category in “the workplace, education, different physical spaces (e.g. city or neighborhood), and local, national, and global politics” (74). It has “a profound effect both on the general organization of society, as well as on those bonds – identities, sense of belonging – that tie the members of these societies together” (74).

The ‘big 8’ are far from innocent categories and not all of them are equally visible, especially if “psychological tendencies, abilities, or preferences” (Jones, Dovidio, and Vietze 4) are added to these markers of difference. All of them, however, imply a human or cultural norm and thus entail hierarchies of power and different levels of agency. Any scholarly interest in diversity therefore always has to take into consideration “the underlying structures and patterns of e.g. discrimination and bias that are

often embedded in the social norms and institutional structures of society” (Vitikainen 75).

Diversity studies has emerged only recently as a transdisciplinary academic field in its own right, focusing on the essentially interdependent markers of social distinction – culture, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, ability, age, or class – and investigating how these impact on social dynamics, mental well-being, political decisions, or economic developments and the ensuing systems of privilege and oppression. The co-editors of *Diversity Studies: Grundlagen und disziplinäre Ansätze* (2007) have assembled contributions from scholars working, among others, in fields as diverse as women’s and gender studies, ageing studies, migration and postcolonial studies, antisemitism research, and disability studies as well as anti-discrimination or equal opportunity research under the umbrella term of ‘diversity studies’. According to Vitikainen, major disciplines involved in the field are sociology, psychology, economics, law, political science, philosophy, and cultural studies. The ongoing establishment of the field can be seen in the foundation of diversity studies as a study discipline, e.g. at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and the University of San Francisco, the latter advertising their BA in Critical Diversity Studies as a means to study “historical and contemporary social constructions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and religion” (University of San Francisco, website). In 2026, an open access, German-language introduction, *Kulturwissenschaftliche Diversity Studies: Eine Einführung*, will be published, which, according to the editors Hanna Höfer and Sigrid Nieberle, is meant to bring to the fore the contributions of language, literature, and media in the critical reflection on socio-cultural diversity. And finally, the launch of the peer-reviewed *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* in 2018, based in Witwatersrand, South Africa, further attests to the maturation of the field.

With the essays from English Linguistics, British and American Cultural and Literary Studies assembled in this volume, we aim at making a further contribution to diversity studies from an English and American studies perspective. It was in May 2023 that we decided to dedicate an entire academic year (autumn 2023 to summer 2024) to the critical engagement with diversity. Students of two English-taught Master’s programme tracks at the University of Bamberg, the MA English and American Studies as well as the European Joint Master’s Programme in English and American Studies, were invited to approach the topic from various (trans-)disciplinary angles and to engage in a continued scholarly debate around the significance of cultural diversity for the future of the humanities, for themselves – forming part of an international student body –, for the international classroom as well as for society at large. In a variety of settings, students discussed diversity and plurality in the areas of language, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc. and their literary as well as cultural representations.

Little did we know that, when we first sketched out a programme for the upcoming academic year 2023/24, diversity would become even more topical and come under more fervent attack because of both new and ongoing – but newly accelerated – developments around the globe. To name a few, albeit disparate, examples: the pro-Palestinian protests at numerous universities following the eruption of armed conflict in Gaza in October 2023 sparked a debate around how to deal with political divides – and antisemitism specifically – in the student body. In the US, according to PEN America (Mehan et al. n. pag.), more than 4,000 books were banned during the school year 2023/24 – a sad all-time record. In many cases these were titles from young adult fiction featuring PoC or LGBTQIA+ characters. Only a year before, new legislation in states like Iowa, Florida or South Carolina had prohibited classroom debate around sexual orientation and gender identity, thereby promoting heteronormativity and stigmatising, among others, homosexuality, trans, and non-binary people. In very subtle ways, the increased use of generative AI chatbots also entails exclusion: AI comes with a white, heteronormative, ableist, and racial bias.<sup>1</sup> Laws regulating gender-sensitive language were introduced in Bavaria on 1 April 2024, a symptom of a larger political trend towards regulating the German language for the sake of ‘clarity’, thereby rendering non-normative persons – such as genderqueer, trans, or non-binary people – (linguistically) invisible. In a similar vein, the British Supreme Court ruled only a year later (April 2025) that the legal definition of the term “woman” must only apply to people assigned female at birth and thus classifies trans women as men; it understands sex as only binary and similarly excludes trans or non-binary people. In Bavaria, the official argument made in favour of the exclusion of special characters in written language signifying inclusion and diversity, such as asterisk or colon, is to keep an open discourse as befits an open, liberal society since certain individuals’ “missionary zeal” had led to a “factual coercion” to use gender-sensitive language.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, the Supreme Court ruling followed campaigns denigrating trans women driven by the need to protect women by disallowing men into women’s spaces. This very real need to protect women from (domestic) violence and abuse has however significantly imposed on the safety of trans women and all trans people as the ruling has now undermined gender recognition certificates (Human Rights Watch) and thus endangered the social group most likely to experience violence (trans and gay people) even more (U of Surrey).

A particularly overt example of a reactionary treatment of issues of diversity can be found in the 2025 US DEI debate, that is, the debate around how American programmes of diversity, equity, and inclusion were blamed for anything ranging from an aviation accident to an alleged accumulation of inadequate workforce who were

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<sup>1</sup> See for example data journalist Meredith Broussard’s interview with *The Guardian* (Corbyn n. pag.).

<sup>2</sup> Our translation of Bavarian Minister of the Interior Joachim Herrmann’s words as quoted in Jerabek.

allegedly only hired because of the requirements of DEI. According to major news outlet CNN, DEI have not only “come under attack” but were “dividing America” as Nicquel Terry Ellis claims in her article (Ellis n. pag.). Very much unlike the academic discourse on the positive effects of DEI in practice, which Melina Duarte, Katrin Losleben, and Kjersti Fjørtoft show in their 2023 essay collection *Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia*, US politics were quick to abolish DEI programmes and disputed people’s qualifications if they were in any way non-white or non-normative, (wrongly) claiming that DEI hiring policies have only led to the employment of unqualified personnel. Positive effects of DEI on society and economy, as outlined for example in a series of reports by McKinsey from 2015 to 2020 (one of which is aptly named “Diversity wins: how inclusion matters”), were negated in Donald Trump’s “war against such policies” (Ellis n. pag.). Trump’s argument in terminating DEI programmes is evident in the title of the respective presidential action published on the page of the White House on 20 January 2025: “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing”. Diversity and the right to social participation are regarded as impediments to a positive socio-economic and cultural development – counter to any actual research conducted on the topic – and non-normative people are stigmatised, ostracised, and, at worst, prosecuted.

Generally speaking, populist political rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment have been on the rise throughout Europe, with very real repercussions for the safety and mental well-being of our international MA students. What is conspicuous in these examples is the ostensible need to protect ‘society’ from ‘ideology’ without further defining what is understood by ideology or how this ideology reacts to contemporary dominant culture. Denigrating any political opponent’s position simply as ‘ideology’ not only speaks to an ignorant use of the term, it also unveils the underlying populism of a debate that would rather resort to emotion-based populist discourse than fact- and science-based, neutral language. This, then, is what research and academic discourse has the power to do. By shedding light on the concepts of power, knowledge, and ideology in the public discourse and how they can and have been employed for cultural and political aims is one way of countering ill-informed polemics or outright misinformation. Given the sheer mass of opinion available online at any hour of the day – often presented as semi-scientific without being so – and the increased global hostility towards science and scholarship, questions of diversity and inclusion or representation of diversity are often led with particular vitriol. The popular discourse seems to be composed of opposing factions – proponents of a certain ‘ideology’ – and the actual concerns of non-normative people either get lost or are being weaponised. What, then, is the ‘purpose’ of a scholarly debate – if any at all? In this volume, we follow an understanding of academia as a necessary contributor to the public discourse that provides critical discussions of terminology, observes and describes public discourse, analyses the inclusion and exclusion of (in

the case of the current topic) issues of diversity in society and their representations in literature and culture at large. It would be a common misconception to assume that approaches to studying diversity necessarily must start at the ideological top, that is, by discussing the meaning of the term itself or the significance diversity holds for any given society. On the contrary, by looking into individual films or books, we are just as able to see the importance of a diverse and inclusive society on the microlevel of the analysis of the respective source. Challenges to a rigid normativity with all its negative repercussions on social cohesion, such as the strategic ostracisation of non-normativity for a variety of reasons, are just as visible in case studies as they are on the macrolevel of society as a whole. This is what this volume does, it challenges the idea that one certain norm exists and it shows that what is perceived to be ‘the norm’ is a construct based on assumptions of reality rooted in dominant culture’s reading of ‘truth’, a concept French philosopher Michel Foucault already heavily criticised in 1977.

In her introduction to the inaugural volume of the *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies*, Melissa Steyn from the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies reminds us of the centuries-long debate around the “ideal incarnation of the human [...] [that] has enabled a small group of people to set the terms for understanding difference, establish the rules of engagement, and institutionalise social arrangements with themselves as a norm” (7), a norm that has been and in varying degrees still is at the same time “(West)Eurocentric, White Supremacist, Colonialist, Heteropatriarchal, Christonormative, Nationalist, Capital(abl)ist, Classist, Humanist/Anthropocentric, and Militarist” (7). She denounces those reactionary social and political developments that nostalgically strive to (re-)create “simpler, homogenous identities, times and spaces, organized along the lines of domination that are familiar and do not challenge the interests of the historical beneficiaries” (8). As teachers, our own critical engagement with diversity is informed by the ethical imperative to practice a lived “culture that values the variety of inputs from academics and organisational staff and students from different backgrounds and enables constructive encounters among them in the joint process of producing, disseminating, and receiving knowledge” (Duarte, Losleben, and Fjørtoft 1). As researchers, we align ourselves with the aims of the *Journal*, which envisions “an orientation of critical hope in the belief that scholarship can, in however a modest way, contribute to a social imaginary that envisions a more equitable, caring, safer and sustainable world” (Steyn 9). This, in effect, is what sparked our desire to engage with the umbrella term of ‘diversity’ on an academic level and in a teaching and conference environment.

Throughout the academic year 2023/24, MA students from Bamberg, Barcelona, Graz, Krakow, New York, Paris, Pécs, and Venice met online for a series of online lectures taught by professors from within the consortium of the European Joint Master’s Programme, giving students an opportunity to engage in discussion with MA

students and teachers from partner universities alike: Manfred Krug (University of Bamberg) inaugurated the series with a multimodal approach to a Michael Jackson music video, Andrew Monnickendam (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) introduced students to the transdisciplinary field of Food Studies, Roberta Maierhofer (University of Graz) contributed with a talk on Inter-American Perspectives in Cultural Studies, and Mena Mitrano and Pia Masiero (both from Università Ca' Foscari Venezia) invited students to think about the challenges and affordances of first person narration.

The lecture series was followed by two student and alumni conferences entitled “Diversity: Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Perspectives”, a title which reflects the three specialisations within our MA Programme – English linguistics, cultural and literary Studies. On 25 April 2024, twenty Joint MA students and alumni from all eight partner universities<sup>3</sup>, whose proposals had been accepted in a competitive selection process, gave their talks in front of fellow students, Bamberg teaching staff as well as the coordinators of the Joint Programme, who had all travelled to Bamberg for their annual meeting. This was the fourth student and alumni conference organised by a Joint Programme university and so far the largest of its kind and an excellent opportunity for Bamberg students to meet – face to face – some of the students and professors they had previously only met within the online lecture series. The conference was completed by two keynote lectures, one held by Wladyslaw Witalisz (Uniwersytet Jagiellonski w Krakowie) on the power of political farce in Carlos Morton’s *Trumpus Caesar* and one by Kedon Willis (City College of New York) on “Queer Literatures of the Caribbean”.

The second student conference, for students of the MA English and American Studies (regular track), took off with Chandni (Anjali) Rampersad’s (University of Duisburg-Essen) guest lecture on “Head-dresses, Hoops and Stays: Fashioning Ladies in the 18th Century” on 13 June 2025 and continued the next day with a full conference day started by Christoph Heyl’s (University of Duisburg-Essen) keynote lecture entitled “Miss Jones takes an omnibus to Baghdad: Perceptions of Urban Diversity in London”. It was followed by six papers delivered by MA students from Bamberg. This was the first instalment of what we have envisioned as a series of student conferences called “Building Bridges, Bridging Gaps”, to be continued in the summer semester 2026. Our goal is to give MA students a platform where they can practice

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<sup>3</sup> In April 2024, the partner universities of the consortium of the European Joint Master’s Programme in English and American Studies were the University of Bamberg, Germany; the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Austria; the Université Paris Cité, France; the Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, Italy; the Uniwersytet Jagiellonski w Krakowie, Poland; and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain with the City College of the City University of New York, USA, and the Pécsi Tudományegyetem / University of Pécs, Hungary serving as additional mobility partners. For more information, see here: <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/en/ma-jpeas/>.

academic skills in a safe environment and prepare for postgraduate academic challenges.

The present volume assembles the top nine student and alumni papers from both conferences and features the two lectures by Andrew Monnickendam and Kedon Willis, which frame the collection of student essays. In keeping with the overall topic, these essays provide highly varied approaches to diversity – topics that are as diverse as their eleven authors of all stages of university education from MA student to professor emeritus and hailing from seven countries. The following articles use literature since the nineteenth century, modern film, newspaper coverage, and even an entire branch of research to contribute their approach to diversity studies.

In the opening chapter, Kedon Willis focuses on a postcolonial reading of the representation of queerness in Marlon James's 2016 novel *The Brief History of Seven Killings* (ch. 2). Next, Kae Borkeloh takes an intersectional look at the 2016 film *Moonlight* to show how the film negotiates queerness and black masculinities (ch. 3). Ege A. Özbek continues the topic of filmic masculinity and analyses the connection of postfeminism and fatherhood in the 2018 film *Leave No Trace* (ch. 4). Then, Lara Brändle takes us to the Victorian Age and compares how the literary modes of Gothic and realism affect the representation of madness and sanity in murderesses (ch. 5). Using the rare poetic genre of the choreopoem, Katharine Wilson analyses black women's trauma in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (ch. 6). M. Angela Sperlí then looks at the literary representation of the "New Negro Woman" at the turn of the twentieth century in Jessie Fauset's novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (ch. 7). Next, Kristina A. Steiner uses her study on Walter Tevis's novel *The Queen's Gambit* to comment on the lack of representation of women in male-dominated sports (ch. 8). Following that, Anna Lorenzon analyses the character Joelle van Dyne in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* to assess how the novel prioritises aural culture over the dominance of visual culture (ch. 9). Leonie Unkel contributes both to narratological theory and diversity when she introduces ageing as a category within narratology in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (ch. 10). In the only linguistic article in this collection, Eva Katharina Bauer presents her comparative study of the linguistic representation of climate change in news outlets with a focus on temporal perspectives (ch. 11). Rounding off the volume with another keynote, in the last chapter, Andrew Monnickendam introduces the rather young field of food studies and its contemporary issues and thus points to yet another future direction of diversity studies (ch. 12).

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## 2. Contemporary Queer Literatures of the Caribbean: From Martyrs to Mercenaries<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Queer writers from the Caribbean in recent years have reconceptualized queer theory as a potent form of anticolonial critique. This paper examines how Jamaican writer Marlon James, in his 2016 novel *The Brief History of Seven Killings*, deconstructs cultural artefacts such as sayings and folk songs to (1) unearth their forgotten or overlooked anticolonial registers and (2) reconstitute them as vehicles for postcolonial utopian thinking. James, I argue, moves away from tropes that emphasize queer stigmatization as a discrete social problem and more broadly attends to the contemporary transnational maneuvers on trade, the environment and foreign policy that continue to undermine the sovereign agency of postcolonial nations like Jamaica. James does, however, offer glimpses of hope through the enlightening potential of music, film, and language, as well as through fleeting moments of same-sex intimacy scattered throughout the novel. These moments, I argue, collude to ask the reader to consider the transgressive alliances necessary for imagining the future destabilization of Euro-American colonial logics still operating within the framework of neoliberal capitalism.

### Keywords

Jamaica, Marlon James, queer theory, utopia, postcolonialism

### The Evolution of Queer Representation

Like many Caribbean novels, H. Nigel Thomas's *Spirits in the Dark* (1993) explores the traumatic legacies of colonialism on citizens of the region. The coming-of-age tale charts Jerome Quashee's journey from a naïve colonial schoolboy through to a troubled but eventually self-conscious adult.<sup>2</sup> Jerome is intellectually gifted but, as a member of the rural Black underclass, confronts the racism that continues to mold systems of education and government. Unable to reconcile his native identity within institutions that uphold colonial values, Jerome falls into cycles of aimlessness and insanity. This examination of unbelonging places Thomas within a lineage of Caribbean writers who explore themes of displacement, isolation, and rootlessness as organizing conditions of the Caribbean identity. In the novel, Jerome undergoes

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article have previously been published in the April 2021 edition of *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Volume 21, Number 2. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>2</sup> The story's fictional setting (on the Edenic Isabella island) lends it the aura of a parable for the Caribbean's own journey from a region of dependent subjects to a set of mostly fully self-determined and liberated nation-states.

initiation into an Afrocentric religious order to undo engrained ideologies related to white European superiority. For well over a century, this return to an 'authentic' self through reconnection to a 'forgotten' heritage has been a reliable trope in Caribbean literature.

Notably, in the novel, Jerome's reconstituted wholeness also hinges on his self-acceptance as gay. The explicit treatment of homosexuality in *Spirits*, according to Timothy S. Chin (1997), was a potent counter to the production of Caribbean literature which had "traditionally maintained a conspicuous silence around issues of gay and lesbian identity" (Chin 128-29). In fact, the 1980s and 1990s ushered in a wave of queer and women writers who, diverging from the ethic of nation-building parables built on the foundation of heterosexual couplings, centered concerns of female and queer sexuality in the formation of the Caribbean citizen subject.<sup>3</sup> Writers such as Trinidad and Tobago's Dionne Brand and Jamaica's Patricia Powell wrote of queer lives as organic to their respective Caribbean landscape. To be sure, the depiction of queer existence was not absent from literatures of the Caribbean. Literary scholar Rosamond King (2002) notes queerness was historically there but that its presence, specifically in Anglophone Caribbean novels, was often coded, peripheral, or made sordid.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, pioneering writers such as Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff challenged these fixed notions by "refusing the silence and shame usually associated with woman's sexual maturation and homosexuality" (35). In the end, King continues, "the thread that runs through this genealogy is of writers who remake representations of Caribbean sexuality, only to have their images revised and remade by the next generation of writers" (35). Indeed, using *Spirits* as an example, Thomas repositions queerness as a productive aspect of the self-actualization process of the novel's protagonist to whom the redemption of the nation is symbolically tied. The recuperation of an idealized African heritage happens alongside the acceptance of a non-heteronormative identity in the course of achieving a reconstituted liberated self. Thomas thus, alongside other select women and queer authors, opens an anti-colonial critique that positions the trauma of white domination as also constitutive of patriarchal and heterosexist prescriptions. Michelle Cliff elaborated on the transformative power of this "decolonized indigenous queer subject" (Chin 1997) in her novels *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1996). The protagonist

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<sup>3</sup> One such novel is V.S. Reid's *A New Day* (1949). The aged narrator recalls Jamaica's various uprisings and setbacks as it marches toward the creation of a New Constitution (which takes place in 1942 in the novel). The novel exemplifies a long-held trend whereby the struggle for self-determination is embodied in the male protagonists.

<sup>4</sup> In her study, "Sex and Sexuality in English Caribbean Novels — A Survey from 1950," King clarifies that homosexuality has appeared in the works of novelists such as Paule Marshall, Austin Clarke, and Rosa Guy. The portrayal of homosexuality, however, "existed in a heteronormative frame that assumes homosexuality is 1) abnormal and immoral, 2) practiced primarily by white and non-Caribbean folk, with Caribbean people only involved out of the desperation of loneliness or poverty, and 3) that when homosexuality does exist it should remain unseen and unacknowledged" (33).

in both works, Clare Savage, battles against cultural, state, and capitalist forms of colonial and neocolonial dominance to come to terms with her indigenized Jamaican identity. In both novels, sexual and gender non-conforming entities – imbued with mythical ties to Afro-spiritualism or the affect of Black rebellion – support Clare on her journey to self-actualization. Far from being a peripheral notion, queer sexuality is inscribed in the foundation myths that play a role in the construction of nation.

It is perhaps this notion of marginality that Caribbean writers refute when they insist on queer presence as a part of the discourse on nationhood. However, in her recent work on Caribbean sexuality, King takes issue with the, at times, conservative rendering of queer sexuality. Her study, *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (2014), champions the celebration of the multiple ways sexual being and performance in the Caribbean defy easy categorization even within the realm of queer theory. Keeping this in mind, she turns her critical lens on tropes in the depiction of queer characters among the generation of female and/or queer authors that emerged since the 1980s. Interestingly, King finds a lack of depth in the portrayal of gay lives. She identifies a tendency to imagine queer characters as, however tormented, fundamentally benevolent and communitarian. To be sure, King was focusing specifically on trans<sup>5</sup> characters who, even when compared to gay and lesbian characters, were “consistently kept on the margins of the texts and deprived of their individuality” (25). This is certainly true, as even in novels such as Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and Mayra Santos-Febres’ *Serena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), trans characters in their various capacities are fundamentally in a service role, delivering cis-gendered characters “to safety, to a better understanding of themselves, and to their ‘true’ destinies, feelings, or histories” (24). But, if we take seriously the re-historicizing imperative that Timothy Chin had attached to queer texts, we can also begin to see the service function that many queer characters – not just trans characters – have provided through the period examined in King’s survey on sexuality in Caribbean writing. To *deliver* the reader to an understanding of the Caribbean region as a perennially exploited body within the global modes of production, the queer body is offered up as an overdetermined site where the horrors of class, racial, and sexual exploitation are allegorized. As such, queer characters are often sympathetic characters. Certainly, they can be vindictive, selfish, and even violent during their journeys or in the realm of interpersonal relationships, but often those tensions are sublimated into a larger, more noble goal, sometimes in the interest of another individual, sometimes in the interest of the nation itself. In Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place*,

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<sup>5</sup> I rely on King’s definition of trans identity as she points out the problematic imposition of the term transgender from the US onto the Caribbean. The unassuming appellation of “trans,” according to her, can apply to a range of gender bending behaviors that the more specific “transgender” would not cover.

*Not Here* (1996), Verlia is a member of the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto who returns to an unnamed Caribbean island in the 1980s to help with organizing a resistance among poor sugarcane laborers. There she meets Elizete, a poor worker herself, who through Verlia begins to feel her autonomy as an erotic and political being. However, at times, Verlia can be distant, difficult to understand and uncompromising. Verlia, ardently committed to her political work, dies in a rebellion that harkens to the 1983 US invasion of Grenada. Indeed, rather than being murdered in the approaching US offense, Verlia dies on her own terms, leaping from a cliff amidst a storm of bullets. In their function, therefore, as vehicles for the redemptive hopes of their nation, queer characters, though on complex journeys of discovery or reconciliation, were firmly sympathetic, at times even martyred, in the spirit of aligning them with the postcolonial hopes of their nation.

Curiously, however, Marlon James's novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) was released the same year as King's *Island Bodies*, the study from which I have adapted my critique of the seemingly static depiction of queer characters in works from the Caribbean. *A Brief History* investigates familiar themes of Black subjugation and postcolonial malaise and was lauded for its bracing dramatization of Jamaica's post-independence struggles, even receiving the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2015. While *A Brief History* remains James's most popular work, scholarship on the novel overlooks one of its most radical elements – the portrayal of its only queer main character as an abject villain, an ex-convict working *against* the progressive aims of the state by drugging and enlisting poor urban boys as pawns in a cocaine empire. Within a few years of *A Brief History*'s publication, other queer Caribbean authors released novels depicting their gay, lesbian, or trans characters as villainous or morally bankrupt. These works do not account for a majority trend among recently published novels by queer Caribbean authors, but it is noteworthy that this trope has emerged among a range of writers in the past decade – a period marked by sharp economic downturns, spiraling debt obligations, and a series of natural disasters that devastated many Caribbean islands. Some novels of note are *Here Comes the Sun* (2016) by Jamaican author Nicole Dennis-Benn, whose queer female lead prostitutes poor young girls to tourists in her bid to scale the heights of the hotel industry. The trans Dominican protagonist in Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) opts to safeguard a promise of future wealth by foregoing their mission to save the Caribbean Sea. And in Gary Victor's *Masi* (2018), the queer lead participates in the ongoing impoverishment of the Haitian population to maintain his government post.

Why then do these authors, from islands with distinct cultures and histories, all present negative representations of queer characters at this moment in time? In my larger project – a manuscript titled *Mercenary Queers in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* – I make three core arguments:

- (1) that while the move toward representative government was a logical step for the region's colonized, the processes of nationalization were too tied up in a neocolonial paradigm to truly deliver equitable social systems to most of the region's population;
- (2) that the politics of postcolonialism, developed in the crucible of mid-twentieth century decolonial efforts, are incompatible with twenty-first century pressures of ecocides, debt burdens, and postcolonial disillusionment;
- (3) that queer relations, despite their seemingly negative presentation in these novels, nonetheless offer a way of understanding the overlapping forms of historical violence that continue to constrain the capacity for humane sympathies.

*Mercenary Queers in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* takes as one of its theoretical frames the increased scholarly interest in the acute sense of suffering experienced by Caribbean nationals in the aftermath of failed revolutions since the mid-twentieth century. Shalini Puri (2014) examines the trauma of failed postcolonial promises through the tragedy of the Grenada Revolution. Sociologist Orlando Patterson (2019) performs his autopsy of the "postcolonial predicament" via the contemporary nation body of Jamaica. And the anthropologist David Scott (1999, 2004, 2014) interrogates the crisis of postcolonialism, where the concerns that animated anti- and postcolonial policies in the twentieth century are not suited to twenty-first century dilemmas. The queer Caribbean authors I examine are staging a similar criticism. They make this critique, however, through the concept of the *mercenary queer* – a marginalized figure who nonetheless uses the exploiting tendencies of a state or capitalist regime to enhance their social positions. In other words, these authors critique how the structure of modern democracy in their native islands allows for the absorption of some queer people as upwardly mobile while maintaining the oppression of a largely poor and mostly non-white citizen body.

In the section that follows, I return to *A Brief History* to show how author Marlon James dramatizes the failings of Jamaica's immediate post-independence endeavors. Postcolonial state apparatuses (and the social and private sectors they support and regulate) were too anchored in governing frameworks conceived by former colonial powers in the service of their preserving their material and ideological interests. The logic of subjugation that propelled European (and later American) control of Caribbean islands recurs in the neoliberal schemas that presuppose the constrained capacity of the Caribbean region's politics and its peoples. In the wreckage of this post-colonial malaise, *A Brief History* does offer a moment of liberatory imagining via the rapture induced by a moment of queer intimacy. The characters ultimately fail to channel this imagining into political action. But it is this very failure that outlines the terms of a more equitable future not yet imaginable under the exploiting regime of neoliberal capitalism.

## Colonial Recursiveness in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

One, two, three, four  
Colon man<sup>6</sup> a come  
with him watch chain a knock him belly  
Bam Bam Bam  
Ask him what's the time  
and he look upon the sun  
with him watch chain a knock him belly  
Bam Bam Bam

— Olive Senior, “The Colon People”

*A Brief History's* main narrative spans two decades and starts in the fateful 1976 election year when the promise of Jamaica's independence had lifted to reveal a colonial infrastructure still rooted in place. Michael Manley is prime minister and is attempting to reaffirm a socialist platform meant to disrupt this entrenched inequality. The first two thirds of the novel, set in the capital city Kingston, center on the orchestrated assassination attempt on Bob Marley (known as “the Singer” in the novel), with covert help from the CIA. The Singer's message of self-determination and pan-African consciousness is ideologically allied to Manley's socialist movement and represents a threat to US political hegemony throughout the Americas. *A Brief History* thus uses the real-life assassination attempt on Bob Marley as the dramatic thrust for a conglomerate of narratives that show the growth of political tribalism and criminal empires in Kingston, the politicians who nurture them to maintain their positions of power and the coercive methods of the United States to support local players sympathetic to their capitalist regime of world order.

Where the novel picks up in 1976, Papa-Lo, who is the powerful don of the Kingston garrison, Copenhagen City, is having a crisis of consciousness; the anti-establishment fervor that led to the creation of these autonomous garrisons has stoked greater divisions among the urban poor. Violence has reached horrific levels, and the political establishment has maneuvered to exploit intercommunity tensions to uphold their positions of power. Papa-Lo recalls the Colon Man song at a moment of realizing that he and his fellow residents are operating within a colonial structure like that of their forebears. In fact, he mistakenly attributes learning the song from his grandfather until he remembers that he has no grandfather. The exceptional violence that engulfs Black urban living creates a Kingston landscape where “no

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<sup>6</sup> Colon Man refers to the wave of Caribbean laborers, the majority of them Jamaican men, who travelled to Panama in the early twentieth century to work on constructing the Panama Canal (and later on banana plantations run by US companies). Poor economic conditions drove this labor migration to Panama and its dangerous working conditions in the Canal Zone. Some men returned to the Caribbean sporting signs of newfound wealth. “The Colon Man” therefore became a symbol of upward mobility. But he was also a figure of ambivalence – sometimes flaunting wealth that was not as deep as it seemed.

man in the ghetto have grandfather” (James 338).<sup>7</sup> The mistaken patriarchal figure, Papa-Lo realizes, “was just an old man unlucky to be the only man who live to old age, singing the Colon man song” (338). The moment reads like a glib reference, one quietly nudged in the chapter’s brutal retelling of political violence in 1970s Kingston. But the moment is not arbitrary. It is plausible that this man was a Colon Man himself and a testament to the struggles that attended the labor migrants’ return to Jamaica two generations before Papa-Lo’s present. James’s implementation of the song thus uncovers a more informing B-side, one that unpacks the imperialism of Big Stick diplomacy and the rise of US economic and military power in the Americas. It also pays closer attention to what Olive Senior (2014) points out as the brutal reality of racism, death, and disease that haunted the experiences of West Indian labor migrants returning from the Panama Canal (Senior 69). In the early twentieth century, many of these laborers returned to confront the seemingly unmovable class and racial barriers that informed the violence and poor sanitary conditions of working-class Jamaicans, conditions that continue in the lack of working toilets and contaminated drinking water that Papa-Lo alludes to later in the scene. Through this sonic maneuver via the Colon Man song, the colonial past folds itself into the postcolonial present. However, by the terms of the novel, the young men languishing in the same miserable conditions as their grandparents flock instead to the avenues of organized crime opened up by Cold War intrigue and neoliberal economic schemas.

When Papa-Lo tells us he can tell time like a Colon Man, there is an inherent rejection of the utility of linear logic in trying to recount the surreal conditions of the urban poor in post-independent Jamaica. Instead of laughing at the posturing figure that is the Colon Man, the novel asks us to consider the ethics of a regime that allows for his poverty and illiteracy, then derides him for not being able to read a watch. It nudges us into also considering the failings of our postcolonial consciousness when we overlook the resourcefulness and cunning inherent in being able to read the sun as a survival strategy. This type of consciousness, however, is under constant threat. Papa-Lo’s more populist beliefs become a danger to the type of political apathy upon which the political establishment depends. Peter Nasser, the novel’s corrupt political figure, moves on to work with the more mercenary Josey Wales in maintaining his political party’s hold in the region. And while Josey Wales does arrange for Papa-Lo’s murder and expresses a distaste for Manley’s socialist policies, he is not motivated by loyalty to any party. He is motivated more by a determination to exploit the perversities of broader turf politics that could gain him individual wealth via the

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah Thomas, in *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*, argues for the abstract concept of “exceptional violence” as a tangible repository of the lasting impact of colonialism on the contemporary socio-political landscape. Thomas employs historical research and media analysis to thread a connection between colonial regimes and Jamaica’s postcolonial state and cultural formations.

transnational scope of drug trafficking. For this, Josey Wales bypasses local politicians to make overtures to Colombian cartels in Medellín. However, it is important to note that the fashioning of his transnational drug empire could not function without the cooperation of the US government, as represented by the artless CIA station chief, Mr. Clark.

Mr. Clark is willing to turn a blind eye to Josey's "trips to Miami and Costa Rica" (James 414) as long as Josey continues to assist in the US government's efforts to neutralize the threat of communism, which they imagine Manley's socialist government represents. In a critical exchange between himself and Josey, Clark uses a coloring book to explain the benefits of democracy and capitalism in the cartoonishly reduced terms of "twinkies," "ice cream," hot chicks in miniskirts, "tall buildings," "markets," and "freedom" (412). The communal implications of communism, however, subvert a timeless heterosexual ordering that naturally aligns with the precepts of capitalism. "You know why so many [communists] are faggots?" Clark asks Josey, "[B]ecause normal people like me and you, we reproduce. Commies? They're just like homos, they recruit" (413).

With this in mind, I would like to make an argument for the historical connections between European colonialism and postmodern capitalism through the neo-imperial figure of Mr. Clark, who is described as embodying a "pirate spirit" when he meets Josey at Port Royal in Kingston (410). Port Royal, as the most important port in the New World in the seventeenth century, was central to the growth and domination of the British economy at that time. "You wonder," Josey says, "if this is the same spirit that leap up in them as soon as they land on any rock. I'm betting it must be so, from as far back as Columbus and slavery. Something about landing from sea that make a white man feel free to say and do as he please" (410-11). On this strategic site, Mr. Clark is figured as a retransmission of a white European tradition that stakes the prospect of financial and political domination on the plundering of resource-rich islands. Where the Caribbean (and, by extension, Latin America) is concerned, the United States' imposing foothold through anti-communist maneuvers or debt mechanisms should not be read as a unique product of a post-World War II global world order. It should also be read as always already informed by a material history that presupposes white Euro-American dominance in geopolitical relations. In making this argument, feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander (2006) asks us to abandon the lineal technologies (such as the watch) in tracing the progress of our present political situations and to think alternatively through the concept of the palimpsest – that parchment meant for repeated inscriptions, the previous content never being perfectly erased, often leaving ghostly traces of itself among the new. In Alexander's words, the figure of Mr. Clark shows that "colonialism's multiple projects, often normalized through hypervisible practices and racialization and

(hetero)sexualization, cannot be seen simply in terms of having been past, and thus no longer constitutive of the (post)modern” (191).

For James, the white heteropatriarchal considerations that naturalized the white conquest of so-called untamed islands for the sake of profit and resource extraction have evolved into the postcolonial-state maneuvers that align progress with productivity and thus marginalize ideologies and citizens who are seen as a moral threat to its productivity – be it the queer, the prostitute, the pleasure seeker, the socialist, the poor immigrant, the single mother, or the reggae singer making a case for reparations. Through these strategies, James inscribes the echoes of the colonial past in the happening of the story’s present to show how democracy in the fledgling country could never bring true self-determination to its majority-Black citizens since the terms of said democracy, to borrow a claim from Deborah Thomas (2004), were built on a house of cards structured in the power-consolidation interests of Western Europe and, later, the United States (Thomas, *Modern* 13).

As the exchange between Mr. Clark and Josey attests, a critical aspect of James’s critique also centers on the role of violent heteropatriarchy as a destructive force in a postcolonial context. I alluded to the Colon Man as a failed duplicate of the image of his colonial ruler. I reach for the Colon Man once more, however, as a (queer) tool for decoding James’s anti-colonial critique, for the popular imagining of the Colon Man betrays a slippage not only in the broad terms of coloniality but also in more specific terms of masculinity. This slippage taps into Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as a gesture of disruption, one that picks at the indefinite nature of hegemonic constructs and, in doing so, undermines its self-evident authority. I argue that James’s use of cultural signifiers also highlights masculinity’s equivocal nature and offers a pathway to breaking down its destructive influence on the Caribbean psyche, the male Caribbean psyche in particular. To this end, I focus specifically on James’s use of queer Eros to imagine the dismantling of white heteropatriarchal logics that marginalize not only queer folk but also the multiple subaltern groups – the single mother, the poor immigrant, the pleasure junkie, the mostly Black poor communities – imagined as antithetical to the productive imperatives of capitalist regimes.

### **The Promise of Queer Failure**

*A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a bleak novel, operating as a transcendent exercise in failure or, one could say, as a clinical vivisection of the Caribbean body for the sole purpose of exposing the fatal cancer that structures its existence. But I lean on Bill Ashcroft’s theorization of utopianism as a critical lens that disrupts the self-evidence of hegemony by detailing the terms of said hegemony’s violence: “The distinguishing feature of all utopian visions”, he says, rests in “the critique of those present conditions that make utopia necessary” (10). *A Brief History* anchors the terms of a possible utopia in the dismantling of – at the individual level – those

colonial logics Caribbean citizens have inherited that posit the non-normative or subaltern as inferior. Crucially, one of the ways in which James dramatizes this psychic battle is through sex between men.

Of the eleven major characters who get to narrate their stories, the character Weeper is the novel's only queer Jamaican. His backstory reveals that, unlike some of the other Copenhagen criminals, Weeper had aspirations of middle-class success, perhaps even "apprenticing for some architect somewhere" (James 66). But in 1967, he was pounced on by the police and arrested. Under the false claim of his being involved in a robbery lies the social politics of Weeper being a downtown Black boy strutting on the border of uptown Kingston. His imprisonment and subsequent turn to crime is a rejection of the untenable ideals of a post-independent Jamaica where education, diligence, and thrift would be an equalizer for all Jamaicans. After prison, Weeper becomes one of Josey Wales's most brutal enforcers, participating in ruthless campaigns of murder, sexual assault, and even the drug-induced zombification of young Black men for the sake of creating a desperate and slavish squad of assassins. The point I am making here is that James, as a queer author, does not feel compelled to position his queer characters as solely victims or noble heroes. Like other contemporary queer authors, mentioned earlier, James's focus on the abject terms of the postcolonial condition reveals how even marginalized characters such as queer folk can participate in economies of exploitation for personal gain.

Weeper does, however, struggle to come to terms with his attraction to men, despite evidence of a significant same-sex relationship that he once had in prison. It is not until he becomes the Brooklyn-based operator for Josey Wales's expanded drug empire that he confronts the conflicting terms of his desires and his beliefs. Weeper, in short, has fallen for a white American man but chafes at the implications of the pleasure that he experiences, for the first time, from a same-sex encounter. He worries about being made to feel like a woman, "not from a fuck," which to him is merely transactional, "but from a blow on the nipple," which encodes a feeling of intimacy that is unnervingly humanizing (497). Weeper struggles to even scream in pleasure, plagued by illogical ideas such as Josey Wales flying by in an aeroplane to catch him in the act in his fifth-floor apartment. Even during sex, Weeper remains stymied by these thoughts until the moment his lover manages to

reach something and somewhere that make me jump and no I don't wonder if this is how woman feel when me hit the spot, because fuck women and fuck pussy and fuck trying to fuck the faggot out, at least right here, right now five floors up. And fuck thinking what it going mean the white man on top because I don't think about the white man on top until I think that this is America and if I think like a nigger then it mean something that the white man on top and maybe I should go on top even though he can still ride me. Thank God me not the one who need to have a hard cock. (499)

To "fuck" thinking about what it means to have the white man on top is to both acknowledge how racialized sexual encounters can recall genealogies of violence and

to reject the debilitating terms of that colonial masculinity adopted to combat the traumas of that violence. To reject this shame, according to feminist scholar Juana María Rodríguez (2014), is to reject the psychic constraints that prohibit the power of the erotic (144). The power of the erotic, of course, recalls Audre Lorde's important argument for our erotic embrace being intimately allied with our political agency in the present. Weeper's embrace of being "a faggot" is thus predicated on his battling and understanding the constitutive terms of his homophobia and, for readers, opens up vistas of imagining how to undo these structures of social relations that also marginalize other subaltern communities.

It is important to point out that Weeper ultimately fails in transferring this moment of consciousness into a social ethic that envisions the dismantling of existing power structures that continue to differentiate – that is, mark as abject – certain citizen bodies. He does not imagine abandoning his life in organized crime, and his execution is soon after arranged via a power grab by another drug lord. Curiously, James imbues Weeper's death with one of the novel's most urgent moments regarding human connection. Weeper tricks his assassin into allowing him a shot of pure coke, effectively killing himself in order to go out on his terms of lawless pleasure. Weeper's defiant gesture stirs a heretofore untapped tenderness in his would-be assassin John-John K (who is also queer):

[Weeper's] still jerking, choking and hissing [...] And me I don't know why, I don't fucking know but I grab him around the chest and clutch him even though he is on top of me. I don't know why but I was hugging and holding him and squeezing him and he was just shaking, man, shaking and shaking some more with the back of his head bumping into my forehead, foam bubbles popping out of his mouth. I grab his neck but don't squeeze. Weeper wheezes three times then quit. (James 597-98)

What is it within the grim scenario of Weeper's dying that spurs this impulse in John-John K? In the grim parade of deaths riddling his novel, why does James choose to imbue this moment with the affect of tenderness? Perhaps James here is channeling José Esteban Muñoz's theorization in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) of the utopian impulse always already present in queer gestures. The utopian, he claims in a nod to Roland Barthes, emerges from the quotidian – that smile, that touch, that embrace. In the context of queer touch (queer love), it is defiant and portentous, always pointing to a potential horizon where the asymmetries of capitalism and the normative imperative of heterosexuality are not present (22). Weeper as a character does not succeed in transferring his consciousness to any form of selfless actualization, but the gesture of his death raises the stakes for the reader in recognizing the importance of this transfer. Frantz Fanon had once argued that a national literature is necessarily a literature of combat because it must work to mold a population's consciousness (173). For the Caribbean subject, James forces us into such a combat, but on the plane of the psychic and emotional. Like Weeper's lover, James performs on us a type of intercourse,

invading and penetrating – flinging us into sobering channels of the past and present to force a recognition of the conscious overhaul necessary to imagine a more egalitarian future.

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### 3. “But I ain’t soft” – Enqueering *Moonlight*’s (2016) Intersectional Renegotiation of Black Masculinity

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#### Abstract

The chapter will examine the nuanced portrayal of Black masculinity in the critically acclaimed coming-of-age drama *Moonlight* (2016), written and directed by Barry Jenkins. The intersection of Blackness and queerness has largely been ignored or even stigmatized in past cultural representation of Black masculinity. *Moonlight*, however, invites scrutiny of the impact that questions of identity, masculinity, and sexuality can have on the portrayal of Black masculinity. As the title of the movie, adapted from the play by Tarell Alvin McCraney *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, suggests and the movie repeatedly alludes to, Black boys and men are expected to keep up an overly ‘masculine’ persona. This façade can only be dropped when the soft light of the moon turns them blue. These blue moments of emotionality, intimacy, and vulnerability occur repeatedly in Jenkins’s film, allowing other facets of masculinity to shine through. The chapter shows how, within these scenes, which intertwine themes of Black male identity formation in conjunction with intimate relationships between men, distinct spaces emerge. In these spaces, individuals find the freedom to express emotions, embrace vulnerability, and exhibit affectionate and nurturing behavior. These inter-male relationships or moments of closeness are interpreted in this chapter as a form of queering in the film. Queering, on the one hand, because same-sex closeness has no legitimacy in typical constructions of Black masculinity or is even dismissed. But, queering also applies to the sexual identity of Chiron, the movie’s protagonist, as conveyed in some of the analyzed scenes. Ultimately, my enqueering of *Moonlight* shows that the movie provides room for a more multifaceted and less confining representation of Black masculinity. It counters narratives of aggression, dominance; and violence often attributed to Black male characters in the past US media landscape.

#### Keywords

Black masculinity, Film studies, intersectionality, queerness

## Introduction

“Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act.”

Director, producer, and writer Marlon Riggs included the preceding quote in his groundbreaking documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989). It was one of the first documentary films that represented Black gay men in the US cultural landscape. During the 1980s and 1990s, Riggs's unembellished portrayal of the homophobia and racism faced by Black men contrasted with the limited and often marginalized representations in mainstream media. The intersection of Blackness and queerness was largely ignored or stigmatized, as the dominant view of Black masculinity was tied to an assertive form of heterosexuality. Amid the fear of the AIDS crisis and the rigid stereotypes surrounding Black masculinity at the time, Black queer men unapologetically loving and living – as Riggs's work and words suggest – epitomized a daring revolution.

Since Riggs's contributions, the representation of Black masculinity has remained largely unchanged, highlighting the ongoing need for more expansive portrayals. Thus, it was hardly surprising that the release of *Moonlight* (2016), a coming-of-age drama chronicling the life of a Black gay man, attracted significant attention. The movie received 161 accolades, including the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It also made history as the first all-black cast movie and the first LGBTQIA+ movie to win Best Picture. *Moonlight*, written and directed by Barry Jenkins, negotiates topics such as identity, masculinity, and sexuality anew, challenging existing scripts of Black masculinity. The title, taken from Tarell Alvin McCraney's as yet unpublished play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, reflects the shedding of the overly 'masculine' persona that Black men are often expected to maintain – a hard façade that can only soften under the gentle, revealing light of the moon. In Jenkins' film, the main character Chiron takes these symbolic moon baths, as he repeatedly experiences moments of emotionality, intimacy, and vulnerability which allow for other facets of his masculinity to shine through.

I argue that *Moonlight* unveils alternatives to preconceived and harmful notions of Black masculinity when moments of queer intimacy intersect with Chiron's negotiation of his identity as a Black man. The film renegotiates Black masculinity not only by portraying Chiron's struggles with his queer sexuality. It also and most importantly offers alternative drafts of Black masculinity that include vulnerability, emotionality, and intimacy within intermale relationships. This chapter's 'enqueery' of *Moonlight* will provide answers to the following research questions: how are issues related to Black masculinity – such as hypermasculinity, hypersexualization, and stoicism – renegotiated or even queered in *Moonlight*? How do the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender contribute to the renegotiation of Black masculinity in the film? Before transitioning to a close reading of the movie, a theoretical

framework on intersectionality, Black masculinity, and queerness/queering will clarify the chapter's underlying theory.

## **Intersectionality**

This section begins by clarifying the concept of intersectionality, laying the groundwork for understanding how *Moonlight* navigates overlapping structures of identity and oppression. Intersectionality originated as an idea within the Black feminist movement before it was established as an analytical framework by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as an academic approach to examining how racism and sexism intersected in the discrimination of Black women in the US labour market. Scholars from various disciplines have since expanded intersectionality into a theory, approach, and concept to explain, analyze, and tackle multi-axis discrimination based on various social categorizations such as gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and disability (Crenshaw, "Margins" 1241-48; Collins and Bilge 1-2). Collins and Bilge, for instance, acknowledge in their definition of intersectionality that social and political phenomena, as well as individual identities, are never only shaped by one sole factor but by the convergence of multiple axes of social division (Collins and Bilge 2). To that effect, they argue that "intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (2). Thus, intersectionality enhances an understanding of the interrelation and interplay of social identity markers in shaping compound individual identities. Moreover, it makes resulting specificities of discrimination that individuals with compound identities face more intelligible. It allows for a more exhaustive analysis that moves beyond simplistic and isolated perspectives on oppression.

An example is Kimberlé Crenshaw's aforementioned detailed examination of the challenges faced by Black women in the US labor market. Crenshaw argues that conventional approaches to combating racial discrimination fail to address the specific experiences of Black women because their gender is not taken into account (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 140). Through examining their specific stereotyping as well as their limited job opportunities and job advancement, Crenshaw sheds light on the inequalities Black women face. She highlights discriminatory practices such as denied maternity leave and unequal pay that disproportionately affect Black women compared to White women and Black men.

In the context of this chapter, intersectionality serves to analyze the representation of intersectionally compound identities in cultural production, more specifically in film. Intersectional media studies examines how media representations can either reinforce or challenge harmful narratives and power structures. It provides insights into how different marginalized groups are portrayed, and the ways in which intersectional identities are either marginalized and/or celebrated. Campbell and Carilli highlight in this regard that "when talking about media representation, for example,

power relations must be examined not only in terms of identity but in terms of media hegemony” (3). Joseph and Winfield expand on this, stating that intersectionality as a “toolkit not only includes space to expand what controlling images can be but also [includes space] to construct a new lens for more representative analysis” (410). Following this idea, this chapter uncovers the ways in which film, here *Moonlight*, both perpetuates and challenges social inequalities and stereotypes concerning Black masculinity.

Within academic discussions, there is ongoing debate about whether the discrimination faced by Black men is intersectional. This debate arises because, despite facing racial discrimination, Black men hold certain privileges within patriarchal structures, leading scholars to question whether their discrimination is primarily due to race rather than the intersection of race and gender. However, I disagree with this argument. While both Black and White men are positioned within patriarchal structures, Black men’s experiences are simultaneously shaped by racism under White hegemony, which produces distinct gendered realities for them. bell hooks explains in her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* that while White men benefit from patriarchal privileges, Black men face unique challenges and forms of oppression that intersect with race. She highlights how the intersection of race and gender results in the marginalization and devaluation of Black masculinity, with Black men being subjected to racial profiling, criminalization, and violence (hooks 56-62). Relating thereto, bell hooks states: “At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling”(x).

## **Black Masculinity**

The racially informed expectations and stereotypes Black men face in the US have arisen from a long history of slavery, white supremacy, racism, and oppression. hooks suggests that, unlike African explorers ‘pre-Columbus,’ who did not seek dominance over indigenous peoples in the US and thus did not exhibit a masculinity tied to dominance, African enslaved men were later taught patriarchal masculinity by White oppressors (1-3). Meanwhile, the commodification of Black bodies during slavery, where Black individuals were objectified and reduced to mere property, played a significant role in shaping the perceptions of Black masculinity. These dehumanizing experiences of Black enslaved men contributed to the emergence of dominant cultural narratives that associated Black men with attributes such as hardness, strength, and stoicism. To this effect, Collins states: “Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence” (152).

Consequently, these enduring images have deeply influenced the construction of Black masculinity in history and contemporary society. As Collins points out: “Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images that center on Black male bodies, namely, Black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline” (158). Thus, many of these portrayals are constructed as controlling images that serve to minimize Black men and Blackness while promoting racial oppression (166). Black men are expected to conform to White patriarchal masculinity but are still othered by racist constructions imposed on their bodies. Slatton and Spates argue as follows:

Manhood in the United States is fundamentally constructed around perceptions of whiteness and heterosexuality. The disproportionate failure of non-white men to live up to the standard of “true manhood” reinforces the process of “othering.” Contemporary notions of manhood include heterosexual white males as financial providers and protectors; while black masculinity has become closely associated with perceptions of dangerousness, unreliability, criminality, and an inability to serve in supportive or protective capacities. (3)

Ultimately, cultural representations of Black masculinity today often emphasize hypermasculine traits such as physical strength, aggression, and sexual prowess (Collins 151). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall posits that cultural representations act as powerful discourses that shape self-perception and external perception (15-16). Candy Ratliff’s retrospective self-perception as a Black man in his text “Growing Up Male: A Re-Examination of African American Male Socialization” reflects these ideas when he states: “This is why there was always an emphasis on making sure that I was tough ... that I was not a punk ... that I was not soft ... and most importantly, that I would not become a sissy. Succinctly, it was conveyed to me directly and indirectly that I would develop into a *real* man” (10).

Furthermore, Ratliff emphasizes: “Within this socially constructed conceptualization of masculinity, as understood then by an adolescent, one exhibited their manliness through physical dominance over women, the denouncement of anti-male behavior and by the number of women one could bed” (12-13). Ratliff’s upbringing exemplifies that there is a strong emphasis on cultivating toughness and avoiding perceived signs of weakness, such as being *soft* or *feminine*, to conform to societal notions of Black masculinity. Masculinity is associated with physical dominance and control. Deviating from this socially constructed ideal of masculinity, for instance through engaging in same-sex relationships, is stigmatized and perceived as undermining one’s manhood bestowing dishonor upon the respective person.

### **Black Masculinity in Film So Far**

Building on the Hall-sian connection between cultural discourses and identity formation, it is fruitful to examine how Black masculinity has been represented in film so far. Katharine Bausch, for instance, traced the historical development of Black

masculinity in film, highlighting the shift from the exaggerated portrayals of hyper-masculine Black heroes during the Blaxploitation cinema era in the 1970s to the emergence of New Black Realism in contemporary films. She argues that Blaxploitation films, described as the “vanguard of Black filmmaking” (273), initially empowered Black characters by challenging stereotypes and asserting a new form of Black masculinity. However, the Blaxploitation genre later succumbed to commodification and sensationalism, ultimately reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating limited representations of Black masculinity (263-66). The idea that Black masculinity and Black male assertiveness against White supremacy was grounded in sexual autonomy emerged from the Black Power movement of the time. It was quickly adopted in popular film and eventually contributed to a harmful hypersexualization of Black men. Later on, the emergence of New Black Realism in the 1990s offered a shift towards more nuanced portrayals. However, these films still grappled with complexities and often depicted African-American women in detrimental roles, drawing critiques for reinforcing stereotypes. Movies mostly centered around young Black men in urban settings entangled in chaotic and nihilistic lives characterized by violence and drugs, while attempting to humanize them amidst prevailing stereotypes (267). New Black Realist films continued to explore themes of sex and sexuality, borrowing from Blaxploitation cinema’s portrayal of Black men’s sexual identity. At the same time, they emphasized personal responsibility, challenged the idea of sex as the sole determinant of manhood, and addressed societal issues such as promiscuity and the impact of AIDS on the Black community (268-70).

By contrast, contemporary representations of Black masculinity frequently take place within the genre of action cinema. Yvonne Tasker emphasizes that these representations of Black masculinity differ from earlier portrayals. Whereas earlier genres such as westerns and war films celebrated and centered on White masculinity, the emergence of action cinema has provided opportunities for more diverse representations (Tasker 116-18). African-American, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian performers have been able to take on central action roles. Tasker points to the fact that “the extent to which male (and to a lesser extent female) stars of color perform such conventional heroism is by no means insignificant” (119). Having said that, it is crucial to acknowledge that action cinema oftentimes builds its narrative on a certain physicality and strength of its heroes. Such depictions may further perpetuate the damaging stereotype of Black individuals as hypermasculine, aggressive, and solely defined by their assertiveness. These portrayals often ignore the diversity and complexity of Black men’s experiences, focusing narrowly on physical traits while neglecting intellectual and emotional dimensions.

## Queerness and Queering

“Queer is very much a category in the process of formation” (1), as Annamaria Jagose states in an introduction to queer theory. As a term that often tries to defy conceptualization in fixed categories, it is thus hard to pinpoint a straight and delimited meaning of the term. When used as a descriptor of sexual and gender identities, ‘queer’ encompasses the entire spectrum that deviates from heterosexual and cisgender norms. It serves as an umbrella term that includes individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or with other non-normative sexual orientations and gender expressions. The use of the term acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of sexuality and gender, challenging binary categorizations and recognizing that identities may not neatly fit into traditional dichotomies.

When ‘queer’ is used in an academic context, it is most commonly used in debates on queer theory. This interdisciplinary field emerged parallel to the consolidation of lesbian and gay studies during the 1990s. Since then, it has sought to challenge stable notions of sex, gender, and sexual desire. Scholars in the field analyze and question the construction of binaries in society and explore the complexity and fluidity of human experiences (Henderson 3-4). Influential scholars such as Teresa de Laurentis, who coined the term queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler played a significant role in shaping the academic approach. Sedgwick’s work challenged binary constructions of sexuality, emphasizing the importance of embracing fluidity and resisting fixed categories, while Butler’s concept of gender performativity asserted that gender identities are socially constructed and continually performed rather than innate or predetermined (Henderson 4). Concisely, in queer theory, rigid categorization of individuals into binary categories like heterosexual/homosexual or male/female are challenged, and the limitations imposed by such categorizations dismantled. It challenges normativity by recognizing non-normative variations as legitimate aspects of human existence and, similar to critical race theory and feminist theory, by positing that marginalized perspectives can redefine societal norms (Henderson 5-6).

Subsequently, ‘queering’ develops into a critical practice, a way of seeing, experiencing, and knowing that encourages perspectives that go beyond normativity. Henderson puts it as follows:

In a sense, what *queering* (as a gerund or verb) does is to challenge what might be considered the foreground proportions usually unchecked or uncritiqued. In this sense, *to queer* is to ask all of us to consider or reconsider what gets emphasized and how seeing from what are often marked as the ‘margins’ may make it possible to produce better, more inclusive knowledge. (6)

Within the scope of this chapter, both queering as a critical practice and queerness as an identity marker are central concepts. For one thing, *Moonlight*’s protagonist is queer, a gay Black man departing from normative expectations of heterosexuality.

Thus, various instances of queer intimacy in the movie will be examined. Here, however, queer intimacy will also be used to denote intimacy or affection that challenges the permitted heteronormativity within constructions of Black masculinity, but which is not necessarily sexual or erotic. This stems from the chapter's second aim: to employ queering as a critical practice that challenges ingrained assumptions and stereotypes surrounding Black masculinity. By "rescripting the accepted performances of heteronormative Black masculinity" (Neal 4), queering disrupts established norms and offers new perspectives. The argument put forth in this chapter asserts that *Moonlight*, through its exploration of queer intimacy and Black masculinity, effectively incorporates queering at their intersecting junctures.

### **Analysis of *Moonlight* (2016) through an Intersectional Magnifier**

*Moonlight* chronicles the life of Chiron, a Black gay man, as he navigates the complexities of growing up and coming to terms with his identity. The tripartite movie portrays Chiron's life from childhood to adulthood as he goes through experiences of poverty, neglect, bullying, and abuse. In the first chapter, Chiron is still a young boy nicknamed 'Little' who is bullied by his peers and neglected by his drug-abusing mother Paula. Little's experience of bullying, social isolation, poverty, and neglect are reflected in his demeanor. He is portrayed as quiet, introverted, and withdrawn in nature. For instance, when Little plays soccer with a group of neighborhood boys, he is separated from the rest, is less involved in their scuffles, and stands more on the sidelines of the action (*Moonlight* 00:13:36). Once Little and his friend Kevin part with the group, Kevin urges Little to stand his ground against his bullies rather than 'being soft' and pushes him to test his self-assertion. Here, Little is explicitly confronted for the first time with expectations placed on him as a boy in his environment. When Kevin tells Little that "all [...] [he] gotta do is show these [...] [n-word]<sup>11</sup> [he] ain't soft" (*Moonlight* 00:15:16), he implies that Little's 'softness' is the reason for his bullying and exclusion. Even though softness is never clearly defined, Kevin suggests that its opposite includes self-assertiveness and the potential for aggression and violence. These traits are expected of Little. This moment reinforces the notion that vulnerability and a lack of aggression are seen as weaknesses within constructions of Black masculinity. Another telling indicator for this pressure is Chiron's nickname, "Little," because his small physique is already perceived as deficient enough to define him as a person.

Furthermore, his peers use derogatory terms like 'faggot' and other homophobic insults to offend and describe Little. Being as soft as Little is negatively and pejoratively associated with being gay as well as with not being masculine enough. Both

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<sup>11</sup> In *Moonlight*, the n-word is often reclaimed as a self-empowering self-designation. However, as a White person unaffected by racism and its consequences, I refrain from using it and will censor the word in the following.

identity and character traits are excluded and even condemned by the other boys in Little's environment as illegitimate forms of Black masculinity. Here, *Moonlight* underscores the pressure Little faces to conform to hypermasculine ideals, highlighting the complex intersection of race and gender in the societal expectations that shape his experiences with his peers.

The scene also shows Little's early confrontation with an alternative understanding of masculinity – one that can indeed include tenderness and emotional vulnerability. Several close-up shots capture both the boys' facial expressions and their physical proximity as Chiron touches Kevin's face to examine his wound, worrying about his friend's pain (*Moonlight* 00:15:20). This act of tender touch between Little and Kevin challenges dominant notions of Black masculinity as inherently hardened and emotionally distant. At the same time, Little's gesture of care reveals his emerging negotiation of selfhood, as he begins to sense the dissonance between the emotional openness he instinctively exhibits and the physical markers of toughness expected by his peers. As Bost argues, when Little touches Kevin's bruised face, he begins to learn that Black masculinity is often performed as an exterior display of toughness (98). Kevin's dismissal of his own pain suggests that looking tough matters more than actually feeling tough. His response to Little rejecting the idea of being soft – "it don't mean nothing if they don't know it" (00:16:29) – underscores how masculinity relies on visible and physical proof, often expressed through fighting or play. Bost demonstrates that their subsequent wrestling in the scene highlights once more how Black masculinity is often shaped through physical encounters meant to build toughness (98). At the same time, Little's care and tenderness towards Kevin challenge this focus on hardness. Outside the context of sexual intimacy, the scene presents affection as a valid form of closeness between boys, quietly pushing back against societal expectations. By contrasting Little's sensitivity with Kevin's performance of toughness, *Moonlight* reveals the narrow boundaries of Black masculinity while suggesting that these limits can be softened through moments of tenderness.

Further moments of subversion occur in *Moonlight* when Chiron meets Juan. A neighborhood drug dealer, Juan assumes the role of the only paternal figure in Chiron's life, playing a crucial part in his upbringing. As a compassionate mentor, Juan offers guidance and support to Chiron, whose life is marked by neglect and bullying. Furthermore, Juan provides Chiron with a safe space to explore his identity and navigate the complexities of his experiences. This pivotal relationship deepens when Juan takes Chiron to the beach and teaches him how to swim. Upon arriving, Chiron initially appears reserved, observant, and cautious (*Moonlight* 00:17:26), suggesting he is unaccustomed to paternal care and attention. When he finally enters the water, he hesitates at first, taking time to adjust to the unfamiliar environment of the ocean. Shortly after, a medium shot captures Juan cradling Chiron on the surface of the water, emphasizing the physical connection between them (00:18:15).

This framing highlights Juan's nurturing and protective role, amplifying the emotional impact of the scene. Chiron's trust in Juan symbolizes the vulnerability he is willing to show in his presence. At this moment of uncertainty, Chiron relies on Juan for safety and reassurance. Juan responds with love and patience, encouraging his trust when he says: "Give me your head. Here, let your head rest in my hand. Relax. I got you, I promise. I'm not gon' let you go" (00:18:05).

Following the swimming lesson, their conversation further solidifies Juan's role as a caregiving paternal figure. Juan shares insights about Black identity, his upbringing, and the importance of Chiron's independent choice in shaping his identity. He not only reassures Chiron of his place in the world by telling him: "There are Black people everywhere. Remember that, okay? No place you can go in the world ain't got no Black people" (00:19:35). Juan also empowers Chiron to define his own identity, adding, "At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gon' be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you" (00:21:00). Juan's words encourage Chiron to embrace individuality and challenge societal expectations. Furthermore, he creates a nurturing space where Chiron can explore his emotions, vulnerabilities, and fears. Later, this intimacy resurfaces when Juan shares a childhood story, ultimately concluding on the topic of Black identity and individuality. Another shot-reverse-shot sequence underscores their physical as well as emotional closeness and familiarity (00:20:32-20:53). Throughout the first chapter, Juan's support helps Chiron begin to form a sense of self. The boy finds solace in Juan's acceptance and understanding, which validate his individuality. Juan's overt and unquestioned displays of affection and tenderness disrupt conventional boundaries imposed on expressions of Black masculinity.

While the first part of *Moonlight* primarily presents moments of queer emotional and physical non-sexual intimacy, the second part contrasts hypersexualized notions of Black male intimacy with depictions of queer sexual intimacy among Black men. Early on, Chiron is confronted with expectations of Black male sexuality that differ from his own behavior and identity. As Chiron grapples with bullying at school and physical abuse by his mother at home, he notices his peers focusing on sexual conquests. In one scene, for instance, Kevin tells Chiron that he ended up in detention after being caught having sex with a girl in the stairway. Kevin explains:

Look I just wanted some quick head, you know, but this chick all like "Hit that shit, Kevin. Hit it with that big dick." Like what she got to compliment a [n-word] for? So I'm like: "A'ight. Shit. We can do this you know, you know? So I started banging her back out, dawg. I'm talking I'm banging her back out. She went and made all this fucking noise though. So Aimes come in, acted all five-O and shit, almost had my ass suspended, dawg" (00:38:06-38:26)

Kevin's account reflects the notion that Black men are expected to be sexually assertive and dominant, to figuratively 'have a big dick,' as indicated by the girl's

statement. The emphasis put on physical attributes and sexual prowess in Kevin's statement reinforces the hypersexualized image associated with Black men. Additionally, Kevin's casual and explicit language – including phrases like “banging her back out” – aligns with the stereotype of aggressive sexual encounters. It underscores the perception that Black masculinity is defined by an aggressive and non-sensual pursuit of sexual relationships with women (borne in mind, not with men).

This pervasive image of dominant and hypersexual Black masculinity continues to resurface in subsequent scenes of *Moonlight*, further underscoring the societal expectations placed upon Black male sexuality. In one instance, Chiron dreams of Kevin engaging in sexual activity with a girl in his garden. This encounter again reinforces the stereotype of Black men as sexually assertive and physically dominant (00:43:03). This dream sequence mirrors the prevalent hypersexualized narrative of Black masculinity that Chiron is confronted with in his environment. Furthermore, in another scene, when Chiron is assaulted by his bullies, the teenagers attempt to shame him by referencing his mother's involvement in sex work, a means she employs to support her substance abuse disorder. One bully crudely remarks: “Or does she [talking about Teresa, Juan's girlfriend] charge like Paula [Chiron's mother]? Hell, Paula getting cheap though. Talkin' like a rock can get your rocks sucked!” (00:47:15). This statement reduces Chiron's mother to a mere object of purchase, portraying her as having little value. Sex is further depicted as a transactional process focused solely on satisfying men's desires for as little cost as possible. This reinforces the harmful notion that Black women, like Paula or Teresa, are available for sexual acts with little regard for their autonomy or dignity. This statement reflects the broader culture of sexual objectification, as well as the devaluation of women's agency and well-being that accompanies the hypersexualized expectations of Black men. Additionally, the remark perpetuates the notion that sexual encounters – even exploitative ones – are both expected and celebrated for Black men. Moreover, in the same statement and scene, Chiron's bullies also imply that Chiron has a sexual relationship with Teresa, the only nurturing figure in his life after Juan's death. The insinuation highlights how fantasies of sexual conquests among Black men are portrayed as so pervasive that they even extend to familial or caregiving relationships. And it underscores the immense pressure on Chiron to conform to (hetero)sexual expectations.

However, *Moonlight* contrasts the hypersexualized portrayal of Black male sexuality with an exploration of alternative expressions in later scenes. In an exemplary scene, after being kicked out by his neglectful mother, Chiron seeks shelter outdoors and ends up at the beach (*Moonlight* 00:49:34). By chance, Kevin meets him there and the two have an intimate conversation during which they open up to each other and let their guard down. Their conversation reveals the complexities of expressing affection between men within the confines of Black masculinity. At first, Chiron

questions Kevin about giving him the nickname 'Black.' He asks: "Why you always calling me that? [...] what kind of dude goes around giving other dudes nicknames?" (00:50:14-28). This highlights his discomfort with acknowledging or embracing affection between Black men. Chiron's reluctance reflects the prevailing social expectation that Black men should remain emotionally detached for fear of being perceived as homosexual or deviating from conventional ideals of heterosexual dominance. Kevin, however, responds with confidence, showing an understanding of male affection that defies these restrictions. Eventually, his desire for emotional release and respite from daily hardships resonates with Chiron in their conversation:

Sometimes round the way, where we live [*pauses*] you can catch that same breeze [of the ocean]. It just come through the hood and it's like everything stop for a second [*pauses*] 'cause everyone just wanna feel it. Everything just gets quiet, you know? – And it's like all you can hear is your own heartbeat. Right? – Yeah. Feels so good, man. – So good [*pauses*] – Hell, shit make you wanna cry, feel so good. – You cry? – Nah, but makes me want to. What you cry about? – Shit, I cry so much sometimes I feel like I'm gon' just turn into drops. (00:52:10-00:53:10)

In this moment, their openness about emotions and vulnerabilities defies the emotional stoicism expected from Black men, challenging the notion that expressing grief or tenderness signals weakness or contradicts masculine behavior. The poignant reference to tears flowing into the ocean deepens the scene's thematic exploration, symbolizing fluidity, softness, and emotional release. This imagery counterbalances societal expectations of hardness and stoicism ingrained in stereotypical notions of Black masculinity. At this point, the scene's emotionality and intimacy segues into sexuality, as Kevin and Chiron now also get physically closer. As the scene shifts to sexual intimacy, the camera lingers on close-ups – Chiron's head resting on Kevin's shoulder and Kevin's arm wrapped around him. Finally, as they kiss and Kevin masturbates Chiron, an extreme close-up captures Chiron's hand grasping the sand (00:54:45-55:30). This scene of sensual and sexual intimacy between the teenagers creates space for queer desire within Black male sexuality. And yet, *Moonlight* also addresses the harsh reality of queer Black men in Chiron's life. After all, Kevin violently beats up Chiron under the pressure of his peer group on their next day at school. And Chiron seeks brutal vengeance against his bullies ending up in juvenile detention.

The movie then moves fast forward ten years in Chiron's life. After his time in juvenile detention, Chiron has emerged as a hardened drug dealer. He has a strong physique, gold fronts, and a respected, or even feared, standing in society (01:09:05). Even now, the film shows Chiron outwardly conforming to aspects of Black hyper-masculinity, but this does not simplify the question of his identity in the third part of the movie. Instead, *Moonlight* focuses on Chiron's internal struggle. He struggles to come to terms with his past, his personal relationships, and the societal expectations imposed on him as a Black man. Later, he reconciles with his formerly abusive

mother during her time in rehabilitation and rekindles his bond with Kevin. In the final part, the movie highlights the complexity of identity formation. It shows that identity is not confined to surface-level appearances or societal constructs of masculinity. Chiron's exploration of authenticity and his pursuit of meaningful connections challenge the idea that identity can be neatly categorized or defined.

The third part of *Moonlight* offers a nuanced exploration of Chiron's identity, beginning with a haunting nightmare that brings to light an abusive episode from his childhood (01:06:10). This nightmare not only reveals the lingering effects of his past trauma, but also challenges Chiron's outwardly hardened persona. While he initially appears to conform to societal expectations of Black hypermasculinity, the film consistently uncovers glimpses of his emotional vulnerability beneath this façade. His tough exterior seems to be a coping mechanism, an attempt to assert power and control in a world that prizes Black male dominance and toughness over vulnerability. Through Chiron's development, the film ultimately illustrates how, constrained by systemic racism and limited social and economic opportunities, Black men may feel compelled to resort to illegal activities as a means of survival and self-preservation.

Chiron's struggle is further explored in a scene where he reunites with Kevin. Chiron visits Kevin at the diner where he works as a chef. The unfolding scene reveals their ongoing familiarity and connection. It begins with Chiron grooming himself, meticulously combing his hair, and adjusting his outfit in the window of his car (01:22:18). This moment serves as a visual prelude that signifies Chiron's anticipation and appreciation of their reunion. Kevin's joyful reaction to seeing Chiron at the bar establishes their ongoing bond, as he says: "Man, what are you doin' down here. Hey, hey, you here now, man. That's all that matters. There you go with that dam noddin' again, man, you ain't, you ain't changed one damn bit. You still can't say more than three words at a time, huh?" (01:25:04).

Kevin's remark about Chiron's nodding and silence shows his deep understanding of Chiron's character and his affection for him. During an intimate conversation over drinks both men open up about their lives. Close-ups of their faces in shot-reverse-shot sequences suggest the emotional depth of their conversation (01:24:36-01:24:42). Eventually, Kevin reveals that he became a father unexpectedly. He vulnerably shares his private matters with Chiron saying: "We had him young. Shit, too young. Man, when I got locked up. Man, that shit was hard, wasn't no way I could go back to the streets, man. Not after this" (01:30:19). Kevin then prepares his signature dish for Chiron. Here, the audience gets a sense of the effort and the attention to detail that he puts into the dish by means of a series of close-up shots of Kevin's hands during each step of the preparation of his Pollo alla Plancha for Chiron (01:26:18-01:27:03). While eating, Chiron, initially reluctant, eventually admits his involvement in the drug trade, whereupon Kevin's affection repeatedly shines

through when he criticizes Chiron stating: "That ain't you, Chiron" (01:32:05). At this point, Kevin's remark suggests that he sees Chiron's true character beneath the tough façade of a drug dealer and wants him to reconcile with his identity. Though Chiron initially reacts defensively, he eventually asks why Kevin reached out after all these years. Struggling to express his emotions, Kevin plays Chiron the song "Hello Stranger" by Barbara Lewis, which first prompted him to reach out. The song's themes of grief and hope from a past lover's visit echo their own past relationship. The men's encounter in the diner thus fosters vulnerability, emotional connection, and the potential for growth and self-discovery. Moreover, it emphasizes their quest for authentic relationships with other men. Ultimately, Kevin offers Chiron a place to stay and thus demonstrates to Chiron that he is willing to be a refuge and support system for his journey toward self-acceptance.

The closing scene of *Moonlight* further explores Kevin's and Chiron's struggle for self-acceptance as Black men growing up. After Chiron accepts Kevin's invitation, they discuss their struggle with societal expectations and the pressure to conform in Kevin's kitchen. Kevin reflects on the past pressure he experienced to conform to societal expectations about his identity. Kevin describes how he never felt he was worth much, always doing what others expected rather than pursuing his own desires (01:43:18). As Kevin shares his life story and path to self-acceptance, *Moonlight* acknowledges the challenges imposed by harmful expectations of Black masculinity. It also highlights the opportunities for exploring alternative expressions of Black identity. By renouncing his criminal past and emphasizing his personal growth, Kevin embraces an alternative form of Black masculinity that rejects stereotypes and fosters authenticity. In turn, a deep layer of vulnerability emerges also for Chiron, when he confesses to Kevin: "You're the only man that's ever touched me. You're the only one. I haven't touched anyone since" (01:44:34). This revelation points to Chiron's loss of intimacy and emotional connection, resulting from his experiences of hardening to the world. After his confession, Chiron and Kevin share a profoundly intimate moment. Both are shown naked, with Chiron resting his head on Kevin's shoulder in the privacy of his bedroom. This last part of the movie ultimately leaves space for alternative explorations of Black masculinity and a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of Black male identity formation. By depicting the intimate, affectionate, and vulnerable relationship between Chiron and Kevin, the film opens up possibilities for queer expressions of Black masculinity. Queer, not only regarding their sexuality but also concerning the possibility of emotionality, tenderness, and affection between men outside of sexual contexts.

## Conclusion

As delineated in the previous analysis of *Moonlight*, the movie consistently presents, challenges, and confronts harmful constructions of Black masculinity, while concurrently illuminating alternatives. Notably, within scenes that depict intimate relationships between Chiron and other men, distinct spaces emerge wherein the characters find the liberty to express emotions, embrace vulnerability, and exhibit affectionate and nurturing behavior. These *inter-male* moments of closeness are interpreted in this chapter as a way of queering in the movie. Queering, on the one hand, because same-sex affection has no legitimacy in typical constructions of Black masculinity or is even dismissed. In particular, the relationship between Chiron and Juan demonstrates the way in which intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional depth can exist as part of Black male relationships and identity formation. But also central to this reading is the notion of queering in relation to queer Black male sexual identity, as *Moonlight* affirms same-sex attraction and intimacy between Chiron and Kevin as valid expressions of Black male sexuality.

This chapter's theoretical framework has laid the groundwork for applying queering as a form of critical social practice to *Moonlight*. Queering, here, has been used to challenge the entrenched stereotypes of Black masculinity. Drawing on critical race and queer theories, this analysis positions moments of Black intimacy in the film – both emotional and non-erotic – as acts of resistance against hegemonic masculinity. Characters like Juan, Chiron, and Kevin repeatedly defy the societal pressures placed on Black men, particularly the rigid expectations of hypermasculinity. By centering queer intimacy between these characters, *Moonlight* disrupts heteronormative, hypermasculine, and hypersexual expectations imposed on Black men.

In line with an intersectional approach to media studies, this analysis has demonstrated how *Moonlight* challenges existing power structures through its expansive portrayal of a Black male coming-of-age story. The film offers a blueprint for an 'enqueery' of normative expectations surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. By centering Chiron – as a child, teenager, and young man – navigating restrictive societal norms, the film invites audiences to reconsider traditional portrayals of Black manhood. In *Moonlight*, queerness, in its various dimensions, converges with the complexities of Black masculinity to create space for renegotiation and transformation. At these intersections, the burdensome expectations placed upon Black men – embodied by Chiron, Kevin, and Juan – momentarily recede, opening pathways to liberation. Ultimately, *Moonlight* not only resists harmful stereotypes of Black masculinity but also envisions more expansive, inclusive, and authentic possibilities for Black identities on screen.

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## 4. Fatherhood in the Wilderness: Postfeminism and Masculinity in *Leave No Trace* (2018)

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### Abstract

This paper examines the representation of fatherhood and masculinity in *Leave No Trace* (2018) within the framework of postfeminist discourse. By focusing on the evolving father-daughter relationship, the film challenges both traditional paternal roles and the postfeminist construction of the new father. Will, the protagonist, embodies a masculinity that oscillates between hegemonic ideals of strength and the postfeminist emphasis on emotional engagement and caregiving. However, his repeated failures to protect and provide for his daughter problematize the idealized construction of postfeminist fatherhood. The paper explores how the film engages with the notion of postfeminist fatherhood, which, as scholars such as Hannah Hamad argue, reconfigures traditional masculinity rather than dismantling patriarchal norms. Additionally, the wilderness setting serves as both a site of refuge and a space of tension, reinforcing Will's isolation while simultaneously enabling his daughter, Tom, to develop independence. As a "wise-beyond-her-years daughter" (Hamad 111), Tom's character plays a pivotal role in reversing traditional power dynamics between father and child. The film subverts the conventional fatherhood narrative by emphasizing Tom's growth into an authoritative figure, ultimately disrupting the presumed stability of postfeminist masculinity. This shift challenges cinematic conventions that typically position the father as the central figure of transformation, offering instead a narrative in which the daughter emerges as the agent of change. Drawing on theories of postfeminism, hegemonic masculinity, and cinematic fatherhood, this paper argues that *Leave No Trace* resists the redemptive narrative typically found in postfeminist fatherhood films, instead presenting an unresolved tension between fatherly authority and the daughter's emerging agency. By positioning Will as an angst-ridden figure whose masculinity fails to conform to either traditional or postfeminist ideals, the film critically engages with contemporary gender discourses, highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in modern representations of fatherhood.

### Keywords

Postfeminism, fatherhood, masculinity, father-daughter relationship, *Leave No Trace*

## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, feminist movements – particularly first-wave (late nineteenth–early twentieth century), second-wave (1960s–1970s), and third-wave feminism (1990s–2010s) – challenged traditional gender norms, though in different ways: the first wave focused on legal rights, the second on social and economic equality, and the third on intersectionality and the diverse experiences and identities of race, sexuality, and class (see Cott; Friedan; hooks). In this regard, the feminist movements have influenced mass culture in multiple ways, contributing to the cultural shifts that some scholars characterize as the era of postfeminism – often with negative connotations (see McRobbie; Modleski; Tasker and Negra). Regardless of debates over the success of feminist movements in achieving full gender equality, it is clear that they have transformed perceptions of gender, influencing not only notions of femininity and masculinity but also challenging binary understandings of gender. However, this does not necessarily indicate that these changes have resulted in a completely egalitarian society. Accordingly, Timothy Shary, who thinks that true gender equality has not been achieved yet, states the opportunity for reexamining masculinity as follows:

Given the escalating developments within the gendered milieu of men in U.S. culture as well as the ongoing evolution of male roles (domestic, professional, performative) and the concerns that these vicissitudes presented to the patriarchal norm, a logical opportunity to reexamine masculinity at the turn of the millennium arises. (4)

Reflecting and contributing to the changes in society, contemporary US cinema has undergone a significant transformation in the portrayal of masculinity, femininity, and gender roles in recent years. As films are part of visual culture, it is expected that they represent changes in the understanding of gender roles. The changing representation in cinema might take more time than the actual change in culture and society compared to other media and arts. This is due to the long production processes of the films. There are multiple approaches to examining gender norms in films, including the representation of masculinities, femininities, and the dynamics of parental roles, each of which can reveal distinct cultural and ideological shifts.

This paper investigates three central aspects of *Leave No Trace* (2018): how the film challenges traditional gender roles with a focus on the father-daughter relationship, how it engages with postfeminist conceptions of the “new father” and “new hegemonic masculinity,” and how the wilderness setting is utilized to explore the complexities of the father-daughter dynamic. I argue that *Leave No Trace* offers a complex portrayal of masculinity and the father-daughter relationship, resisting straightforward categorization and capturing the fluid and often contradictory nature of contemporary masculinities. The film challenges traditional gender roles, understood here as the historically dominant, binary expectations that position men as only protectors, providers, and figures of authority, while casting women as nurturing, passive, and dependent. These roles have been reinforced by cultural norms and

patriarchal structures that assign distinct and hierarchical responsibilities based on gender. By depicting a “wise-beyond-her-years daughter” (Hamad 111) and a father who oscillates between sensitivity and the traditional expectation of strength, the film contributes to the postfeminist discourse while simultaneously pushing beyond it and interrogating its limitations. While examining the evolving conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood in postfeminist US cinema, this paper does not ignore the fact that the shifting gender roles are inherently political, shaped by ideologies and power dynamics.

Postfeminism refers to the understanding of the “pastness” of feminism according to Tasker and Negra (1). They argue that “postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism” (Tasker and Negra 2), which can be interpreted as that it is based on feminist values and gains of second-wave feminism. However, postfeminism usually ignores the intersectionality of oppression and discrimination. Tasker and Negra state that “postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (2). Thus, the inability and deficiency of postfeminism to offer a broader account of equality must be noted. Another criticism that needs to be mentioned is the argument of Angela McRobbie that postfeminism, in fact, undermines the feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s while it appears to be in support of feminism (McRobbie 27). Therefore, I agree with Hamad’s statement that there is a “continuing need for feminist criticism of postfeminist culture, especially its formations of masculinity” (11). This paper does not intend to join the discussions of postfeminism *per se* but rather tries to explore the reflections of postfeminist discourse in visual representation, while also critically engaging with postfeminist culture and its formations of masculinity.

Before discussing the theoretical background and analysis, a brief synopsis of the film is provided. *Leave No Trace* (2018), directed by Debra Granik and distributed by Bleecker Street, tells the story of a father (Will, played by Ben Foster) and his thirteen-year-old daughter (Tom, played by Thomasin McKenzie) who live off the grid in the forests of Portland, Oregon. They have a close and loving relationship, but their unconventional lifestyle is disrupted when they are discovered by the authorities and forced to integrate into mainstream society. As they struggle to adapt, tensions arise between Will’s desire for independence and Tom’s growing sense of belonging to a community. Ultimately, the film explores themes of fatherhood, masculinity, and the father-daughter relationship, as well as the meaning of family and human connection.

## Renegotiated Fatherhood in Films

### Tropes of Postfeminist Fatherhood and the “New Father”

Contemporary US films have frequently featured the theme of fatherhood, which can be interpreted as being part of the postfeminist discourse. According to Podnieks, “fatherhood moved to the foreground in discourses of masculinity, a fact registered by the sudden plethora of narratives about fathers in film and on television” (15). Some scholars, including Tania Modleski and Hannah Hamad (1991, 2014), have discussed masculinity in films through the lens of fatherhood narratives. Modleski states that “a whole host of comedies are participating in the trend [...] of redeeming and celebrating fatherhood” (76). Hamad, in particular, explores the fusion of postfeminism and fatherhood and defines it as the “new hegemonic masculinity” (1). She argues that popular cinema increasingly portrays fatherhood as the ideal masculinity and notes that “fatherhood has become the dominant paradigm of masculinity across the spectrum of mainstream U.S. cinema” (Hamad 1). Barnett similarly observes that “fatherhood has become the ‘ideal masculinity’ of post-feminism” and notes that discussions of fatherhood in contemporary cinema have largely centered on the construction of a “domesticated ‘new man’ masculinity” (11). To understand this shift, it is important to consider how the representation of fatherhood has evolved from traditional, patriarchal models of masculinity to the more emotionally engaged and domesticated figures associated with postfeminist discourse. Despite the varying characteristics depending on narrative and genre, Hamad defines the tropes of postfeminist fatherhood as follows:

[D]ominant iterations tend toward a model of fatherhood that is (or becomes) emotionally articulate, domestically competent, skilled in managing the quotidian practicalities of parenthood and adept at negotiating a balance and/or discursive confluence of private sphere fatherhood and public sphere paternalism. Furthermore, hegemonic formations of postfeminist fatherhood configure this model at little cost to the legibility of fathers’ more traditionally masculine traits. Fatherhood is thence dually articulated through a mutually constitutive binary of strong–sensitive, patriarchal–postfeminist masculinity, with a correspondingly circuitous relationship to feminism. (2)

As can be seen, Hamad emphasizes the fusion of traditional masculinity and postfeminist masculinity through a combination of emotional sensitivity, domestic competence, and strength and authority. The fact that fathers have become more involved in the private sphere (household) does not mean the abolishment of the hegemonic and paternal traits both in public and private spheres. While the father’s involvement in childrearing and performing a ‘mothering’ role can blur the boundaries between these spheres, it can also reinforce the very division it seeks to dismantle. The renegotiation of fatherhood, and parenting in general, under second-wave feminism, has led to a new understanding in which both parents should be involved equally in both spheres (i.e. private and public, childrearing and breadwinning). However, the postfeminist discourse and the reconfiguration of fatherhood

in US cinema represent fatherhood as the ideal masculinity which “simultaneously evokes and rejects” feminism (Tasker and Negra 21). Therefore, questioning or being skeptical of the characteristics of postfeminism and the tropes of postfeminist fatherhood is necessary to achieve a better understanding of what it offers and what it tries to achieve. Accordingly, Hamad claims that “[t]he recentralization of masculinity through postfeminist fatherhood is thus negotiated, offering little challenge to the status quo, while tacitly accounting for itself in disingenuously feminist terms” (11).

Although the new concept of masculinity in postfeminist fatherhood in contemporary US cinema promotes a more equal partnership between parents than previous understandings of parenting, it still perpetuates a conservative cultural belief in paternal protectionism. To move beyond binary understandings and conservative norms, it is important to question the binary thinking and traditional parenting roles assigned to fathers and mothers. Otherwise, the discussion may only focus on role reversal, in which fathers take on traditionally feminine/mother roles while retaining their hegemonic masculine traits, or mothers take on hegemonic masculine traits.

Overall, postfeminist fatherhood in popular cinema is characterized by a fusion of traditionally hegemonic masculinity and more emotionally engaged, nurturing traits, establishing a link between feminism and fatherhood. This reconfiguration of fatherhood, presented as an ideal model, combines traditionally masculine roles like protecting and providing with more nurturing, sensitive, and emotionally engaged qualities. It is a model that functions “in the guise of a feminist ideal of masculinity” (Hamad 135), positioning fathers as figures who embody both caregiving and strength. The father is portrayed as a capable parent in the private sphere while retaining his hegemonical ties to the public sphere.

Lupton and Barclay refer to this evolving representation as “the archetype of the new father” (Podnieks 2). They claim that contemporary fatherhood is shaped by paradoxes and tensions that influence how men perceive and practice their roles as fathers. On one hand, fathers are increasingly depicted as nurturing, emotionally engaged, and actively involved in parenting and domestic responsibilities. The new father is seen as transforming family life and challenging traditional notions of masculinity. On the other hand, men are still expected to participate fully in the economic sphere and sustain their identities as masculine subjects, reinforcing elements of traditional masculinity (2). This tension between caregiving and economic provision defines postfeminist representations of fatherhood, reflecting both progress and continuity in gendered expectations.

## **Masculinities**

As Tina Miller argues, “fatherhood, then, like motherhood, is a socially constructed category which is shaped by and through an amalgam of political, social, cultural and historical antecedents and contemporary concerns” (6). In line with this, representations of fatherhood in media also evolve in response to broader societal shifts. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Barnett observes that Hollywood redefined fatherhood as “a powerful tool able to save the men that, as the world changed around them, were struggling to make sense of a modern masculine identity” (2). This transformation underscores how fatherhood became a stabilizing force amidst anxieties about shifting gender roles, reinforcing its cultural significance as both a personal and ideological construct.

Accordingly, masculinity is not a singular, fixed concept but rather a plurality of masculinities, as suggested by the title of this chapter. These various forms of masculinity are shaped by historical, cultural, and social antecedents, with significant variations evident within American and broader Western contexts. Hegemonic masculinity is “the most traditional and overarching form of masculinity,” representing the cultural ideal of how men should act and be (Podnieks 13). The concept of hegemony originates in the work of Antonio Gramsci and refers to the exercise of power by a social group through both domination and intellectual and moral leadership, allowing it to maintain control over others in social life (Gramsci 57-58). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). However, hegemonic masculinity is not only about the subordination of women; it also involves the domination over and subordination of other masculinities, including homosexual, effeminate, working-class, and Black masculinities – what Connell terms “marginalized masculinities” (81). Barnett expands on this idea, stating that “hegemonic masculinity describes the normative, dominant construction of masculinity underpinned by ideological power, against which femininities and subordinate masculinities are measured; inevitably, the parameters of hegemonic masculinity, as with any gender constructions, shift over time” (5-6). This shifting nature of masculinity underscores its socially constructed and performative dimensions, rather than being an inherent or static trait.

At this point, it is also necessary to consider Steven Cohan’s definition of masculinity, which builds on Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance. Cohan asserts that “‘masculinity’ does not refer to a male nature but instead imitates a dominant regulatory fiction authorizing the continued representation of certain types of gender performances for men (like the breadwinner), marginalizing others (like the mamma’s boy)” (qtd. in Baker viii). This perspective aligns with Connell’s

discussion of hegemonic masculinity by emphasizing how particular models of masculinity are upheld as normative, while others are rendered subordinate or deviant. What is particularly significant in Connell's definition is the idea of "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (77). In the present era, this answer appears to be postfeminist masculinity constructed through fatherhood – a model that integrates caregiving and emotional engagement while still maintaining structures of male dominance. Understanding masculinity as performative allows for a more complex examination of how postfeminist fatherhood functions as both an evolution of and a reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity.

As discussed so far, despite the emergence of the "new father" or the "new man," postfeminist fatherhood retains some traditional masculinity traits. Thus, one needs to identify those traits in order to distinguish between the persistence of traditional masculinity and the supposedly progressive ideals of postfeminist fatherhood. The tropes of hegemonic and traditional masculinity are being strong, capable of many things, powerful, and independent, as well as retaining the provider and protector role in the context of family. Podnieks argues that the "'new man' is, in the end, a 'redefinition of masculinity in men's favour' such that he continues to exert his influence over women and other subordinate (nonhegemonic) men" (14). Thus, the emergence of the "new man" and the fact that fatherhood has become the new hegemonic masculinity refers not to a radical change in favor of feminist and egalitarian values, but rather to a reconfiguration that incorporates certain values traditionally seen as antithetical to it. In other words, traits that previously would have been considered anti-hegemonic are now assimilated into contemporary hegemonic masculinity. Aligning with Hamad's claim that postfeminist fatherhood represents the new hegemonic masculinity, Beynon also asserts that "many elements of a generalized new man-ism (men as more caring, sensitive, domesticated and expressive) now feature in contemporary versions of hegemonic masculinity" (17).

### **The Mother's Place in (Postfeminist) Fatherhood Films**

The renegotiation of fatherhood and the prioritization of male protagonists as ideal fathers require the absence of the mother according to some scholars (Dole, Hamad). This means that the single/widowed father figure has become prominent in contemporary US cinema. I believe this might have several reasons. One reason might be to give more space to the father to showcase his involved and nurturing qualities in parenting with the help of the absence of the mother. Without the mother, the father is forced to provide the child with everything on his own, assuming that he is represented as the ideal father. Another reason might be that the single father can do so even without depreciating and marginalizing the woman's position in parenting. Dole, similarly, argues that "[f]eminist critics have long been concerned about the ways in which fathers might become more involved in childcare

and the ways women's longstanding contributions might be devalued. Some have found this fear confirmed in media representations of fatherhood" (141). This makes films a safe space to renegotiate fatherhood within the framework of post-feminism, or, as Villamarín-Freire puts it, "mothers are often removed from these narratives so that paternally signified masculinity can be placed at the center" (330). Hamad, too, claims in the same manner:

[T]he preferred paradigm for the discursive elision of the mother is to kill her off prior to the narrative's timeframe. This conveniently sidesteps the problem of representing motherhood in scenarios contrived to foreground fatherhood, enables postfeminist fatherhood to be articulated through a melancholic affective register, and accounts for the otherwise unlikely proliferation of male melodramas and tragi-comedies of widowed single fatherhood. (19)

Hamad also points out the melancholic and melodramatic effects caused by the absence of the mother/wife in the fatherhood films. Thus, the father figure is given a double advantage in terms of ideal portrayal.

These characteristics can be identified as the recurring elements in postfeminist fatherhood films. In the case of *Leave No Trace*, the death or absence of the mother is implied, as she is briefly mentioned once in a conversation between the father and daughter. This aligns with Hamad's observation that the mother is figuratively "killed" prior to the film's beginning. Furthermore, one could argue that this contributes to the melancholic and melodramatic portrayal of the father, Will, who also grapples with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As Will assumes the sole responsibility of raising and caring for his daughter, Tom, he faces not only physical challenges but also emotional and psychological burdens. This engenders empathy within the viewer, fostering a positive perception of the ideal father figure. Consequently, the absence of the mother serves to reinforce the favorable depiction of fatherhood while avoiding any portrayal of women that could be construed as conflicting with this ideal father image.

## **The Father-Daughter Relationship in *Leave No Trace***

### **Will: Fatherhood and Masculinity**

As previously indicated, *Leave No Trace* offers a complex portrayal of masculinity and fatherhood. Will serves as a prime example of this intricate portrayal. While he mostly retains – or tries to retain – the traditional roles such as the protector and provider, he also exhibits some traits emblematic of the "new father" archetype. However, it is important to note that Will's attempts to uphold these traditional roles are often unsuccessful, particularly in his capacity to safeguard and provide for his daughter. A notable instance highlighting this failure occurs early in the film when the father-daughter dyad is discovered living illegally in the forests of Portland, Oregon (00:19:40). The park rangers see Tom one day and they discover their small

camp eventually. Although Will becomes aware of the approaching police, affording them an opportunity to escape and hide, he fails to protect himself and his daughter from getting caught by the police.

Notably, in this scene, the police locate Will before locating Tom, despite the film's earlier suggestion that Tom lacks the skills to remain hidden and leave no trace yet. The film employs a clever twist by initially withholding the identity of the individual who is found, thereby challenging viewers to confront their own biases and preconceptions in terms of power and gender relations. Even though the police do not detect Tom and do not even know if there are other people with Will, he calls out to Tom and wants her to come out. This scene is an important turning point in the film which suggests that the daughter is more self-reliant and competent than initially expected while it shows the failure of the father. It leads to the separation of them in the end.

Another instance highlighting Will's failure occurs following their escape from the farm where they have been placed by the social workers after getting caught. Will struggles to adapt to communal living and grows increasingly restless. After running away from the camp, the pair end up in the forests of Washington State, where they spend a bitterly cold night. Will's actions in the face of this dangerous situation put their lives at risk, as they narrowly avoid succumbing to the extreme cold. Fortunately, he manages to cover Tom and himself in branches and they survive this terrible night, finding a small vacant cabin the next morning. However, an important instance occurs after this. Will leaves Tom in the cabin and goes to buy some groceries, but he never comes back. Tom spends the rest of the day and the night alone, eventually finding her father injured and unconscious in the forest the next day. In trying to provide his daughter with food and safety, Will fails once more. This scene marks a significant role reversal between father and daughter where Tom undertakes the role of protector and rescues her father, foreshadowing a more pronounced shift in dynamics as the film progresses (01:15:40).

All of these instances, despite Will's failures and unsuccessful endeavors, indicate his adherence to traditional expectations of fatherhood. He remains committed to protecting and supporting his daughter, even in challenging circumstances and at great personal risk. However, his inability to fully embody the ideals of traditional fatherhood positions his character as a challenge to conventional gender roles. In doing so, the film also complicates the new hegemonic masculinity associated with postfeminist fatherhood. As Pleck asserts, "the most important aspect of the father's role throughout American history has been his role as provider and protector" (52) – a role in which Will ultimately fails.

The archetype of the new father does not entirely overcome traditional fatherhood norms. Instead, it redefines them to encompass a more nurturing fatherhood. Will exemplifies this archetype, as he embodies both the traditional expectations

discussed earlier and exhibits a nurturing and sensitive demeanor. He assumes the role of an educator to his daughter, teaching survival skills as well as playing chess and studying encyclopedias. However, it can be argued that he assumes these responsibilities out of necessity, as the absence of the mother leaves him as the sole caregiver. He is compelled to fulfill both traditionally divided parental roles, acting as both mother and father figures. Failing to do so would result in him becoming a neglectful father, which does not align with the idealized representation of fatherhood in contemporary postfeminist cinema. Moreover, one can also discuss whether Will is idealized as a father figure or not, or to what extent his characterization represents an idealized form of both traditional and postfeminist masculinity. Considering all of these aspects, he occupies a position somewhere in between: his depiction resists simplistic categorization, existing at the intersection of traditional and progressive fatherhood.

Complicating this portrayal further is the impact of Will's PTSD, which manifests in scenes that reveal his psychological distress (00:10:10, 00:43:00). Although the exact origins of his trauma are not explicitly disclosed, it is implied that it stems from his wartime experiences. This trauma shapes his parenting and relationship with Tom, as his decision to live in isolation can be understood as an attempt to exert control over his environment. Yet, as Tom grows increasingly independent, she begins to reject the limitations imposed by his trauma-driven choices.

Aligned with Hamad's conceptualization of fatherhood in contemporary US cinema, *Leave No Trace* constructs Will's fatherhood characterized through a juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory masculinities – strong yet vulnerable, patriarchal yet postfeminist. Will embodies this duality of being both strong and sensitive. In terms of the patriarchal-postfeminist binary, Will's decision to lead an isolated life with Tom in the forest reflects patriarchal masculinity. He forces his daughter to live like him. It is only when Tom experiences communal living that she begins to recognize and question this dynamic. However, his eventual reliance on Tom gestures toward a more reciprocal, postfeminist dynamic. This underscores the film's central tension: Will is neither wholly traditional nor entirely progressive but instead occupies a transitional space between these masculinities.

Will's character can also be understood through the lens of male angst, as his struggle to adhere to conventional masculinity while simultaneously failing to conform to postfeminist fatherhood places him in a state of crisis. His inability to successfully fulfill the roles of protector and provider unsettles the dominant ideology of masculinity, demonstrating how his character resists both traditional and postfeminist paradigms. As Peberdy asserts, "images of angst-ridden men immediately challenge the idea of a 'true' masculinity or 'dominant masculine', no more so than when their narratives fail to be resolved or, if resolved, fail to re-establish gender binaries that reinforce male power and domination" (173). Will's narrative does not offer such a

resolution; rather than reclaiming control or restoring his authority as a father, he ultimately relinquishes his influence over Tom. In doing so, *Leave No Trace* subverts the traditional trajectory of male redemption, rejecting the postfeminist model in which fatherhood serves as a saving mechanism for troubled men. Instead, the film exposes the fragility of masculinity by portraying Will's downward trajectory as he fails to meet both the traditional and newly constructed standards of fatherhood. His angst is not merely an expression of individual suffering but a broader critique of the expectations placed upon men. As Peberdy observes: "[I]t is only in attaining a particular standard of maleness that they can be considered successful 'men'. Their failure to achieve such a standard can be seen as the crux of their downfall; the men who realise the myth of 'true' masculinity move closer to rejecting the restrictive model to which they aspire" (173). Will's recognition that Tom no longer needs or wants to follow his way of life suggests such a rejection – an implicit acknowledgment of the constructed and unattainable nature of the postfeminist ideal of masculinity imposed on him. By centering Will's struggle and eventual failure to conform to any single model of fatherhood, *Leave No Trace* presents a complex critique of both traditional and postfeminist masculinities, positioning Will as an angst-ridden figure caught in the tensions between these competing ideologies.

### **Tom: Challenging, Confronting, and Becoming Her Own Agent**

Tom embodies the "wise-beyond-her-years daughter" figure as described by Hamad (111). As Dole (142) observes, this characterization, compared to earlier depictions, has evolved in 2010s films to reflect even greater wisdom and insight. Tom's characterization aligns with this evolution in the representation of daughter figures, as demonstrated through key moments in the film. In the scene where she evades the police (00:19:40), she demonstrates that she is more capable than expected by hiding better than her father, while in another, she comes to his rescue (01:15:40). More significantly, Tom's wisdom and insight hold implications for the shifting balance of their relationship, as she assumes the role of an educator for her father. Although her encounter with communal living introduces her to a different way of life that she finds preferable, she chooses not to abandon her father and join the community right away. Instead, she empathizes with her father's traumas and the experiences that led to their isolated lifestyle, attempting to teach and persuade him to embrace community living. Gradually, she starts to challenge both her father and their established way of life.

Tom's emotional intelligence and effectiveness as an educator are further demonstrated in the film. Particularly noteworthy is a pivotal scene in which Tom shows her father how to take care of a beehive (01:31:04). This moment serves as both a practical lesson and a metaphor for the importance of community, reinforcing her efforts to integrate her father into a social environment. A comprehensive shot-by-

shot analysis of this scene follows in the next chapter. The fact that their relationship is based on love, respect, and mutual understanding is beneficial for Tom's attempts to transform her father and relieve him from the burdens of his traumas.

The father-daughter relationship in the film involves several conflicts and confrontations, with Tom challenging her father on multiple occasions. A major turning point occurs when they are relocated to a farm, exposing Tom to a more communal lifestyle and enabling her to form new connections. One night, she returns home late after spending time with a boy and his rabbit, prompting her to question their current lifestyle. Expressing her discontent, she confronts her father saying, "I liked it there," and asking, "Did you even try?" (00:53:24), after Will makes them run away from the farm. This marks the first instance where she directly challenges her father and patriarchal masculinity since she is obliged to follow him. While Will does not embody a traditionally dominant paternal figure, Tom's initial dependency on him constrains her autonomy. However, as she gradually gains confidence and asserts her own desires, the balance of their relationship shifts, ultimately leading to their separation.

Another significant confrontation arises after Will's injury, when a family offers them temporary shelter in a trailer. Tom develops a sense of belonging, "which leads to a clash between the desires of the two characters" (Martausová 141). While Will plans to depart as soon as his foot is healed, Tom secretly pays to extend their stay without her father's knowledge, expressing her desire to remain in the community. Surprisingly, Will initially responds with approval, stating that "that was the right thing to do" (01:32:41). However, his internal conflict soon compels him to revert to his instinct for isolation. When Tom discovers him preparing to leave, she confronts him, possibly for the final time, asserting that "the same thing that's wrong with you isn't wrong with me" (01:35:44). This pivotal moment in the film showcases Tom's significant character development and her assertion of independence from her father, as well as her journey to become the agent of her own life.

As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that Tom's perspective takes precedence over Will's. Thus, *Leave No Trace* aligns with Dole's notion that the daughter's perspective is emphasized more than the father's. Dole argues that in the fatherhood narratives of the 2010s, "the fathers are more fully on their own but the dominant perspective in the film is the daughter's [...] the traditional dominance of the father is more equitably balanced by the wisdom of female characters" (142). Through her actions of protecting, rescuing, and teaching her father, Tom undergoes a significant development to become an adult and an agent of her own life over the course of the film. Eventually, it becomes clear that the protagonist of the film is the child rather than the parent.

This trajectory culminates in the film's final scene (01:36:40). Despite her continued love and understanding for her father, Tom ultimately chooses a different path.

Though she initially follows Will, she soon turns back, choosing to remain within the community while he continues his isolated existence. This moment signifies her full transition into adulthood – she is now capable of making independent decisions, not out of defiance but from a deep comprehension of her father’s limitations. Her final words, “Dad, I know you would have stayed if you could” (01:37:21), underscore the emotional depth of their relationship, which is rooted not in authority and submission but in love, respect, and mutual recognition of their differences.

### **The Beehive Scene**

The climactic scene near the end of the film represents a crucial moment for Tom, as she assumes the role of her father’s emotional guide and displays her emotional wisdom, as suggested by Dole’s observations that such wisdom “[is] the province of women and daughters” (142). The scene unfolds with a long shot capturing Will’s laborious attempt to walk with a stick (01:30:46). Subsequently, a medium shot focuses on his lower body, highlighting his injury and the challenges he faces in walking. The following long shot includes Tom as well as Will walking towards the hive which will be the central object of the scene. Tom leads Will and is given more space in the frame. The camera follows her and focuses on her. She talks while Will only makes gestures. She is clearly the authority figure now.

The following sequence comprises a series of medium shots, including shot-reverse shots that constantly switch back and forth between Tom and Will and over-the-shoulder shots showcasing their face-to-face interaction next to the hive. Both of them wear special clothing to protect themselves from the bees. Tom grasps the hive, lifting it to show her father while remarking, “It’s cool, huh? You put your hand over it. You can feel the warmth of the hive” (01:31:24). They both put their hands over the beehive and feel the warmth while we witness it with an over-the-shoulder medium shot at first, then a close-up focusing on Will’s hands, thus emphasizing Will’s experience of the warmth and the underlying message of the scene that Tom tries to give to him. Then, Tom proceeds to remove her protective clothing, urging Will to close his eyes, and we are presented with extreme close-up shots, revealing fragments of Tom’s hand covered in bees and honey. Will’s astonishment is captured in a close-up of his face upon opening his eyes. The scene further unfolds, featuring close-ups of Tom’s face and hands surrounded by bees, ending in an extreme close-up shot that vividly displays the intricate details of her honey and bee-coated fingers. These shots signify how fearless and brave Tom is while also showing she knows what she is doing.

This intricate scene captures the significant transformation within Tom’s relationship with her father and the broader impact on her life. Through the skillful use of close-up shots and shot-reverse shots, the scene emphasizes the importance of community over isolation, using the beehive as a powerful metaphor. Notably, the

incorporation of camera rotation and rack focus strategically directs the viewer's gaze from Tom's face to her hands and the swarm of bees, intensifying the visual impact and symbolism within the scene. This meticulous attention to cinematographic techniques amplifies the scene's sentimental resonance and highlights Tom's growth, self-reliance, and authority within the narrative.

### **The Wilderness Setting**

Nature vs. culture emerges as a prominent theme within the film, highlighting the dichotomy between the wilderness setting and societal norms. The wilderness serves as a space of liberation for the father-daughter dyad, allowing them to live off the grid beyond society's constraints. In this way, Will's retreat into nature reflects what Martausová describes as an "alternative American Dream that is transcendental and freed from all material and monetary considerations" (145). However, this freedom comes into conflict with his paternal instinct to protect Tom and ensure her well-being. While Will's decision to abandon traditional domestic and professional spheres may signal a rejection of conventional masculinity, his attempt to protect Tom from the hardships of survival and provide stability aligns with the very paternal responsibilities he seeks to escape. The film thus complicates the mythic notion that the forest "cleans and heals the fathers of the wounds inflicted by society" (Martausová 145), instead portraying nature as both a space of refuge and a source of tension that challenges Will's ability to reconcile his ideals with his daughter's evolving needs.

Considering the broader implications, the wilderness setting offers a space to reexamine traditional gender norms and expectations. Martausová discusses the wilderness setting in the film "as a refuge from society" (132) and "as a form of environment that motivates and shapes the representation of the postmillennial father" (131). The wilderness provides an unbounded space where societal pressures and constraints are absent. However, it also leads to Will's struggle to maintain his identity as a father in an environment that is both a refuge and a challenge. It serves to underline Will's outsider status. His retreat into the wild is not just a rejection of society but a manifestation of trauma. His wartime experiences and subsequent PTSD further isolate him from society's norms and expectations. By challenging norms surrounding fatherhood and masculinity, Will remains an outsider, rejecting conventional roles yet unable to escape their influence entirely.

Overall, the wilderness in *Leave No Trace* serves as a transformative space that both challenges and reinforces traditional gender expectations. It allows the father-daughter relationship to develop outside urban family life while simultaneously highlighting Will's isolation and internal conflict. Through its exploration of nature vs. culture, the film prompts reflection on the complexities of gender, parenthood, and human connection in non-traditional wilderness settings.

## Conclusion

*Leave No Trace* presents a compelling and multifaceted portrayal of the father-daughter relationship within the framework of contemporary cinema's prevailing fatherhood narrative. In doing so, it defies traditional gender roles and offers a complex examination of masculinity. Rather than featuring a dominant father figure, the film establishes a more egalitarian power dynamic between Will and Tom, prompting us to critically question the notions of hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood. What I mean here by hegemonic masculinity is both the new hegemonic masculinity of postfeminist fatherhood and the traditional ideology of a masculinity that remains embedded within this redefined paternal role.

In this way, *Leave No Trace* not only contributes to the postfeminist discourse to a certain extent but also challenges and pushes its boundaries, inviting viewers to engage in deeper contemplation and reflection on the complexities of gender and familial relationships. The film disrupts the idealized portrayal of postfeminist fatherhood through Will, who does not fully embody the postfeminist father figure. While he exhibits traits associated with the "new father," such as emotional sensitivity and engagement, his repeated failures to fulfill the traditional paternal roles of protector and provider problematize this representation. In doing so, the film challenges the presumed stability of postfeminist fatherhood, highlighting the tensions and contradictions within contemporary constructions of masculinity and caregiving.

The film portrays Will's failure to integrate into a community, to adequately care for his daughter, and to find personal fulfillment. This stands in contrast to other postfeminist fatherhood films, which often conclude with the father successfully reconciling his vulnerabilities and reclaiming his role as both caregiver and provider. Such a resolution would require the father figure to undergo a transformation, ultimately embodying the ideal postfeminist father – simultaneously nurturing, breadwinning, and emotionally sensitive. However, *Leave No Trace* resists this trajectory, leaving Will's struggle unresolved and exposing the limitations of postfeminist fatherhood ideals. Thus, the film goes beyond the established postfeminist fatherhood narrative.

Another intriguing aspect of the film is Tom's journey toward self-sufficiency and independence, which questions traditional assumptions about gender and power dynamics. As the narrative unfolds, Tom emerges as a self-reliant individual who is no longer dependent on her father's support. This departure from conventional gender norms signifies a progressive shift in the portrayal of father-daughter relationships on screen. While Will tries to maintain his role as a protector and provider, Tom gradually assumes the position of her father's protector and educator, asserting agency over her own life. Through her actions, Tom exemplifies the figure of a "wise-beyond-her-years daughter," embarking on a transformative journey toward maturity. As the film draws to a close, it becomes evident that Tom's growth extends beyond personal development. Her newfound wisdom and understanding of her

father's experiences contribute to her role as an authority figure, guiding him toward emotional growth and self-discovery.

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## 5. Is Murder Madness? Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction

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### Abstract

The Victorian era is an era of change. Among these changes are developments in medical and legal discourse, specifically a shift in the perception of madness. It becomes a condition primarily associated with women. Alongside this shift, the insanity-plea arrives in Victorian courtrooms. Considering these shifting discourses, this chapter will examine how different modes of Victorian fiction participate in and respond to these discourses. It will analyse Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) as an example for Victorian Gothic fiction and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) as an example for realist fiction arguing that the degree of social criticism that is negotiated through the representation of madness in connection with murder committed by women in Victorian fiction is tied to the realist or Gothic mode. The more Gothic a novel is, the more murder is the pinnacle symptom of the female perpetrators' madness, thus recontextualising murder as madness and reducing a woman's agency. The more realist a novel is, the more murder is the transgression and not recontextualised as madness, thus leaving more agency to women. This chapter will further complicate these transgressions of murder and suicide by further considering the female characters under scrutiny and their transgressions in light of their race (Bertha Mason) and class (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*). Both women's actions and depictions are heavily influenced by these circumstances: They are condemned and judged on more than one level.

### Keywords

Victorian literature, Gothic, realism, murder, mental illness

### Introduction

The perception of madness shifted in the nineteenth century. The raving lunatics one would pay an entrance fee to see in Bedlam were replaced by docile and, significantly, female and feminine patients. "The disturbing images of wild, dark, naked men had been replaced by poetic, artistic, and theatrical images of the youthful, beautiful female insanity" (Showalter 10). Along with this rise of the madwoman in medical discourse comes the mad murderess in legal discourse. Women in the nineteenth century who had committed murder were twice as likely to be acquitted on the grounds of insanity, often simply with the explanation that because they kill, they must be mad. The deed was enough to convince juries of their insanity (Ainsley 43). Literature of the time is also concerned with gender, mental illnesses, and murder. This chapter is placed at this intersection of changing discourses about women in the legal system and women in the asylum system. I argue that the degree of social

criticism that is negotiated through the representation of madness in connection with women who murder in Victorian fiction is tied to either the realist or the Gothic mode. The more Gothic a novel is, the more murder is the pinnacle symptom of madness, thus recontextualising murder as madness and reducing a woman's agency. The more realist a novel is, the more murder is the transgression and not recontextualised as madness, thus leaving more agency to women. I use the term mode here instead of genre since especially the Gothic in the nineteenth century is no longer a stable genre (Killeen 3). Thus, mode, being "associated with method, manner and style" (Cuddon 441), is the more appropriate term. I further consider realism and Gothic not to be separate but rather existing on a continuum, since traces of Gothic can be detected in realist fiction and vice versa (Killeen 10). Regardless of the mode of the novel or the transgression of the characters, however, the female characters discussed here are held to an impossible standard and are further judged, othered, and hindered by their race and class. In order to prove this, I will first give some context on the relevant discourses of the nineteenth century of femininity, murder, and madness which influence the writing of these novels. Then, I will exemplify my argument with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a Gothic novel and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) as an example of a realist novel.

## Context

Murder, attempted murder, and suicide are the transgressions this chapter deals with, yet the women discussed here cross boundaries in more than one way; they also transgress Victorian gender norms. These transgressions are often relevant in the context of the characters' madness and/or criminality. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg give an intriguing definition of what role definitions are when they write:

Role definitions exist on a level of prescription beyond their embodiment in the individuality and behaviour of particular historical persons. They exist rather as a formally agreed upon set of characteristics understood by and acceptable to a significant proportion of the population. [...] They exist as parameters with which and against which individuals must either conform or define their deviance. (333)

Gender norms are therefore a constructed set of ideals against which women – in this case – define themselves. It is further difficult, if not impossible, to fully conform to this set of constructed rules. What contemporary studies have shown is that ideal notions of femininity were rarely adhered to (Klaver and Rosenman 3), and yet not all women were condemned or perceived as transgressive. Not adhering to all the rules, therefore, did not necessarily mean that one was transgressing, transgression rather meant to turn towards the opposite of ideal notions of femininity.

Fundamentally, the core values from which one could deviate seem to have been closely aligned with the ideals set out by Coventry Patmore in his poem “The Angel in the House” (1858). Pamela Stone and Lisa Shapiro Sanders summarise the depiction of the ideal wife in this poem as follows: “dignity, modesty, grace, and charm – while also underscoring that wives find their reward in their devotion and submission to their husbands’ wishes” (89). While recent research strongly suggests that this ideal of the Angel in the House, along with other essentialist concepts – such as its sexually promiscuous opposite, the Fallen Woman, or separate spheres – did not represent reality (Klaver and Rosenman 3), Stone and Shapiro Sanders nevertheless argue convincingly that women were trained to embody these characteristics “to be the keepers of the hearth, guardians of morality, efficient domestic managers, and loving wives and mothers” (37). What is further important here is that these gender norms are class specific; only for certain upper-middle class women was it at all possible to come somewhat close to an Angel in the House because most other women simply had to work (37). Women were furthermore affected by a racial as well as a gendered hierarchy, where the white, European man’s was the ‘normal’ body and everything else followed behind. White women were below men, but non-white women earned the lowest place in this hierarchy (13).

As Michel Foucault shows in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, where he considers limits and transgression as inherently connected, “a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (34). Despite a difficulty to establish exactly how firm these boundaries were, Victorian gender norms must have presented limits, otherwise, no transgression would have been possible. To summarise, the established core values from which a woman could deviate were that she must be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive to men and that women embrace their role and their natural function as mothers. In connection to this ‘natural function’, women were supposed to be nurturing and caring, and bearers of virtue and morality.

While deviation from core values and norms was certainly frowned upon and usually punished, “[n]o women disturbed Victorian complacency more overtly than those who murdered. But despite their shocking behaviour, most violent women were treated more delicately than men guilty of comparable crime; they were acquitted more often, and their death sentences were more often commuted” (Morris 26). This may be due to “the discomfiting prospect of acknowledging women’s agency when confronted with physical proof of their capacity for anger, power, and violence” (Ainsley 40). Thus, a double standard in the treatment of women who kill becomes evident. On the one hand, the committed transgression was perceived as more severe, exciting public attention to a much larger degree than male murderers (Morris 27), yet the treatment of women who committed violent crimes was much gentler.

They were convicted less frequently and even fewer of those convicted actually went on to be executed (30). “The double standard, invoked, for once, to women’s advantage, provided a cogent and ironic example of the Victorian dilemma: wanting to think of women as special, fragile creatures even when they did not act that way” (26). This further exemplifies a central notion of all studies of Victorian womanhood: The concepts of womanhood, largely constructed by men, are incongruous with the lived reality of women unable – or unwilling – to enact these fantasies.

One explanation for the low numbers of executions and proportionally larger number of acquittals in women is class. According to Bridget Walsh, the Victorian public felt a certain distaste around hanging women in general, and middle-class women in particular (128). Morris concurs when she states that middle-class women were not hanged at all, whereas middle-class men were. She further points out that, next to the severity of the crime, sexual misconduct played an important part in the conviction of women (30). Another possible explanation: women were proportionally twice as likely to be acquitted of a crime on the basis of insanity, despite men having been on trial for violent crimes much more frequently than women; Jill Ainsley attributes this to the Victorian belief that women were more susceptible to madness than men (4). There were rules and legislation about what it meant to acquit someone on the grounds of insanity since the M’Naghten rule, which read: “He did not know what he was doing was wrong” (Purchase 92). It had to be proven that someone was unaware that the way they were acting was wrong in order to be acquitted on the grounds of insanity. However, as Ainsley points out, women were often acquitted even when they had confessed their crimes, clearly aware of the gravity of their actions (43).

Coincidentally, madness, according to Elaine Showalter, becomes an increasingly female phenomenon in the nineteenth century, moving away from the raving madman to the docile madwoman. Due to the scope of this chapter, this topic will not be treated in too much detail. Primarily, I want to point out how the kind of behaviour that had women be sent to an asylum – primarily women who were diagnosed with hysteria which had become a “catch all classification” for undesirable behaviour (Lyster 77) – overlapped with social transgressions as well as medical symptoms. This becomes most evident in radical treatments like the clitoridectomy. The performing surgeon, Dr Issac Brown, believed that masturbation was one of the primary causes for a variety of mental illnesses, most prominently hysteria. He describes symptoms such as declining proposals in marriage and remaining single past a certain age, and claims that the cure lies in female circumcision (Brown 72-75). “Clitoridectomy is the surgical enforcement of an ideology that restricts female sexuality to reproduction. The removal of the clitoris eliminates the woman’s sexual pleasure, and it is indeed the autonomous sexual pleasure that Brown defined as the symptom, perhaps the essence, of female insanity” (Showalter 76-77). This procedure is described

in detail here because it is so very telling of the anxiety surrounding women's sexuality, their desires, and their agency in acting on those desires. As King argues, these anxieties "echo the anxieties articulated in other discourses about every woman's potential for sin, trapped as she is in her own body" (20). The discourse of madness thus interacts with that of femininity, and it is this interaction that turns madness into a moral as well as a medical diagnosis used to silence and discredit transgressive women.

### ***Jane Eyre***

Bertha Mason is a very fitting example for a case where madness is both a medical and moral diagnosis. From the beginning, we perceive her as Other, an impression growing stronger with every encounter and depiction. We meet her as "a curious laugh – distinct, formal, mirthless" (Brontë 125) that becomes ever more threatening. Jane describes it as "demoniac" (176). Therefore, before we even know she exists, Bertha is contextualised as an evil and threatening presence in Jane's new life, part of Thornfield and adding to the Gothic atmosphere of the novel. When Jane finally encounters her – as many scholars claim (see for example Gilbert and Gubar or Klambauer) – dark, Gothic double, she describes the figure that appeared in her chamber: "It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back" (340). Her features were "[f]earful and ghastly to me – oh sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face" (340). In short, Bertha reminds her "[o]f the foul German spectre – the vampire" (341). Bertha is depicted as something foreign, something other and less than human, she is often "it", and words used to describe her are "savage" and "animalistic"; they leave no space for empathy on the reader's part.

Even less empathy is awarded to her when Mr Rochester finally reveals all about his wife and gives the readers his version of the story. With this revelation, similar to the classic female Gothic, the supernatural elements of the novel are finally explained (Punter and Byron 279). Rochester's tale is a tale of woe – his woe, she is but his burden to bear – of being tricked into marrying a madwoman. He likens her to a witch because she is "prompted by her familiar to burn people in their beds at night, to stab them, to bite their flesh from their bones" (Brontë 362). According to Rochester, Bertha is mad because she inherited the disease from her mother, whom Rochester significantly identifies as "the Creole" (367). That madness could be passed on, especially from mother to daughter was a common belief at the time (Thormälen 190). However, it is more than his bride's heritage that Rochester finds reproachful, it is her character that he takes issue with most of all.

I found her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger. [...] whatever topic I started, immediately received from her a turn at once

coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile – when I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders. (Brontë 368-69)

Finally, “her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity, her vices sprang up fast and rank” and then “the doctors now discovered that my wife was mad – her excess had prematurely developed the germs of insanity” (369). It becomes evident here that while her madness is hereditary, it is transgression that spurs on the disease, Rochester blames his hatred of her, as well as her madness, on *her* behaviour, thus also constructing her suffering as his burden.

It is further helpful at this point to acknowledge the values of femininity that Bertha is transgressing against. In this case, before Rochester goes into what it is exactly about her character that he finds so repulsive, he names the characteristics he is expecting a woman, and specifically his future wife, to possess: “I had remarked neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners” (368). These values align with the boundaries defining ‘good’ women in Victorian society and cement Bertha’s behaviour as deviant.

More than just transgressing against values of Victorian femininity, she transgresses against whiteness. She is the diseased Other, the Creole from Jamaica invading the motherland and wreaking havoc. Bertha is described as Creole, which Sue Thomas identifies as “a derogatory name for West Indian sugar plantocracy” (1). She further summarises studies that show that the construction of whiteness depended not only on skin colour, but also on being European as well as Christian (1). Thus, one can read Bertha “in relation to that stereotype of depraved self-indulgence, and Jane as an emblem of Christian feminine restraint” (2). What further confirms this is that in Rochester’s description of Bertha as excessive, temperamental, and behaving in a way wholly contradicting Victorian ideals of womanhood, one can recognise contemporary prejudice against people – and especially women – living in warmer climates. It was believed that the hot temperature would lead women to be excessive in their desires (3).

Another intriguing point is made by Susan Meyer who claims that although Bertha is traditionally read as a white woman – or passing as white – she is often described as dark. Jane, for example, describes her hair as dark, her face being “discoloured” and “savage” (Brontë 340). “In the form in which she becomes visible in the novel, Bertha has become black as she is constructed by the narrative” (Meyer 164). There is an argument to be made that while Bertha may be supposed to be of white skin colour, on a narrative level, her character is much more closely aligned with the non-white Other. This becomes even more troubling when considering how often Bertha is depicted as more animal than human. Bertha is therefore transgressive and othered on every possible level, even beyond her madness and her crimes, and it is

those external circumstances that, according to the narrative, make her even more prone to madness and crime.

We shall then turn to her primary transgression: that of (attempted) murder and suicide. Bertha harms others and attempts murder more than once throughout the novel. She sets Rochester's room on fire, finally burns down Thornfield and then jumps from the roof of the burning house. A witness identifies her as "the mad lady, who was cunning as a witch" (517). Bertha's suicide reads as little more than the culmination of her insanity, a raving lunatic setting a house on fire and jumping off it. Her madness is clearly the source for the transgression of attempted murder and suicide. Bertha killing herself also works as a convenient way to get rid of Bertha, the obstacle to Jane and Rochester's happiness. She was the only obstacle standing in their way, "the ultimate legal impediment to Jane's and Rochester's marriage" (Gilbert and Gubar 360), and short of disease taking her, suicide was the only way for her to be out of the way without either Jane or Rochester transgressing and murdering her themselves.

In literary criticism, however, there is, as Showalter notes, much more sympathy awarded to Bertha than Brontë herself offered (68-69), where madwomen like – and perhaps especially – Bertha Mason are read as feminist rebels (Donaldson 11). This romanticisation of madness is tempting since, as Donaldson states, "the figure of Bertha Mason as a rebellious woman subverting the patriarchal order by burning down her husband's estate has a certain irresistible appeal" (12). Bertha burning down Thornfield Hall might therefore also be read as an act of revenge, as Bertha chooses suicide as the only way to escape and be the mistress of her own fate, so to speak. However, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo points out, madness "provides the illusion of power while locating the mad (non)subject outside any sphere where power can be exerted" (4). The fact that Bertha throughout the novel is described as mad, by othering her, by depicting her as less than human, and not in control of herself, removes this potential for agency. By contextualising her actions as madness, all the potential of her actions being conceived of as wilful rebellion against a patriarchal system – or a certain patriarch – is denied.

What is more, the doubling of Jane and Bertha leaves even less space for Bertha to be read as an independent agentic character. Bertha is Jane's dark double in every sense of the word. As many critics argue – Gilbert and Gubar most notably – Bertha acts out, and thus almost embodies, Jane's suppressed desires (359-60). This is, furthermore, an integral part of the Gothic nature of the novel. Anna Klambauer also emphasises the layered duality between Jane and Bertha, whose "kinship [...] is not only visible in their connection to Mr. Rochester – actual and desired wife – as well as their metaphorical/narratorial likeness, the two women are also linked linguistically" (14). While Klambauer acknowledges the potential of reading Bertha as "a stronger, more powerful version of Jane" (15), she concludes that due to the

extremely negative portrayal of the character – especially from a nineteenth-century perspective – this reading may be tempting, yet not fully convincing (15). Bertha's death then is not only the removal of the obstacle in Jane and Rochester's way but also "abandoning madness and passionate resistance from there on out" (15). With Bertha also dies this repressed part of Jane that Bertha can be read to represent, the "type of person that the too passionate Jane could have become" (Smith 82). Bertha is reduced to a mere dark shadow of Jane, which leaves even less potential for a subversive reading of her madness.

Bertha's transgressions in terms of suicide and attempted murder are thus clearly depicted as the result of her madness. However, that madness, in turn, is depicted as a result of a mixture of her heritage as well as her transgressive behaviour. Since madness only "provides the illusion of power" (Caminero-Santangelo 4), Bertha's transgressive behaviour cannot be read as either agentic or socially critical because the roots of her rebellion against her captor and patriarch are recontextualised as the acts of a raving lunatic who is not ascribed enough mental clarity to carry out these actions in order to rebel.

Further, in the figure of Bertha, Brontë subscribed to contemporary beliefs about women and madness and shows an acute awareness of contemporary discourse. As Showalter points out: "Bertha's violence, dangerousness and rage, her regression to an inhuman condition and her sequestration became such a powerful model for Victorian readers, including psychiatrists, that it influences even medical accounts of female insanity" (68), a potent example for the ways in which medical discourse and fictional writing of the time influenced each other. Consequently, there is little subversiveness to be found in her character, and thus little can be made of Bertha as a protofeminist character rebelling against the social conditions of women in the nineteenth century. She functions rather as the "Gothic element within the narrative to the degree that she is associated with racial otherness, insanity, and sexual promiscuity" (Smith 80). One could thus even go so far as to argue that she is a merely functional character, the source of the uncanny discomfort that allows this novel to be read as a Gothic one, not a proto-feminist icon subverting Victorian standards of femininity.

### ***Tess of the D'Urbervilles***

Where Bertha remains unsuccessful in killing her husband, Tess of the D'Urbervilles succeeds and is, therefore, unambiguously a murderer – one of the more famous ones in Victorian literature. She kills her husband and pays for it with her own life. What is harder to find in this novel is madness. While an argument might be made that Tess's behaviour after her murder is strange, or that she acted in a fit of emotional turmoil, I will rather attempt to read what is not there in this novel. Thus reading between the lines or the empty spaces of this novel, I argue that it is

significant that Tess is not contextualised as mad, when – given the contemporary discourse – every opportunity was there. The novel rather seeks to assign blame elsewhere, not in the damaged mind of a woman, but in a society that allows for women – even a good, or as Hardy puts it in the subtitle to the novel: “a pure woman” – to be pushed to a point where murder becomes a viable option. What is more, by not having Tess’s action be a consequence of madness, the novel allows for Tess to be read as agentic, but also as criticising the contemporary treatment of women, especially lower-class women.

*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is the story of Tess’s Fall. She is set up from the very beginning as a “pure woman” and remains pure throughout the novel despite her social transgressions “because she is completely and totally womanly” (Morris 127). Tess is repeatedly described as utterly beautiful. To her, “the eye returns involuntarily” (Hardy 102). Lisa Hoffman-Reyes claims that Hardy intentionally draws attention to Tess’s beauty. “He links this notion of the ideal from the physical to the moral and in doing so redefines assumptions about what constitutes feminine virtue” (34-35). She is intentionally made beautiful to challenge contemporary views of the connections of purity and beauty, and the description is by no means exploitative (34-35). The narrative is constructed as highly critical of Tess’s circumstances and of a society that allows for a young, working-class woman to be exploited in that fashion. Despite her transgressions that should not allow for her to be read as a pure woman anymore, the narrator insists that she is just that throughout. As Kristin Brady explains: “Hardy’s construction of gender difference works in terms not of civilized, Christian codes but of post-Darwinian anthropological theories about social behavior: the ‘purity’ of Hardy’s characters, especially his women, is that of the rural rustic, of the ‘instinctive’ and amoral ‘primitive’ races” (96). This allows for Tess to be both pure and transgressive.

Beyond her social standing and financial situation that can be read as a – or the – trigger(s) for the events of the novel, all of Tess’s transgressions are framed by important people in her life, and primarily men, failing her. It is her father who forces her to go to her alleged relative Alec D’Urberville, who rapes and impregnates her. It is an instant of “the violence performed by the text on the heroine’s body” (Brady 102). Although her extramarital sex in the form of rape certainly constituted a transgression, the novel depicts this not as a free choice but as an act of violence. When Tess returns home, her mother blames her for her situation, accusing: “You ought to have been more careful if you didn’t mean to get him to make you his wife” (Hardy 95), to which Tess responds with desperate exasperation, asking her mother why she did not prepare her daughter better for the dangers of the world outside the home (95). The novel, therefore, clearly offers a critical assessment of the treatment of women and the dangers of insufficient education. Tess subsequently loses this child, pointedly named Sorrow the Unwanted, which prompts her to go to the farm where

she meets Angel. He is supposed to love and accept her, yet when she confesses, he abandons her after her forgiving him a very similar transgression, one that he committed willingly. Tess even points out the hypocrisy of this: "I have forgiven you for the same. [...] Forgive me as you are forgiven! I forgive you, Angel" (272). Especially with Angel finding himself unable to forgive her, the novel criticises a Victorian double standard of the sexes. What is a small transgression for Angel as a man is damnable for Tess as a woman. Men keep failing Tess, yet it is she who pays the price.

Significantly, Angel's initial reaction to her tale is: "You cannot be out of your mind, though you ought to be. Yet you are not. I see nothing in you to warrant such a supposition as that" (272). For one, this reads as though Angel is looking for an excuse for Tess's story since the logical explanation cannot be that she chose her path (which arguably she has not since she was raped, but Angel does not perceive it as such), but that she should be mad. However, she is not; there are no signs of madness in her behaviour, which reasserts Tess's agency. The novel could have taken a very different path, excusing Tess's past by describing her as a madwoman with no control over her actions, considering the discourses of the Victorian period around madness and transgression, especially sexuality. And indeed, Angel's words confirm this as a likely, believable, story. In this light, Hardy's decision to not portray Tess's transgressions as a consequence of some lack of mental capacity reads as an active choice to write against contemporary discourses and leave Tess her agency throughout the novel.

Angel abandoning Tess is what leads her back to Alec, whom she marries, and, when Angel returns, kills. We hear her confront Alec about his lies:

And you had used your cruel persuasion upon me ... you did not stop using it – no – you did not stop! My little sisters and brothers and my mother's needs – they were the things you moved me by ... and you said my husband would never come back – never; and you taunted me, and said what a simpleton I was to expect him ... and at last I believed you and gave way! ... And then he came back! Now he is gone. Gone a second time, and I have lost him now forever ... and he will not love me the littlest bit ever any more – only hate me ... O yes, I have lost him now – again because of you! (453)

Finally, she finishes: "O, you have torn my life all to pieces ... made me victim, a caged bird!" (454). Through this conversation we get an image of Tess, the murderer. She is clear and articulate, she does not ramble madly, she has a clear understanding of the harms he has done her, how he has impacted her life, and how he exploited her desperate financial situation. She understands how he could ensnare her and recognises herself as his prisoner and then chooses to end her imprisonment in the most final way, by murdering him. She has freed herself from her oppressor and makes use of her agency. She "pulls herself out of the traditional pattern of the female victim and becomes an assertive woman" (Morris 131). Angel, however, doubts her sanity when she runs after him to tell him what she did. "As well as his confused and excited ideas could reason, he supposed that in the moment of

mad grief of which she spoke her mind had lost its balance, and plunged into this abyss" (Hardy 459). This contradicts the clarity with which Tess has expressed her fury to Alec, as well as anything readers have observed her do and think in this realist novel filled with detailed descriptions of her character and actions. He seems to try and find an explanation for how to combine his image of the pure Tess with the woman who commits murder, and his solution is temporary insanity. Just a page earlier, however, Tess says: "I have done it – I don't know how [...] Still, I owed it to 'ee, and to myself, Angel. I feared long ago, when I struck him on the mouth with my glove, that I might do it some day for the wrong he did to me in my simple youth, and to you through me" (458). Tess thus reiterates that she was not suddenly overcome by madness, but that this was an intentional and inevitable action, something she had to do both for Angel and for herself. Yet, this does not fit Angel's perception of his wife, so he looks for excuses to erase his wife's agentic behaviour.

Nicola Lacey points out that woman criminals in realist novels of the nineteenth century "often exemplify a form of mental incapacity which is closely related to self-deception: absence of mind or multiple consciousness" (124). These instances did not fall into the definition of the M'Naghten rule, since they were less related to a disease of the mind and rather considered as "failures of volition or of suspended consciousness" (124). Yet, in such cases women were often still found not guilty on these grounds, going beyond the legal definitions of guilt based on the grounds of sanity (124). And while Lacey seems then to use Angel's words to describe Tess as one of those characters who are killing absentmindedly, I argue that not even that is the case here. Tess acts fully aware of what she is doing and why she is doing it. There is no regret, there is no unawareness of the consequences of her actions. She knows killing is wrong, yet she does it anyway. Indeed, as Lacey agrees: "Notwithstanding the suggestion of a dissociation of will from body, the reader is left in no real doubt of the intentionality with which she commits the murder which condemns her to the gallows" (128). Tess acts with awareness of what she is doing and why she is doing it.

Tess is executed for her crimes. And that is despite a trend to be observed in the Victorian justice system to declare women innocent on the grounds of insanity or suspended consciousness. Yet, Hardy chooses another path for his heroine. Tess is executed, but for more than her crimes. Morris argues here that "because she is working-class and can be labelled as promiscuous, she pays with her life for breaking the law" (128). Class is an issue from the beginning; it is her lack of fortune as well as the prideful striving of her father for a better position in society that he thinks he is owed that sets Tess on this path. This is in accordance with the real-world context in which the novel was written, since there are no recorded cases of middle-class women being executed for murder in the nineteenth century. And "What better evidence does the jury need than her compromised morality? If she has already broken

the seventh commandment, why would she hesitate to break the sixth as well?” (137). For Hardy, the issue was the inequitable social and judicial treatment based on class and gender (129). “Hardy’s realism – though often overlaid with symbol and legend – clearly conveys the effect of class distinctions on human behavior, especially women’s behavior. Tess had few choices of employment, and none of them provided the means to support Joan Durbeyfield and her children” (130).

What I have argued here is that Tess is a transgressive woman because she has been raped, because she (initially) chooses not to marry Alec, even though she is pregnant with his child, and lastly, of course, because she finally kills Alec. Yet, none of these actions are blamed on her nature, it is clearly her circumstances, and especially the men in her life, that force her to a point where she makes the choice to rid herself of her oppressor and chooses whom she wants to spend the remainder of her days with, all of which leads to her being executed for murdering her husband. “Hardy assaults the façade of late Victorian society by casting this mistress as vulnerable and sympathetic rather than as a whore or a blight” (Morris 138). Yet, while all of her choices and transgressions are contextualised convincingly, so that she is not blamed for them, they are still clearly her choices and transgressions. No one is there to tell her she should leave Alec; it is her moral compass that does so. No one tells her or forces her to murder Alec; it is her decision that she makes for herself and for Angel. The novel can thus be read as very critical of the position of women, especially lower-class women, their dependency, their lack of education and the standards to which they are held. This is only increased by not framing any of her actions as the consequences of madness. Her agency is fully intact, she makes all of her own choices within a system that only presents a narrow set of choices to its women, especially working-class women. By not depicting Tess’s actions as consequences of madness, Hardy leaves Tess her agency, yet he also shows what happens to transgressive women: they are punished and must pay for their transgressions – in Tess’s case: with her life.

## Conclusion

In the Gothic novel analysed here, *Jane Eyre*, transgressive actions are contextualised as madness, and Bertha’s agency is revoked. In the context of the novel’s mode, we can see that madness is also part of what makes the novel uncanny, adding almost a supernatural element. Madness can thus also be conceived as a tool that adds to the atmosphere of the novel. The realist novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, however, chooses not to do so and thus uses female characters to criticise a society that pushes women to a point where they see little other choice to free themselves from oppression than violence. Through the characteristics of the realist mode, such as extensive description, rich psychological portraits, and free indirect discourse, the reader is allowed more insight into Tess’s character and motivations, leaving little room to attribute

her actions to a lack of mental capacities. Of course, due to the scope of this chapter, I can merely begin to observe trends; however, striking similarities can be found in Gothic novels like *Wuthering Heights* and *Dracula* or realist novels like *Adam Bede*. What both of the characters analysed here have in common is a variety of transgressions ranging from non-conformity to crime. What is more, both Bertha and Tess belong to disadvantaged groups of people. With Tess being a working-class woman and Bertha being arguably perceived as non-white, the odds are stacked against them from the start. They are both inherently unable to fully conform to Victorian ideals of femininity because of that, and it is these circumstances which seem to make them more susceptible to falling. Finally, they both either attempt or commit murder or suicide and even though their actions are treated and contextualised differently, depending on the mode the novel is written in, none of these acts goes unpunished. In Victorian society and in literature – independent of the mode – agentic women elicit anxiety, especially in men, and must thus be eliminated to restore order.


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## 6. Staging Testimony: The Creation of the Addressable Other in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

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### Abstract

Although the representation of trauma testimony in Black women's literature has been previously analyzed, scholarship on testimony in theatre and performance is much less abundant. This article discusses how Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (frequently referred to by its shortened title, *for colored girls*) physically and textually depicts the formation of a successful witnessing community among its cast of Black women. By developing a close reading of the poems where all characters are onstage ("dark phrases," "my love is too," and "a layin on of hands"), this article explains how Shange depicts the characters' journey from attempted trauma testimony without a witnessing community through the process of creating a group of addressable others, to the successful transmission of testimony. The techniques of plurisignance and translucence (as defined by Karla Holloway) are crucial elements of the Black female literary tradition that *for colored girls* successfully uses to enact the development of a witnessing community of addressable others. Additionally, the choreopoem's usage of music, dance, and singing drives the physical depiction of trauma testimony on the stage and the divide (and ultimate reconnection) between body and voice for the characters. It is the formation of a unified yet diverse community of addressable others that enables the development of the main characters' independent voices and the beginning of a process of healing from trauma. The physical representation of trauma testimony onstage in Shange's choreopoem blends performance theory and literary techniques to demonstrate the necessary basis for the piece's cast of Black women to begin to heal from cultural trauma.

### Keywords

Trauma studies, cultural trauma, performance studies, Black literature, Black women's literature

### Introduction

Since Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (frequently referred to by its shortened title, *for colored girls*) premiered in 1976, it has been continuously readapted for the stage, as well as TV and movie audiences. Only the second piece by a Black woman to reach Broadway, *for colored girls* has a sizeable cultural legacy. In her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre* on performance and community engagement,

Nadine George-Graves explains that “the show clearly attempts to function as ritual; the choreopoem is distinct in the way that it combines text with movement as ritual – a ritual that brings about healing” (209). Shange’s text certainly showcases racialized and gendered traumatic experiences through the voices of her various characters, all of whom are women of color. However, the question of whether the piece attempts to act as a healing process is relatively underexplored.

In her essay “The Middle Passage and Race-Based Trauma,” Luminita Dragulescu writes, “As a consequence of a violent racial history, there is a predetermination of trauma within race, so that mere racial identification is fraught with a history of racial violence that manifests itself in the trauma of race” (271). This type of cultural trauma (sometimes also referred to as collective or intergenerational trauma) manifests itself doubly for Black women, who are subject to both patriarchal and white hegemonic aggressions. Shange’s text does not only handle her characters’ individually experienced traumas; it also deals with “the original traumatic event of the black girl: she inhabits the space where gender and race intersect” (Hamilton 84). Although critical works bringing together literary trauma theory and postcolonial or cultural race trauma are not difficult to find (see, for example, book-length studies by Jennifer Griffiths, Sam Durrant, and Patricia San José Rico, among others), not all of them call attention to the traumatic “multipronged attack” (84) faced by Black women specifically. As a choreopoem, *for colored girls* combines poetry, theatre, dance, and song. This blend of different media, along with the piece’s thematic emphasis on the (often traumatic) lived experiences of Black women, allows for analysis along diverse lines of inquiry, including literary trauma theory, poetics, performance studies, and feminist and postcolonial theory. In order to investigate how the choreopoem’s characters’ experiences of trauma and healing are staged, attention must be given to both the literary text of *for colored girls* and how that text is influenced by the presence of actual bodies moving in real space.

Using the framework of what Karla Holloway terms plurisignance in her article “Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African-American Women Writers” allows for Shange’s text to be analyzed both as part of the Black female (written) literary tradition and as a performance piece that thematizes and enacts the connection between body and voice. Holloway explains that “the recursive structures of language in literature by contemporary African-American women writers are signaled by what is essentially a ‘multiplied’ text” (766). In the case of *for colored girls*, this multiplicity is not only found within the text of the poems, it also manifests in the division (and, ultimately, the connection) between body and voice enacted by the characters on stage. This multiplicity of voice is also apparent in the fact that Shange initially wrote many of the poems comprising *for colored girls* individually, and later worked to combine them into a unified performance piece (Mahurin 331). By developing the plurisignance in the choreopoem from a place of

disunity to one of cohesion, Shange's *for colored girls* thematizes how resolving the disconnect between body and voice by forming a witnessing community is necessary to begin the process of healing from and living in spite of racialized and gendered trauma.

### **Between Body and Voice: Creating the Addressable Other**

According to Laurie Vickroy in her book *Reading Trauma Narratives*, "The mechanisms of trauma, how it is caused and perpetuated, and the potential to heal wounds are all dependent on social interconnections, through witnessing or healing relationships" (23). Both the occurrence of trauma itself and the processes required to heal from it have social dimensions, and this is even more so the case for marginalized individuals struggling with cultural trauma. Patricia San José Rico points out that "in order for that witness-bearing to take place, it is not enough to simply express the trauma, to put it into words; a listener is needed" (38). The problem is that the socially mediated nature of witnessing is not immune to US society's racist and sexist discourses. In *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, Jennifer Griffiths asks: "What happens when testimony occurs in a public space through the body of a woman? Or the racialized body? How does the spectacle of these 'othered' bodies interfere with the transmission of testimony?" (5). How does a victim of racialized and/or gendered cultural trauma find someone able to bear witness to their testimony in a society that is still dominated by the structures that caused their trauma in the first place?

It is difficult to apply traditional psychoanalytic approaches to healing from trauma when, as is the case with cultural trauma, the original traumatic event is still ongoing. Some postcolonial trauma theory posits that healing from racial trauma cannot take place within a still-racist society. Per Dragulescu, racial trauma's "only possible healing must engage active individual, social, and political involvement in disputing the racist culture's status quo and gradually changing the habits of white privilege" (279). While working to eliminate the racist structures present in US society is certainly a noble goal, what do such requirements for healing mean for the traumatized individual? Is one simply doomed to a lifetime of inability to handle the consequences of trauma, unable to live a fulfilled or positive life within a racist and/or sexist society? Rather than accept these preconditions for healing, *for colored girls* stages a narrative which showcases Black women developing the potential for self-love and the ability to pursue future opportunities despite past cultural traumas and despite still living within a highly flawed society. While moving beyond trauma by cultivating self-love does not directly enact sweeping societal change, Greg Forter writes that "within the current social and representational order, to 'give voice' to the silenced requires the violation of that representational order, an effort to shatter linguistic forms that conspire in the illusions of total understanding" (77). Thus,

presenting Black women narrating their cultural traumas and enacting a process of discovering self-love is, in itself, a radical rejection of sexist and racist discourses that continue to dominate US society today.

This particular type of healing, one that is tempered by the presence of ongoing misogyny and racism, is connected in *for colored girls* to the development of plurisignance throughout the choreopoem. According to Holloway, “The search for wholeness [in Black women’s literature] represents a sensibility that privileges the recovery of an individual (and independent) text over its fragmented textual dimensions” (774). Holloway claims that expecting traumatized Black women characters to undergo a complete recovery and become whole (both in their psyche and in the way their psyche is represented textually) by the end of a narrative fundamentally misunderstands the role of plurisignance in the Black female literary tradition. In a plurisignant text, healing from trauma does not necessitate wholeness or the unification of multiple or fragmented voices into a single, dominant narrative. Rather, restoring balance to the text comes through “the thematic emphasis on the recovery of some dimension of voice” (770-71). The rejection of the necessity of a unified voice to signify healing is a crucial element of the Black female literary tradition, with Holloway writing that “the polyphonic nature of these texts [by Black women] is essential not only to their internal figuration, but is also definitive of the tradition that collectively identifies them” (773). Therefore, what Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué describe as “visual images, textual gaps, repetitions, [and] shifting view-points” that “underline the chaotic aspects of trauma” are, in the Black female literary tradition, representative of more than a traumatized psyche that will coalesce into a peaceful aggregate by the end of the narrative (15). Instead, these features are characteristic of the Black female experience writ large, and can be expected to be maintained in one form or another throughout the text.

In *for colored girls*, this shifting plurisignance is not only seen in various textual characteristics, but it is also evident in the changing relationship between body and voice thematized throughout the choreopoem. Griffiths explains that “historically, people of color have entered the public space in body only. Marked already sexually and racially other within dominant cultural ideology, their displayed bodies presented their stories” (7). Black women bear a double burden here: already othered by being both non-male and non-white, the Black female body has deep historical associations with the traumas of rape and sexual violence. Since dominant cultural scripts already turn the Black female body into a historically determined object, the representation of physical and sexual trauma suffered by Black women is fraught with complexities. As Griffiths points out, “The image of a damaged black female body enters the public consciousness without a voice, a silent object in the performance” before “the dominant cultural voice performs a kind of dubbing over the scene of violence, imposing itself as the interpretive force and reinscribing oppression

through the dislocation of body and voice” (7, 9). In order for any healing from trauma to take place, not only must body and voice be reunited, but the body itself as the site of trauma must be redefined. Farah Jasmine Griffin writes that “this process of reimagining black women’s bodies moves from focusing on a body that is constructed in history and that carries that history within and on it, to a body capable of being remade” (525). As a plurisignant text, *for colored girls* does not conclude with a representation of the Black female body with its inscribed traumas completely resolved and its voice restored in perfect harmony; rather, the suggestion that the body is capable of being re-presented on stage serves as a form of healing in and of itself.

This plurisignant healing process takes place in Shange’s text through the creation of a witnessing community made up of what psychiatrist and trauma researcher Dori Laub refers to as the “addressable other” (“Bearing Witness” 68). Dragulescu explains that “the failure to recognize the survivors’ experience – be it at an individual or collective level – reproduces, and often augments, trauma” (272). Not just anyone can serve as a witness to trauma testimony. Per Laub, “The absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). The traumatized Black women in Shange’s text need to find a specific kind of witness to hear their testimonies; their addressable other cannot be someone who will deny their experiences or reproduce the sexist and racist power structures that originated their trauma. Instead, in *for colored girls*, the group of seven Black women who make up the choreopoem’s cast form their own community that gives testimony to and witnesses each other and is able to maintain a multiplicity of voices while still coming together for support and affirmation.

Shange’s text is loosely structured into two parts which demonstrate attempts to give testimony before and after the formation of the witnessing community. The poem “my love is too” serves as the dividing line between the first and second sections. The opening and closing poems (“dark phrases” and “a layin on of hands”), as well as “my love is too,” include all seven characters, making them of particular interest when examining the formation of community and the changing nature of plurisignance throughout the piece. By analyzing the shift in how the characters interact and the connection between body and voice demonstrated in each of these three poems, we can come to a better understanding of the specific healing that Shange’s characters experience in order to develop the capacity for self-love and the ability to see future opportunities for themselves.

### **“dark phrases” and the Missing “black girl’s song”**

“dark phrases,” the opening poem in *for colored girls*, is primarily narrated by the lady in brown. Throughout the choreopoem, each of the seven characters is dressed in

and exclusively referred to as a color of the rainbow, with the lady in brown replacing indigo in the traditional rainbow color scheme. Throughout Shange's text, the rainbow stands for future opportunities and potential for Black women, as shown through the closing line of the choreopoem: "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows" (89). It is important to note that a variation upon this phrase occurs in both "dark phrases" and "a layin on of hands," effectively bookending Shange's text and framing the choreopoem as the story of how these particular women came to a place where they are able to envision their futures, described as moving to the ends of their rainbows. The exclusion of the color indigo makes sense considering the dye's history in the US as a product of slavery. Robert Nash has documented how during slavery, in South Carolina, "indigo exports rivalled those of rice in value" and that indigo was "mainly responsible for the striking gains in slave-labor productivity" during the generation before the American Revolution (363). By replacing indigo with brown in her rainbow color scheme, Shange replaces a color tied to a traumatic history of enslavement with a color that reflects the skin tones of her characters and is traditionally excluded from depictions of rainbows, already highlighting her commitment to depicting healing and forward movement away from cultural trauma. In addition to this, the lady in brown can be read as a metonym for the Black female community as a whole, with her inclusion alongside the other colors as a part of the rainbow representing the necessity of Black women being able to access the entire range of opportunities in life.

The fact that the cast consists of seven women who are only identified by the color of their clothes is an important component of the text's plurisignance. Sarah Mahurin explains that "because the identities of the colored girls are not fixed, the selves their actions produce are likewise in flux. Their bodies are not theatrical or historical, and the images they produce can feel iconic instead of individual" (330). The women adopt different personas when narrating different poems throughout the course of the choreopoem, creating an unstable and shifting sense of identity, a textual component of plurisignance that Holloway refers to as translucence. According to Holloway, "The quality of translucence that reveals such plurisignant texts is also one that complicates the identities of the tellers of the stories. The boundaries between narrative voices and dialogue often become obscure, merging one into the other" (770). The result of this translucence is that Shange's text can operate both reflectively and reflexively, enacting Black women's trauma testimonies while simultaneously commenting upon the circumstances of such testimonies (766). In the beginning of the choreopoem, "dark phrases" both enacts and comments upon the futility of testifying to cultural trauma without a witnessing community of addressable others.

At the beginning of “dark phrases,” the lady in brown is unable to communicate with any of the other characters. The stage directions note that during the opening scene, the women enter and “freeze in postures of distress” (Shange 19). They remain frozen even while the lady in brown attempts to speak to them. Although all characters have experienced some form of trauma before the choreopoem begins (as reflected by their distressed poses), they are not able to function as witnesses for each other at this point, as shown by their complete inability to engage with one another. The audience also does not function as an addressable other here. The fact that the audience exists on a different diegetic level than the characters prevents the mutual exchange required for the formation of a witnessing relationship. Laub writes that “for the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude” (“Bearing Witness” 70-71). Laub’s use of the word monologue is significant; the characters on stage cannot form a genuine witnessing relationship with the audience since there is no back-and-forth between them. Thus, the lady in brown has access to neither the audience nor the other women on stage in order to form a witnessing relationship. Her inability to communicate with the other characters in particular is not only symbolic of her inability to access opportunities in her life (as represented by the rainbow); it also shows the futility of attempting to give testimony when an addressable other is not present to act as a witness.

The text of “dark phrases” suggests the presence of brokenness and fragmentation in the lives of Black girls and women as a whole. The poem’s title (which is contained in the poem’s opening line) already suggests that something is missing; *womanhood* here is only a phrase, not a complete sentence. The aural similarity the word *phrases* has to *phases*, further reinforces connotations of impermanence and transience. The phrases “half-notes scattered / without rhythm” and “the melody-less-ness of her dance” extend the imagery of something missing (Shange 17). As Holloway explains, speech in the Black female literary tradition is “often liminal, translucent, and subject to disarray, dislocation [...] and dispersion” (770). The lady in brown’s plea for “somebody/ anybody” to “sing a black girl’s song” (Shange 20) contains the implicit understanding that the current song, with its “interrupted solos” and “unseen performances” (19) is lacking some crucial element. For the characters in the choreopoem specifically, an appropriate space for trauma testimony has not yet been created, and thus the traumatic experiences that come alongside being a Black woman in the US have no space in which they can be witnessed. No matter how refined it becomes, the “black girl’s song” will always be incomplete without someone to hear it. The location of the characters outside major US cities further emphasizes this feeling of absence. George-Graves explains that “at the beginning of the play, each woman is on the outskirts of a city – outside. Spatially and psychologically, these women exist on borders and frontiers” (208). The traumatized Black women

of the play not only suffer from the lack of a specific witnessing community, but they have no broader community at all in which to find (or create) these spaces for witnessing. In “dark phrases,” the audience is able to see how the lack of a community of addressable others has confined each woman to the outskirts of life, unable to access self-love or future opportunities, and literally begging for someone to be able to sing their song.

The transition from “dark places” into the rest of the choreopoem comes after the women begin to sing childhood rhymes and play tag together. This shift back to rituals of childhood (a time that is the point of origin of many traumatic experiences) signals the start of the choreopoem’s main narrative. In this way, “dark phrases” functions as an opening frame which provides context for audiences to understand the rest of the choreopoem. As soon as each of the other characters are tagged by the lady in brown, they all freeze again and the first of the text’s individually narrated poems begins. This positions “dark phrases” as an articulation of the choreopoem’s goals: to enable the singing of the “black girl’s song” to a community of addressable others and to demonstrate the process of creating such a space for witnessing.

The three poems directly following “dark phrases” (“graduation nite,” “now i love somebody more than,” and “no assistance”) do not narrate traumatic events. The non-narrating characters remain on stage and make light comments, but a witnessing relationship is not formed since none of the narrators attempt to testify to trauma. “i’m a poet who” signals the shift from non-traumatic narration to attempted testimony that lacks an appropriate witness. At the end of “i’m a poet who,” the stage directions indicate that “there is a sudden light change, all the ladies react as if they had been struck in the face” (Shange 31). This occurs directly after multiple characters have expressed how they “gotta dance to keep from cryin” (31). It is clear that the Black female body is portrayed here as a site of trauma, and the transition into “latent rapists’,” where the women’s dance is interrupted by an unseen force of physical violence, showcases this. Multiple women narrate “latent rapists’” and express both the trauma surrounding rape and the additional traumatization caused when society at large refuses to accept their testimony. Laub describes this phenomenon, writing that “if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a *re-experiencing of the event itself*” (“Bearing Witness” 67). For the narrators in “latent rapists’,” the lack of witnessing is not just inconvenient or frustrating, but actually re-traumatizing.

After the women’s narratives move from more general storytelling into the topic of specific traumas, the ladies in green, orange, and brown leave the stage. The ladies in blue, red, and purple (colors that, not incidentally, invoke the image of a bruise) are left alone on stage to narrate their traumatic experiences with sexual assault. The women speak of their trauma, but there is no external voice to serve as witness and

reaffirm that they are indeed survivors of sexual violence. Additionally, the three women narrating “latent rapists” cannot serve as witnesses to each other since they are not in direct communication with one another. They speak in parallel rather than to one another, and it is unclear if they are even aware of each other’s presence on stage. From the end of “latent rapists” until “my love is too,” poems are spoken by a single narrator, who is primarily on stage alone. Although traumatic events continue to be narrated, no witnessing relationship of any kind has been established, and thus there is no textual indication of healing or forward movement. Without the validating influence of a witnessing relationship, the attempted trauma testimonies in this first section of *for colored girls* exist without contextualization or indication of a future beyond the traumatic event. The characters’ inability to communicate with each other via speech or movement such as the previously-mentioned dancing “to keep from cryin” (Shange 31) demonstrates the isolation and disconnection of their voices. Although the women are attempting to sing the black girl’s song, there is still no audience ready to hear them.

### **Finding a Witness in “my love is too”**

“my love is too” begins in much the same way as “dark phrases,” only this time it is the lady in yellow attempting to communicate with the other characters while they are frozen and unresponsive. However, just as she is about to exit the stage, the others begin to come to life and begin to assume a witnessing role. The lady in yellow declares “my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face” (Shange 61), an affirmation of self-worth despite her traumatic experiences with romantic relationships. But rather than letting her attempt at self-affirmation remain her own, the other characters begin to echo the phrase back with slight individualizations. Per Laub, “Testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as witness; reconstitutes the internal ‘thou,’ and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (“Truth and Testimony” 70). By echoing back the lady in yellow’s powerful statement of survival to her while simultaneously applying it to their own lives and traumas, Shange’s characters begin to form a community able to genuinely act as witnesses to each other’s trauma testimonies. In another similarity to “dark phrases,” the women begin to dance and chant together. However, instead of childhood songs, the women take turns all repeating each other’s affirmations. This act of establishing a community of addressable others contains multiple indicators of plurisignance. Writing about Shange in particular, Holloway remarks, “Poetry and music exist in the same spaces as dialogues and dreams. Women’s sharing of their most intimate and creative language with each other is a significant feature of Shange’s method” (768). The blending of music, poetry, and ritual chant showcases the translucence and multidimensionality

of Shange's writing and the dynamic and fluid nature of the community that the women in the choreopoem have formed.

Despite some structural similarities, however, there is a significant difference between the endings of "dark phrases" and "my love is too." While the transition into the poems following "dark phrases" occurs as the characters are playing freeze tag, the transition after "my love is too" is much more overtly positive. When the characters fall down after dancing together, the stage directions specifically note that they are "full of life and togetherness" (Shange 65). The inclusion of dance as productive physical movement takes a step towards reunifying the characters' disparate voices with their bodies. Mahurin explains that, for the women in Shange's text, "the movement of the body through dance is also evidentiary [...] offering visual confirmation of the women's existences" (338). In "my love is too," the women onstage do not only begin to speak together and to each other, they also begin to dance together and thus affirm the connection between their bodies and their voices. This point in the choreopoem marks not only the formation of a genuine witnessing community, but also a strong movement towards a plurisignance of cohesion and unity that still maintains the text's fluid and translucent components.

The poems following "my love is too" continue to contain traumatic content; however, a palpable shift in how characters interact with one another has occurred. While poems were narrated separately in the first section of the choreopoem, after "my love is too," characters interact with one another during and after their narration of their experiences of trauma. The entire group of women remains on stage together and they respond to each other's narratives with concern and commiseration, reinforcing their bond as a community of trauma survivors who are able to bear witness for each other. During the poems "positive" and "a nite with beau willie brown," multiple speakers narrate together. However, instead of the disparate, though thematically similar, threads making up "latent rapists'," the narrators in these poems narrate a single story of trauma as a group. This shared narration demonstrates the fluid process of giving and receiving testimony. Laub states that "to a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out" ("Truth and Testimony" 69). Although the stories told in both "positive" and "a nite with beau willie brown" happen to an individual woman, the communal form of narration employed by Shange emphasizes how this community helps the trauma survivor shoulder the burden of witnessing. The shift occurring after "my love is too" makes it apparent that the seven women in the choreopoem have finally found their addressable others in one another.

### **The Integration of Body and Voice in “a layin on of hands”**

The final poem making up *for colored girls* is “a layin on of hands,” a demonstration of the self-love the characters have been able to cultivate due to their witnessing community. The poem opens with the line “i waz missin somethin” (Shange 86), taking the audience out of the storytelling poems and back to the narrative frame introduced in “dark phrases.” As the line is in past tense, there is the implication that the speaker (the lady in red) has found whatever she was missing, and is now narrating from a future position. It is fitting that the choreopoem concludes with the characters speaking about their discovery of self-worth within their witnessing community. While “dark phrases” was a cry for someone to sing and someone to listen, “a layin on of hands” is a reflection upon the moment their songs found an audience.

In “a layin on of hands,” the characters are also finally able to unite their voices and bodies. When the lady in red says, “i found god in myself / & i loved her” (Shange 88), the characters are finally able to transition into song, rather than just dance or speech. In *for colored girls*, singing serves as the ultimate unification of body and voice. The music that previously appeared in the piece was external, emitting from offstage and containing voices not belonging to the characters. However, in “a layin on of hands,” the women are finally able to sing. The stage directions indicate that “the ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle” (88-89). Pamela Hamilton describes this as “a song that stimulates rebirth, necessary for the survival of the black woman” (85). The characters’ previous dances have been interrupted by either the intrusion of physical violence or their own tiredness and their voices have been subject to the patriarchal white hegemony they live in, but their song is self-sustaining and evidence of their connection. Mahurin claims that this song “suggests a plentitude of – and, too, a strength in, as the threefold chord is not easily broken – experiential diversity” (339). This is the ultimate articulation of a positive plurisignance in Shange’s text; not the consolidation of individual voices into a single narrative, but a celebration of the strength to be found in textual translucence. Holloway writes, “Only the thematic emphasis on the recovery of some dimension of voice restores the balance to the text between its voices and those collected into its rearticulated universe” (770-71). In *for colored girls*, the thematic recovery is not of voice but of voice and body in harmony. It is the song in “a layin on of hands” which brings balance to the text’s individual narratives and the choreopoem as a whole.

It is also significant that the characters address the audience for the first time during their song. Bringing the articulation of their communal testimony and witnessing outside their group and into dialogue with the public signifies that the characters are not only now able to move forward with their journeys of self-love, but that they may finally be able to address the root causes of their trauma: racist and misogynistic

societal structures. Griffin explains the need for *for colored girls* to ultimately turn outward towards its audience. She writes, “Clearly the reclamation of the sexual body and affirmation of the spiritual self are not in and of themselves enough to constitute acts of resistance; in and of themselves they do not alter the conditions that oppress black women” (533-34). By ending her choreopoem with a turn outwards, Shange demonstrates the power of Black women forming their own witnessing communities, while not forgetting that until there is significant systemic change, traumas like those narrated in the choreopoem will only continue to be perpetuated.

## Conclusion

San José Rico writes that “asking a fictional text about trauma to somehow lead to a process of psychological healing in the real world would be a rather tall order, perhaps completely unattainable, nonsensical and even unethical” (34). Scholars on postcolonial and racial trauma understand that an artistic work alone is not enough to change the structures causing these collective traumas in the first place. Although *for colored girls* does not serve as a remedy for the racism and sexism still faced by Black women today, that does not make it unimportant or useless. Holloway’s conception of plurisignance reminds us that the ultimate goal of works in the Black female literary tradition is not necessarily complete unity and wholeness. Certainly, not every narrative articulated in Shange’s choreopoem ends happily. However, it is the unification of body and voice, as well as the ability to testify to one’s traumas within a community of survivors able to act as witnesses that enables the Black women on stage to claim self-love and gain the ability to strive for future opportunities. Griffiths articulates the role *for colored girls* can play well, explaining that “when the state offers no opportunity for justice and renders meaningless the history of oppression that traumatizes communities, art can provide a public space in which bodies and memories unite to offer testimony” (108). Shange’s text both enacts testimony of Black women’s trauma and comments upon the importance of forming witnessing communities outside the world on stage. As Shange herself wrote in the introduction to the 2010 publication of the choreopoem, “*for colored girls* still is a woman’s trip, and the connection we can make through it, with each other and for each other, is to empower us all” (13). Although empowerment is certainly not the end, it can offer a powerful beginning, and the plurisignant yet unified community in place at the end of *for colored girls* is an important example of that.

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## 7. “To be happy simply, naturally”: Happiness for the New Negro Woman in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun*<sup>12</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the literary representation of the New Negro Woman, an ideal that brought together the claims of the 1890s New Woman and the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* by Jessie Fauset, published in 1928. It argues that Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* critiques the social and cultural limitations imposed on Black women during the Harlem Renaissance by portraying the protagonist Angela Murray’s failed pursuit of happiness through whiteness, femininity, and marriage. Drawing on the ideals embodied in the historical figure of the New Negro Woman, the novel examines how the intersection of racial and gendered hierarchies compels Angela to pass as white and enter the marriage market to achieve social mobility. Angela achieves New Negro Womanhood through her rejection of the Victorian ideals inherited from her parents and by embracing her racial identity. However, the novel’s ending, where Angela emigrates to Paris, suggests that her happiness remains unattainable within racist America.

### Keywords

New Negro Woman, Harlem Renaissance, African American literature, racial passing, Jessie Fauset

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the New Negro Woman was a figure that populated the United States’ sociopolitical and literary scene. This paper examines one of the many literary depictions of this figure that merged the values of the 1920s New Negro Movement and the New Woman ideal. Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928) features the New Negro Woman as its main character and her pursuit of happiness through passing as white while living in New York City as the driving force behind its plot. Eventually, this New Negro Woman, Angela Murray, sees her attempts at happiness in New York City fail, and she moves to France. In this novel, Europe is the “far-away land” where the protagonist finds her happy ending: the book’s last pages see Angela happily reunited with her lover in Paris. This happy ending also implies that the intersection of patriarchal oppression and racial discrimination faced by the protagonist makes it impossible for her to exist happily in the United States, thus making her leave for Europe, where she believes she will be unrestrained by the limitations of racism. This paper argues that

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*Plum Bun* critiques the limitations imposed on Black women in the Harlem Renaissance by exploring Angela's failed attempt to achieve happiness through whiteness, femininity, and marriage. Ultimately, Angela can only embrace New Negro Womanhood by rejecting passing and taking on social responsibility. Nevertheless, the novel's ending suggests that doing this and being happy is impossible in the United States.

The term "New Negro Woman," coined by Margaret Murray Washington<sup>13</sup> in 1895, described "black women who promoted the middle-class ideals of home maintenance, etiquette, and 'neatness of dress'" (Patterson 50). The New (White) Woman,<sup>14</sup> "unmistakably 'modern'" (Ledger 5), was a figure that pushed the limits imposed by patriarchal expectations on women and actively rejected the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, thus striving for radical societal change. Significantly, then, Margaret Washington did not "invoke" the New Woman's "association with an unsettling independence," but "rather [she] claim[ed] negro women abide by an 'old fashioned' helpmate ethic" (Patterson 65). The primary concern of this figure was the "racial uplift within the home" (58). Recalling the "cult of domesticity" of Victorian times, she argued that "because women and their homes reflect[ed] the moral status of a civilization, black women must be encouraged to create an ideal domestic space that reflect[ed] their race progress" (58). Washington's New Negro Woman was thus much closer to the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, with its politics of respectability and the idealization of family and domesticity, than to the New White Woman. She assimilated white-middle-class ideals, morphing the Black bourgeoisie into "domestic middle-class ideals of uplift ideology" to render them white in attitude, as it was not possible in appearance (79).

By 1914, Washington's New Negroes became those of the rhetoric of the father of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke. His "New Negroes" were "spiritually emancipated, self-determined but with an international race consciousness and centered in [Locke's] 'prophetic' Harlem" (Patterson 184). The Great Migration<sup>15</sup> saw many educated young Black Americans finish their pilgrimage in Harlem, a New York City neighborhood that quickly became "the mecca of the New Negro" (Locke 36). In the already culturally brooding city, Black communities flourished, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Murray Washington, third wife of Booker T. Washington, was one of the primary figures of the Black elite of the turn of the century and Lady Principal of Tuskegee University. There, she founded the Tuskegee Woman's Club and was elected President of the National Federation of Afro-American Women.

<sup>14</sup> Notably, although the term "New Woman" can be found in Sarah Grand's essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," the extrapolation of the term is to be attributed to Ouida, pen name of Marie Louise Ramè, an English novelist and essayist active from the second half of the nineteenth century until the first decade of the twentieth century.

<sup>15</sup> The Great Migration was an internal migration that started in 1910 and mostly involved African Americans who migrated from the rural South to urban areas in the North to escape racial persecution, slavery, and lynching.

Harlem Renaissance was born. Here, the New Negro Movement wished to establish an aesthetic that did not come “simply [as] a Black artistic movement but a movement to find a new aesthetic to project Negro identity and culture” (Stewart xxxvi). The cosmopolitan neighborhood gave Black people a community and Black intellectuals a voice: “Harlem was not so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself” (Gates 27). Amid this cultural turmoil was the New Negro Woman: as she stood in the Harlem Renaissance, she merged the New Negro movement and the New Woman ideal. She inherited the New Woman’s rejection of patriarchal expectations, rejection of Victorian values, and demand for a place in the public space, while also carrying the New Negro’s racial pride. Therefore, this New Negro woman stood opposite to the assimilated white-middle-class ideals of Margaret Washington’s rhetoric.

Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* is a crucial literary depiction of the New Negro Woman in the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset writes of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black uplift ideology, and the popularized European escape in her novel. In particular, she commemorates a “moment of transition in the literary development of black female identity” (Phipps 230). In his rhetoric, Locke endorses this New Negro generation as being the result of a clean break with the past, however, Fauset’s writings show a transitional generation, as Meredith Goldsmith shows: “Fauset’s characters establish themselves not so much as members of a 1920s cultural vanguard but as inheritors of a cultural history that lay only a few decades in the past: the Reconstruction era, African American migration to northern cities, and the entrance of black women into the labor market” (261). Goldsmith observes that this novel “addresses the possibilities that urban modernity seemed to offer African American women in the 1920s” (260). Angela, an “urban heroine” (260), attempts to figure out her place in the world and how to be happy in it, specifically as a middle-class Black woman in the United States.

Depicting the early twentieth-century Black woman, *Plum Bun* is an example “of the bourgeois novel of passing and protest in mulatto literature that reflect[s] this historical rise of the mulatto elite” (Watson 1). Additionally, the gendered themes in the novel make it “a novel of female and social development” (duCille 93). The novel’s protagonist, Angela Murray, is raised in Philadelphia with her sister Virginia by their parents, Mattie and Junius. Although she grows up only casually “passing” in her hometown, when her parents die, she decides to move to New York and permanently pass as white. In the city, she goes to art school, makes friends with young (white) artists, learns about the ways of cosmopolitan living for women, the delight and distress of the dating game, and sexual pleasures. In the end, after having lived in poverty and understanding the deep loneliness that comes with “inauthenticity,” she decides to live her life as a Black woman and moves to Paris, where she is joined by the man she loves. Angela’s complicated journey to the other side of the color

line<sup>16</sup> brings her back “home,” and she develops moral and racial pride, demonstrating “her protest against a color-conscious hierarchy” (Watson 7). Only at the novel’s end, when Angela visits Philadelphia, does she accept her racial identity. Fauset dramatizes the complicated reality of a light-skin New Negro woman trying to negotiate personal freedom in racist America and drafts for her a fairy-tale-like happy ending in Europe. Telling Angela’s story, *Plum Bun* portrays “the paradoxes of color prejudice in America” (McDowell 296).

Living in New York as Angèle Mory, her white pseudonym, Angela meets people across various cultural, generational, and racial lines, entering “into multiple communities, demonstrating in the process the flexibility and variability of her social identity” (Phipps 227). Fauset provides a rather diverse set of characters: Paulette Lister and Martha Burden figure as the progressive New Women, preaching women’s emancipation and sexual liberation and rejecting feminine ideals of purity and submissiveness; conversely, Rachel Salting shows the cultural perpetuation of a conservative attitude in young women; Mrs. Denver, the rich white neighbor, and Elizabeth Sandburg, the socialite, show two different approaches to affluent white womanhood; and Miss Powell and Angela’s sister, Virginia, allow Fauset to expose the heterogeneity of the New Negro Woman experience.

On the one hand, Virginia’s joyful experience of Black Harlem displays a sense of community and racial pride. On the other hand, Miss Powell undergoes tragic experiences marked by repeated discrimination and culminating in her final exclusion from Harlem’s artistic spaces. These diverse characters enable Fauset to capture various racial and social statuses in the narrative frame, making *Plum Bun* a comprehensive picture of late-1920s New York City. Fauset stresses the importance of her characters’ direct family ties: Anthony’s father’s, Mattie’s, and Junius’s stories are chosen carefully to trace a racial history for these New Negroes.

In the novel, the Murrays live an ordinary, quiet life in a quiet Philadelphia neighborhood, which “while urban, has the feel and sensibility of a small town or suburb” (Rottenberg 268). A patriarchal order rules the Murrays’ family; in the house, it is Junius who “possess[es] a charming wife and two fine daughters,” making him a “patriarchal” and “almost biblical” father figure (Fauset 11). As patriarchal figures, Mr. and Mrs. Murray are enforcers of Black bourgeois morality; having known poverty and struggle, they both understand the importance of righteousness over pleasure. This family structure portrays Claudia Tate’s idea of “domesticity” as a “tenuous medium for instructing black people in responsible citizenship and personal ambition” (228); particularly, in *Plum Bun*, her parents’ difficult past is to Angela “a

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<sup>16</sup> The concept of the color line perpetuated racial discrimination in Black communities so much so that “blue veins clubs” were created to perpetuate the idea that social hierarchy was to be decided in relation to the percentage of European ancestry, shown in the lightness of skin; these color-based beliefs caused discrimination and ostracization of darker people in their own families and communities.

manifestation of the sort of thing which happens to those enchained it might be by duty, by poverty, by weakness or by colour" (Fauset 5).

From the novel's first pages, Fauset emphasizes how Angela's understanding of color is deeply rooted in her mother's behavior. As she inherits her "mother's fair skin," it is from her "that Angela [learns] the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness" (Fauset 5). The author is careful to ground Mattie's habit of strolling through "Philadelphia's exclusive [white] Walnut Street seeking leisure-class consumer pleasures" in "her early experience of economic deprivation and her venture into the workforce in the early years of the twentieth century" (Goldsmith 262). Fauset stresses that Mattie "had no desire to be of these people" and that these "innocent, childish pleasures" were not more important than her housework, than her "black husband whom she had been happy and proud to marry" (5), than her daughters, or her community.

In the happy Saturday afternoons spent in the white part of town, Angela does not see small indulgences in an already happy life; instead, she sees these moments as flickers of a life she is prevented from having because of her Blackness. Little Angela observes that "coloured people were to consider themselves fortunate only in proportion in which they measured up to the physical standards of white people" (Fauset 8) and develops an understanding that whiteness can be used for social advancement; this belief will stay at the core of Angela's very being long into adulthood, shaping most of her life decisions. Fauset coordinates a particular episode to stress the misunderstanding of values between mother and daughter: while Mattie and Angela are standing on Walnut Street, Virginia and Junius walk by them, and while Angela's father and sister do not see them, she and her mother do; seeing her mother purposefully ignore the rest of their family teaches Angela that the passing masquerade is more important than familiar relations. After this crucial episode, where Mattie shows shame, regret, and guilt for ignoring her husband and daughter while "passing," Angela shows longing; at the end of the chapter, Angela dreams "excitedly of Saturdays spent in turning her small olive face firmly away from peering black countenances" (Fauset 9). Angela's childhood dream is a life of passing forever, where her Blackness and her relations to it would be forgotten. The Walnut Street episode is so striking that it will follow Angela throughout the novel, but it is a long time before she truly understands Mattie. When Angela later rejects and ignores her sister – "who was colored and showed it" (Fauset 114) – at Penn Station, in favor of not revealing her Black relations to the man she believes to be her soon-to-be-fiancé, she damages her relationship with her sister and she thinks back to the Walnut Street episode. Only then does she finally realize that her mother would have never made the same sacrifice.

The advantages of lighter skin are not the only thing Angela learns from her mother; Mattie's daughters grow up with her performance of Victorian femininity. Fauset

puts the Murray family in the tradition of the rising Black middle class's "adoption of Victorian gentility," which came "as evidence of its presumed superior civilization [...] because appropriation of gentility meant approximating racial equality" (Tate 59). The narrator tells Mattie and Junius's story, and "[t]hese origins of the Murray family form a necessary precursor to the novel's plot" (Goldsmith 263); when they meet, Mattie is working for an actress who "projects her own immorality onto [her]," and Junius "offers himself as her protector, and the two promptly quit the actress's household and marry" (Goldsmith 262-63). At the roots of this family's existence, Mattie's femininity and Junius's manhood, their relationship, and their parenting are the ideals of marriage, morality, and respectability – themselves firmly enforcing the patriarchal order. In her instrumentalization of whiteness and femininity, Mattie demonstrates to her daughters that if whiteness is an asset, then so is femininity.

Moreover, Mattie's and Junius's performative gendered dynamic is further stressed in Fauset's "depiction of Mattie's decline and eventual death" (Goldsmith 264). Junius gets sick while waiting for Mattie outside the hospital she is brought to when she faints on Walnut Street; standing in the rain, he develops pneumonia, and he dies in the role of Mattie's protector in a performance of manly strength.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Mattie, letting herself get sick "to follow him" (Fauset 43), dies performing feminine frailty, evoking the "nineteenth-century trope of the beautiful death" (Goldsmith 265).<sup>18</sup> Mattie figures as the Angel in the House and acts as the author's "facetious image of a condescending Victorian depiction of women as helpless and yet as moral guide and companion, the domestic maternal ideal" (Moore 108). Notably, then, "Fauset anchors the problems of her contemporary New Negro Women in the previous generation's gender ideals as well as in the racial ideologies and conflicts with which her characters must contend" (Goldsmith 262). Through the Victorian characterization of Mattie's mothering, Fauset shows how the New Negro Woman, embodied by the end of the novel both by Angela and by Virginia, is heavily influenced by the long nineteenth century. Where the Harlem intelligentsia was arguing for a sharp break from the "Old Negro," Fauset stresses how small the distance between the Old and the New actually was.

The novel's title, *Plum Bun*, is taken from a nursery rhyme, "To Market, To Market."<sup>19</sup> The market that Fauset alludes to, with the title and sections of the novel, is the marriage market. Ann duCille notes that "[i]f *Pride and Prejudice* suggests the

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<sup>17</sup> His death is also marked by racial discrimination, as the reason that he has to wait outside is that Mattie is at a "whites only" hospital where he (visibly black) is not welcome.

<sup>18</sup> Explaining the concept of Beautiful Death, Elizabeth Bronfen quotes Bram Dijkstra's exploration of the "dangerous fantasies" of nineteenth-century culture in which a "woman in a state of sickness unto death" became an "icon of virtuous femininity" (Dijkstra qtd. in Bronfen 59).

<sup>19</sup> The nursery rhyme, as quoted by McDowell, goes, "To Market, To Market, / To Buy a Plum Bun; / Home again, Home again, / Market is done." (292)

degree to which the gentry of Jane Austen's era was preoccupied with money and marriage," novels like Fauset's "suggest the extent to which black Americans have been similarly concerned with the social, economic, and erotic arrangement" of marriage (143). Moving to New York, Angela "believes she can escape her racialized body because her skin is white, [but] she is unaware of being also marked as 'other' because she is a woman" (McLendon 41); however, she eventually becomes conscious of these social differences – for instance, she thinks, "[i]f I were a man [...] I could be president" (Fauset 61).

As Angela learns to "discern that both whiteness and masculinity are external markers of privilege" (Phipps 234), she realizes that it would "be better to marry... a white man" (Fauset 62). Here, Angela identifies marriage as the means to achieve money, power, and status. The power she desires, Angela "knows, is related to economics" (Foreman 654); therefore, for her, marriage becomes merely a socioeconomic transaction, one through which "all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers" (Fauset 62). Thus, Angela enters the marriage market; in it, the author "invert[s] the hierarchy: Angela would capture, in the form of a man, the sign of the 'power and protection' she wishes to possess" (Foreman 654).

In a patriarchal society, gender is intrinsic and decisive, and Angela develops the false belief that she can bypass this issue by marrying somebody who would open her "the doors to beauty" (Fauset 102) through money and status. Once on the market, Angela finds out the currency is sexuality: the "entire novel can be read as an extended sexual metaphor that raises critical questions about the relationship between power and passion, dollars and desire" (duCille 100). Angela, however, enters the market with no sexual or romantic intentions, as she believes that by "purchasing" a husband, she will acquire his privileges. Teaching gender performance to her daughters, Mattie teaches Angela to use femininity as a tool; however, while Mattie desires a protective masculine figure that she finds in Junius and passes this desire on to Virginia, Angela desires protection through money and status, and only incidentally through a man.

As she starts her quest to find a "white spouse," Angela learns from her white friends that "courting with a powerful man is nothing more than a game" (Harrell 195). Living in Bohemian Manhattan, Angela "observes the constricted ambitions of the young white women" she meets and "the compromises that define their personal lives" (Wall 70). Through the women who cross Angela's path the author shows the variety of approaches to gender issues: through Rachel Salting, Angela's neighbor, Fauset demonstrates "that moving to the city does not free women from the psychic effects or force of dominant norms" (Rottenberg 276), but through characters like Paulette Lister she shows awareness of gender performance and gender norms, as in the novel she is the most obvious portrayal of the New Woman: Paulette declares

boldly, “[t]here is a great deal of the man about me. I’ve learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants,” leaving Angela astonished (Fauset 74).

Martha Burden, a student at Cooper Union, is another crucial woman in Angela’s exploration of life as a white woman in the city; when she asks Martha for advice on men, Martha laughs at Angela’s naivety, so rare in the realm she calls “Flapperdom” (Fauset 104). To win the “courtship game,” Martha explains bitterly, women need to withhold their affection, not reveal their cards (104); like passing, courting also reveals itself as a game of inauthenticity. Martha herself is married and unhappily adds, “Think of loving and never, never being able to show it until you’re asked for it; think of living a game every hour of your life!” (105). With these schoolings in mind, Angela thinks of her mother, who so openly loved her father, and reflects on how different her future will be by playing these games of inauthenticity; however, these sexual and romantic didactics reinforce her mother’s teachings “regarding her body as a commodity because of its whiteness” (McLendon 41). In her experience as a white woman in New York City, Angela learns from “her white friends [...] that her body is also a commodity because of sex” (42).

Angela’s white and rich man-to-marry of choice is Roger Fielding, whom she meets at a dinner at Martha’s. She starts to date Roger as Angèle and is giddy with the knowledge of her swindling, not feeling any remorse as she thinks “stolen waters are the sweetest” (Fauset 88). Harnessing her femininity to win the dating game, she is proud of her deceitfulness and satisfied with the outcomes – “Here I am having everything that a girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance” (88). Even though between him and Angela there are “no touching points for their minds,” Roger seems to be Angèle’s perfect fit as he is “a boy who gets everything he wants,” and “he [knows] nothing of life except what [is] pleasurable” (91-92). Although she does not love him, she pushes the fact aside as a non-determining factor: after all, for her, marriage is a socioeconomic transaction, and “most women learned to love their husbands” (93).

Things complicate between them when Roger is aggressively racist towards a group of Black patrons in a restaurant: triumphantly walking back to their table, he asks Angèle, “I could tell [...] that you had no time for darkies. I’ll bet you’d never been that near to one before in your life, had you?” (95). Although shaken by the episode, Angela keeps seeing him – “[d]oubtless later on she could manage his prejudices” (100) – believing he will eventually propose. However, Roger does not propose, quite the opposite, “he ask[s for] everything else” (120). He proposes to her a life as his mistress, and Angela’s fantasy of her future as Mrs. Fielding shatters.

Ultimately, Flapperdom is too foreign a kingdom for Angela, as she, ironically, “tries to ‘buy’ in a society that only allows her to ‘sell’” (McDowell 294). Nevertheless, Angèle and Roger keep seeing each other. She ends up not accepting his

proposition, but sleeping with him regardless, helpless to her feelings. At this point, the socioeconomic contract she was looking for when she entered the market is farther away than ever. When inevitably Angèle and Roger end their relationship, “his tone [is] unbelievably insulting” (169): “‘You knew perfectly well what you were letting yourself in for.’ The phrase had the quality of a cosmic echo; perhaps men had been saying it to women since the beginning of time. Doubtless their biblical equivalent were the last words uttered by Abraham to Hagar before she fared forth into the wilderness” (170). Angela never truly escapes the “patriarchal [...] almost biblical” (11) system she was experiencing in Philadelphia: “the power of patriarchy is exhibited by its timelessness, alluded to in this reference to the Bible” (McLendon 46) in the goodbye scene with Roger and the stern morality and religiousness of her father. This episode leaves her burnt, and she abandons the courtship game: if whiteness and femininity are commodifiable, femininity is not as much of a valuable asset.

Alone, Angela thinks back to Anthony Cross, another friend from Cooper Union, and the afternoon in Van Cortlandt Park where he had admitted to being fond of her; in the park, he had asked how much she was willing to sacrifice for the sake of love, and, surprised, Angela had thought of her mother while pondering the question. She had thought back to the washdays, the tiredness, the “little, dark, shabby house, [...] the made-over dresses and the turned coats” (Fauset 102), and unable to see her mother’s happiness, she had rejected Anthony, thinking, “I’m not going to live that kind of life” (103).<sup>20</sup> Now, enlightened on the realities of the marriage market, she thinks back to Anthony. With the new fundamental understanding that “the conventions, the rules that govern life [...] everything was for men, but even the slightest privilege was to be denied to a woman unless the man chose to grant it,” Roger becomes for Angela “the symbol of all that was most futile” (168, 178), and Angèle exits the market. Having Angela develop more mature thoughts on women’s sexual propriety, “Fauset teases out the individual and political potentials of New Womanhood” (Tomlinson 96).

At the start of the novel, Fauset has Mattie conclude the fairytales she reads to her daughters with “[a]nd they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me” (Fauset 20). In doing so, the author “focuses on the powerful role fairy tales play in conditioning women to idealize marriage and romantic love” (McDowell 292). Using these elements to satirize the connection between gendered expectations and fairy tales, the author builds a “fairy tale’s ironic inversion” (McLendon 29). The cultural translation of the fairytale prince rescuing the princess evolves for Virginia in a “homey and comfortable” Black man (Fauset 274) and for Angela in the “dominant cultural fantasy in which women are rescued by wealthy men and secondarily

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<sup>20</sup> In rejecting a life with Anthony because it would emulate the life her parents had, Angela refuses to inherit her mother’s role of Angel in the House and rejects the “cult of domesticity” praised by Margaret Murray Washington and the Black bourgeoisie of the time.

share their power” (McDowell 293). Using elements associated with childhood – fairy tales and nursery rhymes – Fauset emphasizes how Angela’s unattainable fantasies are rooted in her parents’ teachings; it is only through the experience of the world that Angela is disillusioned. Melting together the teachings of her parents’ fairytale-like love story and her mother’s involuntary teachings on whiteness, Angela pathologically daydreams, fantasizes, and romanticizes, and becomes more and more determined to “beg, borrow, or steal for herself the ‘happily ever after’ fantasy marriage of which fairy tales are made” (duCille 101).

By the end of the novel, the tiny house on Opal Street is again a magical place, “full of secrets, of knowledge of joy,” and she believes “that entering the house once more [...] would be a complete panacea” (Fauset 272), healing her suffering. At the end of the novel, Paris restores to Angela “her old sense of joy in living for living’s sake” (281), and the narration ends in fairytale fashion, with everything magically resolved, and Prince Charming finally saving his princess. While she cannot enter the house on Opal Street and be healed, it will be “Anthony’s reappearance [that] saves her from malaise” (Phipps 237), revealing that it is not her parents’ fairytale anymore but hers and Anthony’s, the new generation’s.

Therefore, it is not while passing that Angela finds her happiness, but in willingly renouncing it and losing its privileges. In the first part of the novel, apart from the walks on Walnut Street, Angela is always discovered when she attempts to conceal her race. The first time Angela is caught passing is in high school: a new schoolmate mistakenly assumes she is white and Angela does not correct her. When it is revealed that Angela is colored, the girl is astonished by the revelation and, with an “accusing face” and “accusing voice,” says, “Coloured! Angela, you never told me you were coloured!” (Fauset 25). Humiliated and hurt, Angela’s answer to her accusation foreshadows her future choices: “Tell you I was coloured! Why of course I never told you I was coloured! Why should I?” (29). Angela’s being hurt does not cover her bewilderment, as she does not understand why she should have given up that information voluntarily. This episode has her, for the first time, ponder the morality of authenticity.

Inauthenticity, in the form of Angèle Mory, Angela’s white self, is the *passe-partout* to the life she desires: away from ostracization and hardship, and into a life of beauty. As they grow, Angela and Virginia move from being witnesses to the rhetoric of the race issue to discussing it with their friends. As they discuss the possibilities for Black people and racial responsibility, Angela openly retorts that she does not think that “being coloured in America is a beautiful thing,” in fact, she adds, “it’s nothing short of a curse” (37). To her, an artist who looks for beauty, color is a heavy, visible weight one cannot get rid of unless one can pass. The solution to be free of the race issue and to be “happy simply, naturally” (37) is to pass as white. As her sister and their friends discuss the importance of being examples of worthiness for the race,

Angela stays out of the discussion, establishing her own goals and aspirations as more critical than uplifting the race, and, thus, positioning herself outside of racial responsibility. Although she understands there is no intrinsic value in whiteness, Angela becomes “sick of seeing what [she] want[s] dangled up in front of [her] eyes” (54). She refuses to accept being defined by her color and the discrimination that comes with it, as she understands that “it isn’t being coloured that makes the difference, it’s letting it be known” (55), emphasizing the paradox of racist America.

Convinced that her racial relations will impede her emancipation, Angela moves to New York City, where the anonymity of the city will let her pass undisturbed, “burn[s] her bridges behind her” (58), and lives as Angèle Mory, a young white aspiring artist. Life as Angèle, with new (white) friends in a new city, makes her giddy; however, as time goes on “[r]epeatedly Angela, who believed that ‘artists were noted for their broad-mindedness,’ is disillusioned,” as Miss Powell, the only “visibly black student,” is “alienated by and from her peers; the honorific ‘Miss’ by which she is always addressed serves chiefly to mark her distance from the group” (Wall 69). While Angela chooses New York “to take advantage of the broad-mindedness and opportunity she thinks the city will provide” (Rottenberg 272), she does not take into consideration her new racial status: as a white person, she needs to comply with social expectations and become an accomplice in the ostracization of her colored peers.

When Virginia comes to New York, Angela commits the ultimate betrayal: she forsakes her sister to not reveal herself to Roger Fielding. Aggravated with guilt, finally, Angela understands she is wielding a double-edged sword. However, she seems to think that the hurt that will come from the decision to pass and to even associate with strongly prejudiced people will all be worth it in the end: the riches, power, and happiness she can acquire performing whiteness will be enough to make up for that hurt, to heal those wounds. She tries to excuse her actions with promises to amend and use her future power – status and wealth – to help uplift her people; she plans her expiation, imagining “a future moment when she will return to some version of her original community, bringing with her tools she can use for social amelioration” (Phipps 235). The episode with Virginia in Penn Station has Angela realize for the first time how immoral and hurtful her choices are and what real consequences they come with: if she is “forever passing,” she also has to leave Blackness behind for good. Eventually, Virginia angrily asks the question what Angela has been running her life as Angèle on: “If you can get more out of [life] by being white [...] why, why shouldn’t you?” (124). Confronted with the emotional contradictions of passing, Angela wishes “not so much that she had never left Jinny and the security of their common home-life, as that the necessity for it had never arisen” (Fauset 165).<sup>21</sup> Naively, she dreams of a life without racial labels, impossible in racist America.

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<sup>21</sup> Jinny is the family pet-name for Angela’s sister, Virginia.

As Angèle Mory, she cannot form meaningful relationships or find a community, and this permeates the novel with “ennui and loneliness” (Jerkins xi). Obstinate, Angela is still committed to reaching her goals; however, after her relationship with Roger ends, Angela is alone. Without real friends, not close to her sister, and without a wealthy future husband, Angela falls into poverty. Alone in the city she was convinced would emancipate her and make her happy, Angela thinks of marriage again only once she is stripped of her ambition for wealth, power, and status; by that point, Anthony Cross, who had only his bare heart to offer, is all she needs. As she thinks “it would be fun, fun to begin at the beginning, to save and scrape and mend,” the idea of that pure, disinterested love brings her back to her life on Opal Street: “For a moment she was home again [...] they were at the table, her pretty mother, her father with his fine, black face” (Fauset 196-97). Thinking back to her father has her reflect on color: “Now what should she do, – tell Anthony?” (197). If her love for Anthony was pure and sincere, it had to be honest and authentic. While Angela starts to understand the importance of authenticity, she does not yet understand the importance of racial pride; she thinks of race as a personal matter and not as a political matter; the racial pride of the Harlem community and her hometown friends is not a priority: her priority is herself and her “right to live and be happy” (197); she is not yet willing to sacrifice her white life.

Angela speaks to Anthony with honesty: “I love you [...] I think you love me” (211). Here, Anthony admits that being colored as racial identity is “too vital, too important” to him although he thinks it will end their relationship (217), and his admission has Angela daydream about their future together and even romanticize renouncing passing: “she would label herself, if he asked for it; she would tell every member of her little coterie of white friends about her mixed blood” (220). Her daydreaming is crushed as a narrative twist breaks this not-yet-born relationship: when she confesses she is colored, Anthony confesses back that he is engaged. The truth is revealed: Anthony is engaged to Virginia. Angela takes a firm decision immediately: “I took her sister away from her; I won’t take her lover. Kiss me good-bye, Anthony” (228), and renounces her dreams of a life with him.

Since *Plum Bun* is a critique on passing and sexual morality, Angela is not biblically punished for the extramarital sex she engages in. However, she is karmically punished for obstinately forsaking her race. By rejecting both Virginia (at Penn Station) and Anthony (at Van Cortlandt Park) and choosing whiteness, she pushes them into each other’s arms. As the plot unravels, it is increasingly evident that passing does not allow the happiness she had hoped for. The cosmic punishment is even more evident when Virginia confesses, “I always wanted to marry Matthew!” (237).<sup>22</sup> As the irony of the facts strikes her, Angela realizes that authenticity is a key factor in

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia is referring to Matthew Henson, a childhood friend from the neighborhood “whom Fauset proudly names after the first black man to reach the North Pole” (Moore 113).

emancipating herself while forming meaningful relationships and finally reaching happiness.

Notably, it is only after Martha Burden brings Angela to Van Meier's lecture<sup>23</sup> that Angela starts growing a sense of racial pride: "the peculiarly brutal terms which white America effects in the discussion of this problem made her blood boil" and make her wonder, "[w]ould it be worth while to throw away the benefits of casual whiteness in America when no great issue was at stake?" (250). As Angela's racial consciousness develops, she becomes less and less amenable and tolerant to these displays of institutionalized racism, and the boiling rage erupts with the Miss Powell incident: both Angela and Miss Powell, having won an art contest, are set to leave for France, but Miss Powell's prize is revoked because she is Black.<sup>24</sup> This injustice triggers in Angela a sense of racial responsibility, and she asks herself, "[j]ust what is or is not ethical in this matter of colour?" (254). Crucially, then, Angela has two different (antithetical) racial awakenings: the first when she realizes that her mother ignoring her father and sister meant she could virtually do the same and the second when she realizes that she cannot express racial pride without revealing her identity. These two episodes, which prod at her racial awareness, determine the start and the end of the passing plot.

When in the cruel scene in Miss Powell's room, Angela, motivated by racial consciousness, admits to being colored, she laughs at the journalist's shock, "Do you really think that being coloured is as awful as all that?" (261). She finally has an answer to "Why should I admit to being coloured?" (59). She now understands the importance of standing up for the race in the face of racism, and she feels "relief and contentment" when she recounts what happened to Virginia, who cries at having her "sister back again" (263). Post-revelation, Angela sends her (white) friends cutouts of one of the articles from the day at Miss Powell's, ending the masquerade with them as well. The title she sends – "Socially Ambitious Negress Confesses to Long Hoax" (265) – acts as a farcical obituary and, as she declares, "I am on the coloured side" (280), Angèle is dead.

As Angèle's time ends, Angela's body is renewed in a "postpassing narrative" (Wald qtd. in Harrell 196), and with it her desire to go back to Philadelphia one last time before leaving the US: "Fauset begins to restore [Angela] to her nonpassing and natural body and the black Philadelphia community" (Moore 107). The author, in fact, only "begins" to restore Angela as a Black body, as she is mistaken for white and, because of that, mistreated in her old neighborhood; however, it is metaphorically the Black Philadelphia community that re-embraces her through Matthew Henson.

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<sup>23</sup> Van Meier, "a great coloured American, a *littérateur*, a fearless and dauntless apostle of the rights of man" (Fauset 153-54), is a fictionalization of famous Harlemit W. E. B. Du Bois, as is agreed among critics.

<sup>24</sup> Miss Powell's story is inspired by a real episode: Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage's scholarship for Fontainebleau was revoked in 1923.

The dynamic of the episode emphasizes that Angela's mistake was not leaving Philadelphia, but leaving her community by burning "her bridges behind her" (Fauset 58). Having Angela give up passing, "Fauset is successful in moving Angela away from the perception of the 'tragic mulatto' and frees her from her mental slavery and racial entrapment" (Harrell 207). To escape racial entrapment, Fauset arranges Angela's happy ending away from American racism in Europe, restoring her colored body. As she lives authentically as a New Negro Woman, although not in the United States, Angela is rewarded with her happy ending, a life of love, art, and racial freedom.<sup>25</sup>

In *Plum Bun*, Fauset concentrates on social, gendered power dynamics and criticizes "the norms of female socialization, and the social double standard" (McDowell 296). Since it closely treats the intricate and multiple dimensions of gender oppression, the "narrative's trajectory demonstrates that gender norms are always already racialized and, conversely, that racial norms are always already gendered" (Rottenberg 267). In doing so, Fauset endorses female independence beyond traditionalist views, making *Plum Bun* a display of progressiveness. Putting side by side the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, Fauset "provides insight into how acceptable black middle-class feminine behavior was being intensely renegotiated during the Harlem Renaissance" (267). New Womanhood, for Angela, is a transformative process: on the one hand, she has a seemingly innate inclination towards independence and naturally desires the public space; on the other, she has to learn self-sufficiency to grow into adulthood – into womanhood. Already having entered the public space as an independent woman, Angela's racial pride awakening cements her identity in New Negro Womanhood. When in the end she decides to leave for Paris, she does so as a New Negro Woman, understanding the hardships of life as a woman in the public sphere and that her identity cannot be separated from her Blackness.

To provide Angela with a happy ending, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* culminates in a European escape. The racial discrimination and hatred perpetuated in the United States make it impossible for Angela to be satisfied. In the novel, Angela lets herself engage with the liberties and expectations of New White Womanhood. Susan Tomlinson deems Fauset's union of "the New Negro and the New Woman" irreconcilable (90); however, the novel implies the irreconcilability of the two movements within the United States, as Angela is a New Negro Woman, independent and standing for racial pride in the public space, but is not happy within American oppressive racism. Fauset sees the resolution to the conundrum between racial pride and social mobility in a European escape, where Angela would be escaping racial prejudice. As she chooses to embrace her racial identity and renounce racial passing, Angela is

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, the racial freedom promised to Angela when she emigrates to Paris is not congruent with the reality of the time (1920s France was hardly a racism-free haven), and authors like Nella Larsen, Fauset's contemporary, harshly criticized the idealization of the European escape.

rewarded with a happy ending in Paris, where, the reader assumes, she will live happily ever after with her New Negro Prince Charming.

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## 8. (The Lack of) Female Representation and Diversity in Male-Dominated Sports as Depicted in Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* (1983)

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### Abstract

Throughout the history of mankind, sports have primarily been considered an all-male sphere with women pushed to the sidelines. If women were to seriously participate in athletics, they were ultimately considered deviant since they acted against their “natural female development” (Colker and Widom 48). Based on the common belief that the ‘weaker sex’ should not exhaust itself by bodily work or physical exercise to sustain health for childbearing and motherhood, a powerful form of biological sexism was consolidated that inhibited female representation and participation in sports for years to come. Although developments in women’s rights and feminism during the last two centuries have caused this sexist ideology to become more peripheral, women today remain underrepresented in disciplines typically considered ‘masculine’.

This paper explores the (lack of) female representation and diversity in male-dominated sports, focusing on competitive chess as represented in Walter Tevis’s *The Queen’s Gambit* (1983). The themes of discrimination and marginalisation are central to this examination, as demonstrated by a closer look at the female protagonist, Beth Harmon, and her experiences as a young professional chess player. Reflecting on and incorporating real-world challenges such as patriarchal power structures and misogyny in sports, this paper finds that Tevis’s novel does not allow a female professional to prevail without major setbacks and obstacles. It shows a female athlete who is severely inhibited by numerous strokes of fate, fuelled by drug abuse, isolation and self-hatred. Moreover, it seems that excelling in a ‘male sphere’ such as competitive chess is integral in forming Beth’s deviant femininity which, in turn, threatens the traditional patriarchal system and thus leads to her being punished through mechanisms of ostracism and self-destruction.

### Keywords

Competitive chess, discrimination, diversity, femininity, male-dominated sports, sex differences, *The Queen’s Gambit*

Throughout human history, sport has been viewed primarily as a man's domain. From Ancient Greece through the Middle Ages to the Victorian era, women were pushed to the sidelines. Professional athleticism seemed an inadequate pastime for women as social scripts and perceptions relegated them to the domestic sphere. Women who sought to participate seriously in sports were often not only discouraged but discriminated against, marginalised and othered by being labelled as 'un-feminine' (Hargreaves 154, 171). The widespread belief that the 'weaker sex' should avoid physical exercise in order to maintain health for maternal and marital duties, such as childbearing, nursing, and motherhood, constructed a powerful form of biological sexism that has inhibited female representation and participation in sports for centuries (46). Although developments in women's rights and feminism over the last two centuries have pushed this sexist ideology to the periphery, women are still underrepresented in disciplines typically considered 'masculine' (e.g. rowing, weightlifting, or intellectual sports such as chess). By seemingly acting against their supposedly "natural female development" (Colker and Widom 48), female athletes challenge societal gender norms and thus threaten the pillars of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal ideology.

According to Plaza et al., there has been a keen gender stereotyping of sporting activities across different cultures for centuries, distinguishing between typically 'masculine' and 'feminine' sports (203, 208). Previous studies have shown that sports which "involved physical contact and the use of force or heavy objects (e.g., rugby, team sports, fighting sports)" are more likely to be perceived as disciplines appropriate for men, whereas sports that focus on "gracefulness and expression (e.g., dancing, ice skating, gymnastics)" are generally considered more apt for women (203). However, gender stereotyping also extends to intellectual sports, as can be seen in competitive chess. Although chess is not necessarily associated with physical strength or acute combativeness – traits stereotypically associated with hegemonic masculinity –, female players are generally deemed inferior compared to male players (Maass et al. 231). Moreover, there is a decisive lack of female professionals in chess to begin with, especially at the top levels (Stafford 430; Bilalíc et al. 1161; Charbis and Glickman 1041).

In this paper, I want to shed light on the (lack of) female representation and diversity in male-dominated sports, focusing on competitive chess as represented in Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* (1983). This paper aims to examine the themes of discrimination and marginalisation through a closer look at the female protagonist, Beth Harmon, and her experiences as a young professional chess player. By examining real-world issues like patriarchal structures, discrimination, and misogyny, this paper contends that Tevis's novel portrays the female professional's success as contingent upon major challenges and setbacks. Excelling in a traditionally male-dominated sphere such as competitive chess becomes central to shaping Beth's

deviant femininity, which disrupts conventional patriarchal norms and, as a result, leads to 'retribution' through social exclusion and self-destructive tendencies.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part reflects on women in professional sports from a cultural-historical perspective, followed by an overview of competitive chess. The second part provides a literary analysis of Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit*, focusing on Beth Harmon's character and experiences as a professional female athlete to demonstrate how her deviant femininity plays a role in the major setbacks and obstacles she faces in her 'uphill battle' to success.

### **A (Brief) History of Female Representation in Professional Sports**

Although sports have existed since the onset of humanity, their documentation only began around 3,000 years ago in ancient Greece (Bellis). Women, however, have been largely absent from the historiography of sports (Kennard and Carter 16-17; Saavedra 439) and sports have been "characterized as a domain of preference for men" for more than three millennia (Plaza et. al. 202). As a male-governed and therefore patriarchal sphere, "sport embodies and recreates the principles and practices of gender inequality and male dominance and privilege in other realms of life" (McCrone 1-2). According to Spears, there has been a certain "paradox of acceptance of the few and rejection of the many" when it comes to the history of women in sports, and there have been various turning points in history where the role of women in sports has been renegotiated (3).

Looking back to ancient Greece, for instance, women were outright discouraged from athleticism (Saavedra 440). Paradoxically, although female athletes were not allowed to participate in the infamous Olympic Games, they were famously celebrated in Greek mythology. There, the women were often presented and praised as "horseback riders, hunters, swimmers, and sprinters" (Spears 3). However, exceptions existed. On the island of Crete, for example, women were allowed to hunt, drive chariots, "and engaged in bull-grappling or bull-dancing" (3). Spartan women were also known for racing and wrestling and began physical training already as young girls (Saavedra 440; Spears 4). Nevertheless, female athleticism was a privilege reserved for the few and not practised by the many.

Fast-forwarding to the Middle Ages, exercise was less a means of leisure and more a part of the daily work of most ordinary people – both men and women (McCrone 2). Sport was therefore known more as entertainment at fairs and festivals, where both men and women could partake "in ball games, foot races and contests of strength" (2). At such festivities, some women worked as acrobats – also known as "gleemaidens" – who entertained as tumblers and dancers (Spears 6; McCrone 2). However, it was at the other end of the social spectrum, among the upper classes, that women's athletics began to flourish. Although many of the popular disciplines

of the time (e.g. archery, jousting, and fencing) were largely associated with military training and therefore with men, there is evidence of noblewomen spending their pastimes hunting, horseback riding, and hawking (McCrone 3). Furthermore, Spears acknowledges that by the end of the fourteenth century, some upper-class women were ice-skating, hunting with bow and arrow, or playing hand tennis (5). Nonetheless, the primary athletic role of medieval women was passive and consisted mainly of being “spectator[s] who awarded prizes and provided inspiration and applause at [men’s] tournaments ” (McCrone 3).<sup>26</sup>

Until the mid to late 1800s, the relationship between women and sport was tense. According to the cultural ideals of Victorian society, a woman’s proper place was at home. Men, on the other hand, “were identified with Culture” and predominantly associated with the public sphere, thus dominating the public domains that were off-limits to many women – including business, politics, and sports (Hargreaves 42-43). Unlike men, who were seen as “naturally aggressive, competitive and incisive—well suited to the rigours of the games field” (43), women were perceived as the ‘weaker sex’ and unable to “cope with the same level of physical activity as men” (Vertinsky 2). As a result, Victorian women were not only considered less athletic than men, but also completely “unsuited to take part in strenuous physical activities and competitive sports” (Hargreaves 43).

The Victorian ideal of “true womanhood”, often aspired to by middle- and upper-class women during this period, further reinforced these stereotypical notions (Spears 7-8). The pursuit of this ideal became a material reality for many Victorian women. According to Hargreaves, “[s]ufficient numbers of middle-class women followed the dictates of fashion and wore restricting clothes, ate little and took no exercise, so that, not surprisingly, they would often faint, become ill and behave submissively, thus confirming the medical stereotype of the ‘delicate’ female” (47). Many contemporary medical experts echoed this belief and supported the idea that women were intellectually and physically inferior to men (Spears 9). Women were therefore advised to limit their energy reserves to motherhood and domestic management, and to refrain from athletic and intellectual exertion. Nevertheless, some medical practitioners advised women to engage in “*gentle forms* of physical exercise [...] taken in reasonable amounts” (e.g. gymnastics) to benefit their health (Hargreaves 48; emphasis in original). However, participation in non-recreational sports was still frowned upon as it harboured potential for physical, mental, and moral perils such as ‘unwomanly conduct’ (Vertinsky 22). This changed, however, when women gained access to higher education.

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<sup>26</sup> Referring to the early modern period, McCrone also notes that Tudor ladies were known to have “played real tennis and battledore and shuttlecock” (3). However, there was a distinct lack of “physical play and exercise in [noblewomen’s] education” (3), which again demonstrates that sport – even for noblewomen – was considered superfluous according to contemporary social conventions and patriarchal ideals.

By the 1860s, dissenting voices had emerged, “challenging ideas in the education of women, revolting against the clothing fashions imposed on them and demanding their legal and political rights” (Spears 7). The suffragette movement and other equal rights advocates were instrumental in helping women gain access to higher education and ushering in a new era for women in sports (McCrone 21). The ensuing developments in women’s education became the main catalyst for the legitimisation of “more active forms of sport and exercise for women” and led to a rapid increase in the number of women in competitive sporting activities (Hargreaves 56). Many disciplines were innovated, modernised, or invented, while physical education for girls and women eventually became an integral part of the curriculum in most colleges and universities (57). Gradually, women became involved in competitive sports and joined intercollegiate teams; basketball, tennis, and swimming, for example, became popular but were not as recognised as men’s intercollegiate sports programmes at the time (Spears 10-11).

For much of the twentieth century, debates about ideal femininity and women’s roles in society dominated cultural discourses. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the period in which Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* is set, conflicting notions of femininity were widely debated and renegotiated. With the men previously at war, many women not only took up jobs in service and industry but also participated in industry-sponsored sports (e.g. baseball, swimming) and engaged in team sports beyond intercollegiate and interscholastic contexts (Spears 12-13). With many women expected to maintain the home, care for the children, and support their husbands (Martins Lamb 1), they had less time or opportunity for exercise outside the home. Nevertheless, after the war, “[t]housands of women finished high school and entered college seeking more and more sport opportunities” (Spears 13). For those who wanted to pursue a serious athletic career, however, opportunities were few and far between.

Overall, the 1950s were a time of ostracism and submission for women. Following Festle, “athletically inclined women were few, were marginalized, and faced serious obstacles to competing in a supposedly ‘masculine’ activity” (1). Women in sports often encountered disapproval and systematic undervaluation; they were often classified as amateurs, treated with disrespect and rarely taken seriously when competing in male-run tournaments (1). At the same time, many worried about being perceived as ‘unfeminine’. Hence, women’s sports “had been tacitly identified as ‘lady-like’ or ‘unladylike’” (Spears 13). By mid-century, there still reigned the widespread belief “that sport **masculinized** its practitioners” (Festle 3, emphasis in original) because it consisted of a number of components associated with stereotypical masculinity: “strenuous use of the body; muscles and sweat; aggressive use of space; potential for physical contact; loose clothing; competitiveness; selfishly motivated assertiveness; achievement-orientation; public display of emotions; discipline” (3).

Following these perceptions, sporting disciplines were systematically distinguished into those that were acceptable for women and those that were not, while gender essentialist notions were reinforced. According to Spears, “[s]wimming, gymnastics, riding, skiing, and tennis were among the accepted sports” (13). However, ball sports such as basketball or volleyball and even track racing were considered ‘unladylike’, discouraging many women from participating and causing spectators to question the femininity of the competitors (Spears 13-14; Festle 4).<sup>27</sup>

It was not until the civil rights and feminist movements began to change the social conscience of the country that the role of women in sports began to progress. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the focus of many women’s rights groups was the elimination of sexual discrimination, which included equal treatment in sports (Bell). Gradually, “women made great strides in professional sports” and were celebrated for their athletic prowess (Spears 14). Following the fight for equal rights and the prohibition of sexual and racial discrimination, Title IX of the Educational Amendments was passed in 1972 in the US, declaring that no institution receiving federal aid could exclude any person from its educational program or (sports) activity on the basis of sex (14).

## **Female Representation in Competitive Chess as a Male-Dominated Sphere**

Although participation rates of women in sports have increased tremendously across Western countries and other parts of the world, there is still a discrepancy between many disciplines regarding their societally perceived gender appropriateness. While many sports can be performed by any gender, some are still deliberately framed as either *feminine* or *masculine* (Pahlke 29). Typically, men’s sports have a higher social standing than women’s sports, and women have to work harder to gain the respect of their male competitors. As mentioned above, many women who wish to compete in male-dominated sports face “role conflict[s] between femininity and athletic prowess” (Duda 144). Breaking with traditional femininity is, thus, often met with marginalisation and discrimination (including sexism and harassment), but there also seems to be an imbalance in the winning ratio. According to Pahlke, women seem to have less chance of winning in male-dominated disciplines than male competitors (29). With competitive chess, this seems to be no different.

Chess is often described as “an intellectually demanding activity where men dominate at the top level” (Bilalić et. al. 1161). This definition suggests not only an underrepresentation of women but also a performance gap between men and women. But why is that? The reasons for these disparities have varied over the years. Previous

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<sup>27</sup> Not only were women of colour excluded from professional sports due to racism and systematic discrimination (Morris), but they were doubly marginalised because they often lacked the resources to gain access to universities and prestigious sports such as tennis and equestrian (Spears 13).

studies have pointed to the so-called “stereotype threat” as a relevant, yet contested, cause (see Maass et al. 2008; Rothgerber and Wolsiefer 2014; Stafford 2018). This psychological effect occurs when “minorities underperform solely because they’re aware of a stereotype that people of their group do worse” (Smerdon). Indeed, studies conducted among online chess players have shown that when the subjects “believed they were playing an opponent of the opposite sex, female players were less likely to win” (Stafford 430). However, Stafford found in his study that the female chess players in his sample “display[ed] a boost in performance when playing men compared with playing women” (433).

At the heart of stereotype threat, and gender stereotyping in general, are two perspectives on women’s sporting performance: on the one hand, it reinforces the idea of women’s athletic inferiority to men; on the other hand, there is the underlying notion that women who “perform exceptionally well” are often considered unfeminine (Maass et al. 233). These assumptions are consistent with hegemonic ideals of traditional femininity and patriarchal views of women in male-dominated athletic and intellectual fields (e.g. science, mathematics, mind sports). The disruption of gender expectations and, ultimately, patriarchal power structures can thus lead to mechanisms “try[ing] to control, disempower, and contain these ‘leaks’” (Saavedra 444).

Yet, stereotype threat alone cannot explain the underrepresentation of women in chess, as it only touches on the psychological framework of some participants and varies in different tournament settings. Recent analyses have suggested that the research literature on stereotype threat may suffer from publication bias, which further calls into question the reliability of the phenomenon (Stafford 430). Nonetheless, women also fall behind when it comes to winning rate and their Elo rating, which is a measure of skill level based on the individual player’s results against other rated players (Bilalić et. al. 1162). Currently, no woman has ever won the title of World Chess Champion and only 106 of the 2,000 best players in the world, known as grandmasters, are female (*Chess.com*). This disparity is reflected in the overall world rankings: there is currently only one woman, Hou Yifan (China), in the top 120 and only nineteen female players are in the top 500 (*Chess.com*; Baccellieri).<sup>28</sup> The gender gap at the top level of competitive chess can be further explained as a consequence of different participation rates (Chabris and Glickman 1145; Stafford 434). To explain this in mathematical terms, “more extreme values [e.g., best performance] are found in larger populations” (Bilalić et. al. 1163), suggesting that the best-performing players tend to be part of the larger group – namely male players. However, many scholars suggest that the participation rates are also influenced by

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<sup>28</sup> Hou Yifan is currently ranked #101. See <https://www.chess.com/ratings/women>. This search was conducted on 14 September 2025.

other factors, such as gatekeeper effects, culturally manifested differences, and gender expectations (1161).

Gender stereotyping and sexist attitudes towards women have been commonplace in professional chess throughout the past century, particularly during the 1960s. In 1962, the famous grandmaster Robert ‘Bobby’ Fischer, who was one of the real-life inspirations behind Tevis’s *The Queen’s Gambit*, made the following statement about women in chess: “They’re all weak, all women. They’re stupid compared to men. They shouldn’t play chess, you know. They’re like beginners. They lose every single game against a man. There isn’t a woman player in the world I can’t give knight-odds to and still beat” (Fischer qtd. in Rodriguez). The denigration of female athletes is not only evident in the comments of some prominent male chess professionals, such as Bobby Fischer or Gary Kasparov,<sup>29</sup> but also in the media coverage of the time. This was particularly the case with Lisa Lane, another pioneering chess champion whose story helped to inform Tevis’s protagonist.

Although Lane only started playing chess at university, she became the US women’s champion after two years of training and immediately attracted media attention (McClain). In the early 1960s, she was one of the most unusual chess players and the first to ever adorn the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, which characterised Lane as “a girl who is not only beautiful but a chess champion as well” (Baccellieri). The respective coverage of her persona is reminiscent of contemporary discourses on women, which focused heavily on appearance rather than individual achievement.<sup>30</sup> Cantwell, the author of the article, repeatedly acknowledges Lane’s attractiveness but also highlights “her volatile temper and extraordinary competitive drive [which] seemed to project her into crisis after crisis” (Cantwell). Although Lisa Lane’s rise to success as a female chess champion in the mid-twentieth century was both unusual and remarkable, her success was ultimately overshadowed by her physical appearance and young age (McClain). At the same time, she was criticised for her ‘unfeminine’ attitude in competitions, which was accentuated by her aggressive behaviour and competitiveness. Similar structures can be observed in fictional representations of female athletes competing in male-dominated disciplines as can be seen in Tevis’s *The Queen’s Gambit*. How and to what extent the novel’s protagonist faces discrimination and other obstacles will be examined below.

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<sup>29</sup> In a 1989 interview, Kasparov also questioned the place of women in chess but eventually admitted his mistake in 2017 (Watson).

<sup>30</sup> Such stereotypical and superficial portrayals of women can also be found in chess magazines (Maass et al. 233). For further reading on the inequalities in chess culture and discussions on gender stereotypes in contemporary chess, see Jennifer Shahade’s *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport* (2005).

### **Being One Amongst Many: The Hardships of Success as a Female Professional as Depicted in *The Queen's Gambit* (1983)**

From the start of the story, Beth is repeatedly described as an outsider – whether in the all-girl orphanage she grows up at, high school, or the male-dominated world of competitive chess. Throughout the book, Beth is repeatedly ostracised for her appearance, age, and personal interests. Even as a child, she features an androgynous look, describing herself as “a plain, brown-haired orphan girl in dull institutional clothes” (QG 28). Although all the girls at the Methuen Home for Orphaned Children are required to wear the same uniform and hairstyle (4), Beth's behaviour and interests set her apart from the majority. Unlike other girls her age, she does not play with dolls or cares much about ‘girl things’. Instead of playing with dolls, she makes a habit of going to the basement to play chess with the caretaker, Mr. Shaibel. Beth's outsider status is additionally complemented by her good grades and overall performance at school with seemingly minimal effort. Early on, she becomes “the best student in class, even though she [is] the youngest” (6).

Similar dynamics can be observed after Beth is adopted and enters public high school. At Fairfield Junior High, she is once again considered the odd one out and is bullied for not being able to afford the trendiest clothes and for being the smartest in class. Because of that, she is also not pledged to any of the school's girls' clubs, which further marginalises her.<sup>31</sup> Still, Beth cannot seem to find a way to fit in with girls her age – especially in terms of her appearance. Unlike “[t]he girls who belonged to the clubs [and] wore lipstick and eye shadow; Beth wore no make-up and her hair still fell over her forehead in bangs” (52). Soon, Tevis's protagonist begins to constantly compare herself to other girls her age and women on magazine covers whose “hair shone [...] [and] lips were full and red” (53) – a clear reference to 1950s beauty standards and Hollywood idols like Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth. Repeatedly, the young girl feels insecure about her looks, thinking her body “still [looks] like a boy's” (58), but has nobody to talk to. Unlike at Methuen – where Beth befriends and idolises the older, much more feminine and mature Jolene –, she has no friends at her new school. Instead, Beth escapes into playing chess, which is the only time she ever feels “not out of place” (28). In the ‘male sphere’ of chess, however, she is marginalised from other angles.

For most of her professional career, Beth stands out from the crowd. At her first tournament at a local high school at the age of eight, Beth is not only the only girl competing but also the youngest player present. During the competition, most of the players avoid eye contact and seem unable to comprehend that they have been beaten by a “little girl” (29). This becomes the basic tenor for most of Beth's career.

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<sup>31</sup> It is only when Beth makes the headlines in *Life* magazine that she is invited to one of the girls' club parties, but is soon “astounded by the dullness of the evening”, which is filled with discussions “about boys and dating and clothes” (96).

In all her future competitions, the teenager appears to be an oddity, often being the only female player and usually “the youngest there” (92). She is also often underestimated and frequently patronised. At the Kentucky State Championship (KSC), for instance, Beth is told at the registration desk that there is “no women’s section” and that she will be “eaten alive” if she enters the open instead of the beginners’ section (61). However, Beth stands her ground, refuses, and wins the competition anyway. This is also one of the few tournaments where other female players are explicitly mentioned. In fact, “there were four female players [including 12-year-old Beth]”, but they were “all clumped together at the far end, playing against each other” (61). In this instance, the female players are not only spatially marginalised, but they are also ranked so low that it is much harder for them to climb up the ladder of success. As in real-life chess, women’s participation rates decrease drastically at more professional levels of competition. But even at the leaderboard, Beth sometimes feels alone and “[gets] the sense that chess was a thing between men, and she was an outsider” (103).

It is not just women who are sparse in Tevis’s chess microcosm; there is a general lack of diversity. At the KSC, Beth quickly notices that there are “no colored people” present (60). This continues throughout her entire career, especially at higher-level tournaments. At the US Championship, for example, Beth is again quick to acknowledge the lack of diversity when she plays against a Californian, of whom she comments, “[a]lthough he wore his hair in a kind of Afro, he was white—as all of them were” (152). The exception, however, is the International Invitational in Mexico City, where players from Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and the Philippines compete. Yet only one player is mentioned by name – Octavio Marengo, a 34-year-old grandmaster from Brazil (117). Apart from Marengo, no other marginalised character is given any agency. On the contrary, the female competitors are merely described as “a Mexican official’s niece, at Board Twenty-two, and an intense young housewife from Buenos Aires” (120).<sup>32</sup> The lack of diversity in Tevis’s novel is also evident in its focus on American, Soviet, and Western European chess players and tournaments. Of course, the novel can be considered authentic in its reflections on the international chess champions of the 1950s to the early 2000s and the general tensions between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War, but this focus only

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<sup>32</sup> The marginalisation of women of colour in sports is further epitomised by the character of Jolene, Beth’s childhood friend from the orphanage. In a conversation with Beth, Jolene admits to being jealous of Beth’s talent and her “happy home” after leaving Methuen (194). Jolene, who did not leave Methuen until she was eighteen, expresses that she had to work very hard to win a scholarship to university by “doing serious volleyball” (194). Although she is adept at a number of disciplines beyond volleyball, including handball, tennis, golf, and wrestling, she does not excel as Beth does at chess (195). But as a black woman, Jolene cannot be picky. Although she never wanted to be a sports coach, she cannot afford to go to university any other way than by accepting a scholarship for Phys. Ed. Unlike Beth, she has no family connections and cannot make a living as a professional athlete.

underlines the overall 'whiteness' of the discipline. Given that the majority of chess professionals today come from diverse cultural backgrounds and nationalities beyond the US and the Russian Federation,<sup>33</sup> Tevis's depiction of the male-dominated domain of chess not only reinforces the marginalisation of women but also reiterates the marginalisation of ethnic minorities.

In the novel, Beth Harmon is a thorn in the side of her male opponents. Not only is she the youngest female professional in a male-dominated sport, but she also radiates an aggressive and indomitable will to fight. The young girl is fiercely ambitious, easily angered, and merciless. She breaks with stereotypical gender expectations, which irritates many of her competitors. After all, Beth acts unexpectedly non-conformingly. As a teenager, she continues to be patronised and underestimated by many male players and officials; indeed, many try to lecture her or get furious when "be[ing] beaten by a woman" (127). Others either ignore her or, like former chess prodigy Benny Watts, take pleasure in mocking Beth and belittling her talent (87, 147). At one point, one of Watts's female friends even comments that his reaction is simply the result of "male chauvinism", which rings true for most of his male colleagues (167).

But even before Beth becomes a professional athlete, she is faced with a lot of opposition and incomprehension about her seriousness about chess. From the outset, she is told that "[g]irls don't play chess" (7). Her adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley, who embodies the traditional 1950s American suburban housewife, is even more irritated by Beth's desire to pursue "a game for boys" (46). After all, she says of herself, "I haven't the mind for it. But my father used to play", thereby contributing to the reproduction of gender stereotypes about chess (46). The media, however, are enticed by Beth's story. In an interview with *Life Magazine*, Beth is described as "A Girl Mozart [who] Startles the World of Chess" (94). The fact that she is being compared to a musical prodigy rather than a sporting idol only adds to the lack of seriousness ascribed to chess as a rather niche sporting discipline and to Beth's role within this sphere. Moreover, the then fourteen-year-old is mainly asked questions about her private life, such as whether she has a boyfriend and how it feels "[b]eing a girl among all those men?" (93). In the then-published article, Beth is described as "a young, unsmiling girl with brown eyes, [and] brown hair" who "is quiet and well-mannered" but "out for blood" (95). However, Beth is disappointed to find that the magazine "didn't print half the things [she] told them" (95). While men would certainly be asked about their sporting achievements and ambitions, Beth – just like Lisa Lane – is more readily reduced to her looks, gender, and private life.

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<sup>33</sup> In the current top 100 chess ratings, there are eleven US grandmasters and six grandmasters who officially play under the Russian flag (e.g. Ian Nepomniachtchi [#15], Alexander Grischuk [#59]). After the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there have been six further Russian players who now play as neutral players under the FIDE flag. This search was conducted on 14 September 2025 (*Chess.com*, <https://www.chess.com/ratings/standard/all>).

However, there is another discriminatory distinction between the upbringing of male and female chess prodigies in Tevis's novel. Early on, we learn that Beth was neither encouraged nor taught how to play chess by anyone except Mr. Shaibel. Instead, the then-eight-year-old improved her skills by reading and practising on her own. This stands in stark contrast to many of her male opponents, who were encouraged from an early age, such as Benny Watts or Georgi Girev – the latter of whom started playing at the age of three and plans to become world champion by the age of thirteen. Tevis's protagonist eventually comes to the realisation that "if she had [had] half [Georgi's] chances, she would have been as good at ten" (206). But in Methuen, chess and Beth's deviance were not considered worthy of encouragement; on the contrary, they led to her being punished for misbehaviour (37).

### **Mental Health Issues and Substance Abuse**

With professional sports come immense pressure to perform and stress, which can often lead to mental health problems. In fact, "women [in competitive sports] are about twice as likely to develop depression, anxiety, or an eating disorder as men" (Carreathers 9-10). This can also be observed in Tevis's protagonist. Beth, too, struggles with anxiety, substance abuse, and addiction during her teenage years. However, these can be traced back already to her time in the orphanage. Shortly after arriving at the institution at the age of eight, Beth is swiftly introduced to Methuen's daily 'pill-schedule' of vitamins and addictive tranquillisers. When Beth takes the tranquillisers for the first time, she immediately senses their effect: They "loosened something deep in her stomach and helped her doze away the tense hours at the orphanage" (QG 3). Tevis's protagonist soon develops a serious addiction to the pills, often saving them during the day to take all at once before bed to enhance their effect and to cope with her anxiety and loneliness. However, when Beth develops an interest in chess, she finds that winning has a similar effect to the drugs. After her first victory, Beth describes the feeling as "as wonderful as anything she had ever felt in her life" (11). As a result, Beth becomes addicted to winning and alternates between taking tranquillisers and later, at sixteen, alcohol.

Overall, Beth's anxieties stem from fears of failure, loneliness, and loss of control. Her fear of being left behind stems from childhood trauma and the loss of her mother in a car accident. For her, chess becomes both her main coping mechanism and a source of one of her worst fears – losing. As her career progresses, Beth learns to numb her fears by taking Librium, a prescription drug for insomnia and anxiety that can quickly lead to dependence and overdose (Yerby). Though after getting drunk for the first time at sixteen, Beth reckons that "[with] the pills there was a long wait before the swooning came into her stomach [... while the alcohol] gave her the same feeling with almost no wait" (QG 102). Especially before important matches, Beth's anxiety turns to paranoia and she gradually turns to drinking. Her addiction

culminates when her adoptive mother dies on the trip to Mexico, leaving Beth to fend for herself once more (143).

Although Beth's initial episode of alcoholism subsides after she wins the US championship against Benny Watts, she slips back into her addictive patterns after losing a second time to Borgov in Paris. Feeling "physically ill" on the flight back to Kentucky (177), she begins to realise her own limitations and fears that she will never be good enough to become world champion. Doubting herself and losing her will to fight, Beth spirals down a rabbit hole of self-destruction. No longer playing chess, taking showers, or eating proper food, Beth cuts herself off from the outside world and develops a new daily routine:

The mornings were horrible, but she managed them. [...] By noon she usually passed out. She would awake [...], her head reeling. [...] Sometimes the drink had to be forced against a rejection of it by her body, but she did it. She would get it down and wait and the feelings would subside a bit. [...] Lunches came from a can [...] By the third week she was taking a Gibson up to bed with her on the nights she made it upstairs to bed [...] and drank it when she woke up in the middle of the night. (184-85)

By this time, Beth has lost control of herself; she no longer excels but even humiliates herself by being defeated in an amateur tournament (188-89). As a result, Beth fears that "she had somehow damaged her talent" (189), which becomes the tipping point for the protagonist to finally seek help. Jolene, her friend from the orphanage, takes Beth to the gym to improve her physical fitness and prepare her for the Grand Invitational in Moscow the following year. By quitting alcohol and tranquillisers, Beth returns to her former self, finally putting her self-destructive behaviour behind her and refocusing on her main goals in life: firstly, to defeat Borgov in Moscow and secondly, to become the first female World Chess Champion.

Beth's 'uphill battle' to success is marked by self-destructive tendencies, addiction, and isolation. As such, Tevis's protagonist serves as a fictional example of the real-world difficulties faced by female athletes in professional sports, especially in male-dominated disciplines. Unlike her successful male counterparts, such as Benny Watts or Vasily Borgov, Beth is constantly forced to prove herself as a worthy competitor because of her gender and age. One exception is a brief reference to Paul Morphy, a US chess champion from the nineteenth century who was said to have developed severe hallucinations at the height of his career. In Tevis's novel, Morphy provides a foil for Beth; he is described as a player of great talent who was known to be "well-mannered, well-dressed, smiling, [and] moving the big pieces with small, ladylike, blue-veined hands" (146). Much like Beth, Morphy is an outsider and displays a deviant and somewhat feminised masculinity, which is evident in the way his hands are described and how tenderly he behaves when around people. The fact that both Morphy and Beth seem unable to cope with their successful careers as

chess champions and their variations of feminine traits play into stereotypical notions that only 'real' men can truly excel in male-dominated sports.

## Conclusion

For centuries, women had almost no opportunities to participate and gain recognition in sports. It was not until "the advent of the equal rights movements" that women were finally able to find a place as active participants in sports (Bell). Especially in male-dominated sports, as the name already suggests, women remain a minority. They are less likely to become part of their elite ranks due to unequal participation rates and other factors such as culturally manifested differences and societal gender role expectations.

For Walter Tevis's protagonist, chess was never just a "game for boys" (46). However, as the youngest and only female player in almost all competitions, Beth is always the outsider. As a result, she is often the target of people's lack of understanding, strange looks, and disrespect. Even at a young age, she encounters incidents of discrimination and sexism, underlining the unequal playing conditions between men and women within the realm of competitive chess. Her deviant femininity, which is largely influenced by her non-conforming attitudes, appearance, and fascination with chess, seems to be the catalyst for many of her experiences of ostracism and discrimination. In direct comparison to other girls, Beth is considered the odd one out at Methuen and Fairfield Junior High because of her ineptitude (and sometimes deliberate unwillingness) to conform to the standards of female beauty and conduct that were popular in mid-century America. In the 'male sphere' of chess, too, Beth is once again marginalised; only this time because of her enormous talent, competitiveness, and relentless ambition – traits traditionally ascribed to hegemonic masculinity.

Thus, Beth is dually marginalised because of her deviant femininity, which threatens the patriarchal system that is evident both in society and in the microcosm of competitive chess. As a result, Tevis's protagonist is repeatedly punished by mechanisms of ostracism and self-destruction, which are particularly evident in her patterns of addiction, isolation, and insecurities. Nevertheless, Beth Harmon defies the odds and eventually develops into the "serious, professional, [and] sufficient" woman we see at the end of the novel (149).

Like other male-dominated sports, competitive chess seems to function as a blueprint for women's journey of fighting for equal rights and gaining recognition – not only as equal sports competitors but equal human beings in modern societies. In this way, Tevis's novel depicts the larger web behind many socio-cultural spheres that have systematically discriminated against women and minorities for centuries. Tevis's fictional world of professional chess is just another arena in which "[w]omen

aren't disproportionately outnumbered just at the top of the leaderboard. They're disproportionately outnumbered *everywhere*, from youth competition up" (Baccellieri). By constructing Beth Harmon as a doubly marginalised character with traits of contemporary female chess champions like Lisa Lane, as well as male flagship athletes such as Paul Morphy or Bobby Fischer, she is representative of all those women who want(ed) to partake seriously in sports but are hindered and rejected by the heteronormative gender scripts that are still largely at work today.

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## 9. Escaping Visual Culture: The Character of Joelle van Dyne in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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### Abstract

Joelle van Dyne is one of the most important female characters in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996). Joelle, who is remembered for her stunning beauty, disguises herself under the pseudonym of Madame Psychosis and hosts a late-night radio show in which she freely speaks to a niche audience. Through the use of sound studies theories, this paper investigates the positive effects that Joelle's radiophonic voice produces on herself and her listeners. Joelle and her listeners live in *Infinite Jest*'s fictitious reality, which has many points in common with the American society of the 1990s. In that period, the spread of television and visual entertainment began to reveal its negative consequences on people's mental health and psychological well-being. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace discusses the dangers of a culture that prioritizes appearance and entertainment over meaningful values. This paper suggests that the character of Joelle reacts to these issues by counterposing the sound of her radiophonic voice to a culture that is becoming more and more visual. Sound proves to be the very element that permits this character to detach herself from her beautiful body-image and experience embodiment unrelated to her looks. At the same time, she powerfully and creatively affirms herself in the world through her radio show. Joelle's voice paves the way for the creation of a democratic sonic community which includes every listener regardless of their appearance while permitting connection through sound resonance. This sonic community valorizes human emotions and shared values, which appeared to have been abandoned in a society dominated by visuality.

### Keywords

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, visual studies, sound studies, cinema, radio

### Introduction

Visuality has played a leading part in the creation of Western culture up to the point that images have become central to our daily lives. We are surrounded by visual art, advertisements, photographs, television programs, and social media. In this cultural context, sight acquires a privileged position for deciphering reality at the expense of other senses such as hearing. Murray Schafer, one of the leading theorists of sound studies, observes that "in the West the ear gave way to the eye as the most important gatherer of information about the time of the Renaissance, with the development of the printing press and perspective painting" (101). In 1996, David Foster Wallace published his renowned novel *Infinite Jest* in which he deals with several social

issues prevalent in 1990s' American society including the disproportionate consumption of visual entertainment. The novel contains various references to the psychological dangers that image-centered media such as cinema and television cause for people. In his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace argues that unconscionable consumption of television could deeply affect people's psychological well-being (174). The main cause to this problem seems connected to postmodern irony that had entered people's lives through television (171) and that contributed to dismissing "single-entendre values" (192), i.e. valuable principles and human emotions. Wallace can be considered as one of those "literary 'rebels'" (192) aiming at showing that "we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections" (Wallace in McCaffery 27) through their fiction.<sup>34</sup>

This chapter aims at demonstrating that sound in the novel *Infinite Jest* can prove a valuable means to soothe the psychological distress experienced by the characters, which derives from the oppressive pervasiveness of images. The analysis of the radiophonic voice of the female character Joelle van Dyne, who in the persona of Madame Psychosis hosts an independent radio show, highlights that her voice can be beneficial to different characters in a variety of ways. This paper opens with a contextualization of *Infinite Jest* within the framework of visual studies and subsequently proceeds to an analysis of the figure of Joelle van Dyne from a sound studies perspective. Joelle's radio voice is investigated in contrast to her cinematic voice with the aim of showing that the radio provides this character with power and creative potential that the cinema denies her. The study then focuses on Joelle's voice as an instrument to create interpersonal connections between speaker and listeners through the physical phenomenon of sound resonance. The resulting sonic community reveals that the radio impacts listeners in a way that differs from how television influences its viewers. Finally, this chapter proves that Joelle's radio show in *Infinite Jest* allows characters to restore those values and human emotions that seemed to have been neglected due to the diffusion of television.

## Visuality, Television, and David Foster Wallace

Visuality entered the discourse of cultural studies in the late 1980s with the emergence of an interdisciplinary field concerning the "cultural construction of the visual in arts, media and everyday life" (Dikovitskaya 3). The birth of this field of studies, visual culture (3), affirmed the value of images and their cultural centrality in Western postindustrial societies. In the first edition of *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998), Nicholas Mirzoeff, one of the pioneers of visual culture studies, explains that "[v]isual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or

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<sup>34</sup> David Foster Wallace is considered one of the pioneers of the "New Sincerity." More on Wallace and the New Sincerity can be found in Adam Kelly's essay "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction."

pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology” (“What is Visual Culture?” 3). The study of “visual events” unsurprisingly finds its roots in the twentieth century, when images start pervading people’s daily lives thanks to the proliferation of television and other visual media. Mirzoeff’s definition of visual culture suggests a connection between images and capitalistic societies characterized by the emergence of consumerism. In the context of visual culture, people become “consumer[s]” (3) when facing a visual technology such as television, that contributed to changing profoundly the lives of Americans in the late twentieth century. Following Mirzoeff, television would provide pleasure in the form of entertainment, but also information<sup>35</sup> and meaning. Dikovitskaya’s work on visual culture focuses primarily on meaning, since she argues that visual studies concern the “visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context” (3). While Mirzoeff provides a neutral definition of visual technology, some scholars seem to be worried about the gradual increase of mediated images in people’s everyday lives. David Foster Wallace and Jerry Mander, for instance, have shown concern about the effects of television and televised images on people. Aware of the exorbitant number of hours Americans spend in front of it,<sup>36</sup> they both report that this medium threatens viewers’ psychological well-being.

In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace argues that television is a driving force behind the rise of an anxious and self-conscious society whose members worry excessively about their appearance. He is convinced that through television “we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of *truly alive* persons is watchableness” (“Unibus” 155; emphasis added). As a result, only those who can bear other people’s gaze and judgment can be defined as “alive.” Small screen actors distinguish themselves as models of “watchableness,” creating the illusion of being “oblivious to the fact that they are watched” (155). Actors’ illusory “watchableness” is transmitted to viewers who wish to “emulate them,” behaving in real life as nonchalantly as actors do in television shows (154). Beauty constitutes another concern for spectators who tend to feel anxious before actors’ typical outstanding prettiness (173-74). Such toxicity seems to derive from the fact that people are induced to compare their real lives to the false existences of actors in TV programs. As Jerry Mander argues in his 1978 *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, this medium is highly deceitful, causing “confusion as to what is real experience and what is television experience” (246). This derives from the power of images since, as Mander argues in a later essay, “we tend to always believe the image, because images seem real. But they’re not” (“Privatization”). Televised images are thus dangerous because they convey unimportant and superficial values that people accept as meaningful. By depicting “watchableness”

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<sup>35</sup> For example, documentaries and TV news.

<sup>36</sup> In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace includes himself within the mass of Americans spending six hours per day in front of television (155).

as a significant value, television contributes to influencing the “whole psychology of one’s relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes” (“Unibus” 174). People become increasingly anxious and more concerned about their looks as well as about the impression they give others. As Wallace contends, “we seem terribly afraid of other people’s reactions to us and very desperate to control how people interpret us” (“100-Word Statement”). If other people become judges of one’s own worth and dignity, any individual will risk experiencing constant feelings of inadequacy within their own society.

In *Infinite Jest*, published in a moment of transition from literary postmodernism to post-postmodernism, Wallace offers several examples of the self-conscious society television has contributed to creating. For instance, the problem of appearance is investigated through *videophony*, a brand-new option to install on TPs,<sup>37</sup> giving characters the opportunity to make video calls. The sonic elements that characterize usual phone calls are complemented by the visual dimension provided by screens allowing users to see each other. Instead of enhancing interpersonal mediated interactions, in *Infinite Jest*, videophony triggers anxiety and apprehension in most users. Callers start to worry about their appearance on screen: “the videophonic stress was even worse if you were at all vain. I.e. if you worried at all about how you looked. As in to other people. Which all kidding aside who doesn’t” (*Jest* 147). Concern for their own looks may also derive from the characters’ conviction that they are less attractive than the society-imposed standard. Given their lack of self-confidence, users tend to see the negative sides of their own screen images, having the feeling of appearing “*untrustworthy, unlikable, or hard to like*” (147; emphasis in original). The characters’ constant focus on their appearance in front of this new visual technology well translates Wallace’s thoughts on the dangers of the excessive consumption of images expressed in “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.”

The problem of “watchableness” in *Infinite Jest* is also echoed by the huge variety of characters displaying unusual body shapes, physical peculiarities, “deformities,” and disabilities. Members of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed cannot be seen by other characters as they shelter from other people’s gazes under a veil that inevitably prevents them from being watched. Described with disturbing but ironic adverbs such as “hideously and improbably” and by the noun “deformed,” they can see the world through their veil while the world cannot see the deformity they hide. Den Dulk interprets the use of the veil as an “ironic distancing mechanism” (330) that prevents U.H.I.D. members from being determined by the gaze and judgment of others: “literally [...] as a barrier, [...] but also by openly displaying their shame [...] and at the same time hiding that shame, placing it [...] beyond determination by others” (330). However, den Dulk highlights the “negative freedom”

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<sup>37</sup> The TP in the novel *Infinite Jest* is a digital device permitting characters to watch movies through cartridges as well as making phone calls and video calls.

derived from this escape: “it is a freedom from the look of others, but no positive content has been given to one’s own identity” (330). The members of the U.H.I.D. subtract themselves from other people’s gaze while not affirming their identity. Den Dulk states that “The veils of the U.H.I.D. work as an interesting means of distancing from a culture that is itself ‘deformed,’ but they do not offer a satisfactory alternative to that culture” (331). Other instruments are needed to undermine the toxic culture of “watchableness” that subjugates characters in *Infinite Jest* and prevents them from asserting their presence in their fictional world.

Besides developing the topic of “watchableness,” *Infinite Jest* contains further criticism of the televised image. The novel’s plot develops from the accidental illegal dissemination of a TP cartridge titled “Entertainment.” The content, which remains mysterious nearly to the end of the novel, entails that characters who accidentally watch it can never recover from a vegetative, death-like state.<sup>38</sup> The word Entertainment reminds of Postman’s beliefs expressed in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: “all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business [...]. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (15). The Entertainment delivers a type of pleasure literally pushing characters to amuse themselves to death, as it is nearly lethal to them. Moreover, the cartridge and its effects on characters could constitute a metaphor for Postman’s ideas on the American society that turns its components as well as its fundamental values into entertainment. Wallace negotiates this issue in the novel by exaggerating the effects that the televised image produces on people, which are explored by Mander. The scholar argues that when we watch television “[w]e become affixed to the changing images, [...] we merely give ourselves over to them. It is total involvement [...] and total unconscious detachment [...] – no cognition, no discernment, no notations upon the experience one is having” (*Four Arguments* 204). People watching the Entertainment are absorbed by images but deprived of the possibility of consciously considering what they are looking at. In addition, they are unable to openly agree, disagree, or ponder the content of the cartridge. As Mander argues in his essay “Privatization of Consciousness,” “Television is *not* democratic. Viewers at home do not make television; they *receive* it.” This resonates with Postman’s idea that several aspects of society have become part of the entertainment industry “largely without protest or even much popular notice” (Postman 15). Spectators’ absence of cognition precludes them from having any decisional power or participation right in the Entertainment. The reception of TP images happens in a

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<sup>38</sup> In his essay “The Killing Vision: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” Stefano Ercolino interprets the Entertainment as a rewriting of the *topos* of the killing vision and argues that “Wallace’s rewriting of the *topos* dealt a fierce criticism to the televisual addiction of Americans [...] magnifying at the same time the televisual image by providing it with infinite entertaining power unbearable to the viewer” (34).

state of total passivity, since TP, like television, “create[s] a passive mental attitude” (Mander, *Four Arguments* 200).

Taking into consideration the categories of *pleasure* and *meaning* introduced by Mirzoeff (3), it is arguable that since the sense of satisfaction is so strong and pervasive in spectators, any other meaning inferable from the cartridge is effaced at the expense of pleasure. The conditions of passivity and total involvement prevent watchers from judging the visual content critically, with the result that they cannot find a deeper significance behind the image. This creates a loop of “infinite” watching with the only aim of selfishly perpetuating pleasure for oneself. As Marathe, a character in *Infinite Jest*, states, “people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die [...] for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film” (*Jest* 318). This individualistic way of seeking gratification is at the expense of human connections and shared principles. The radio program by Joelle van Dyne and the sonic community she creates through her voice are two of the possible means allowing characters to embrace human feelings while being connected with their peers.

### **Cinema Actress and Radio Speaker: Joelle van Dyne's Voice**

Joelle van Dyne is one of the characters in *Infinite Jest* who seeks to escape visual domination through the veil of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. The reader learns that she decides to hide under the veil of the U.H.I.D. even though she has a completely different kind of deformity from all the other characters belonging to the Union. In fact, her “deformity” is her stunning beauty, since she is described both as a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed and as the “Prettiest Girl of All Time” (*Jest* 239). Joelle's beauty is so fascinating and mesmerizing that it literally drives people crazy. Reactions toward her attractive figure escalate when she becomes a cinema actress, and her image is at the mercy of several viewers. *Infinite Jest* seems to convey the idea that even beautiful bodies are victims of the culture of “watchableness,” and that beauty may be a type of “deformity.” In the novel, Joelle is also presented as a radio speaker under the pseudonym of Madame Psychosis. Her late-night radio show, “60 Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis,” allows Joelle the use of sound, specifically her own voice, to escape visuality and create an alternative to the toxic culture of appearance. In addition, through her radiophonic voice, listeners assume Joelle's corporeality and automatically convey her embodied existence.

Body and embodiment are crucial to our analysis of Joelle van Dyne. These concepts can be considered in relation to cinema and radio, the media featuring Joelle in the novel. A definition of embodiment may be deduced from the works by scholars Mary Ann Doane and Michael Chion, who both investigate voices in cinema. Doane defines the voice-over in films as a “*disembodied* voice [...] not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body [...] lacking any specification in space or time” (42;

emphasis in original). Similarly, Chion discusses the cinematic switch from acousmètre to de-acousmatized voice in terms of embodiment and disembodiment. He defines the acousmètre as “a voice [that] has not yet been visualized – that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face [...] a kind of talking [...] shadow” (21). On the contrary, de-acousmatization is the “symbolic act” of “embodying the voice. [...] [It] roots the acousmètre to a place and says ‘here is your body’” (27-28). The two scholars consider embodiment as the presence of a body localizable in time and space, while implying the visualization of this body on screen. As Chion argues, “de-acousmatization [...] results from finally showing the person speaking” (23) who “in-scribe[s] his or her body inside the frame, in the visual field” (27). These considerations on (dis)embodiment as well as the definition of acousmètre are useful for our analysis of Joelle’s embodiment in the contexts of cinema and radio.

Cinema and filmmaking play a significant role in *Infinite Jest*. This topic is mainly related to the figure of James Incandenza, who is an amateur filmmaker and father of the three brothers and main characters Hal, Mario, and Orin. The addictive Entertainment cartridge is produced by James Incandenza himself and stages Joelle van Dyne as the main character personifying “some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant” (*Jest* 788). It is important to notice that in cinema, Joelle van Dyne is represented in her physicality and her female physical attributes are showcased. As the example shows, the Entertainment revolves around the beauty of her naked body while her femininity is highlighted by pregnancy. Joelle’s corporeality is visually identifiable and localizable through her screen image implying her embodiment. Furthermore, the content of the image is reiterated by Joelle’s speech, adding a sonic dimension to the visual elements, since the woman is “explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film’s camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal” (788). As a result, Joelle’s speech functions as a restatement of her body image, encouraging the spectator to associate Joelle’s body with the concepts of motherhood and death. This seems to imply stereotypical woman-mother and woman-death combinations and assert a male-centric view of the woman.

In her essay “Murder, She Spoke: The Female Voice’s Ethics of Evocation and Spatialisation in the True Crime Podcast,” Amanda Greer proposes a way to explain the difference between female voices in cinema and in radio podcasts. She states that “the female voice in cinema is confined to the frame (devoid of lateral movement), exists in a monophonic dimension of sound and is anchored to a diegetic body” (159). This means that female speech in cinema is always de-acousmatized, bound to the image of the body, with no possibility to detach from it, and this is what happens in the scene of the Entertainment staging the naked actress. As noted previously, in the cartridge, Joelle van Dyne’s speech complements the image of her body.

Moreover, Joelle's voice is attached to the image, which means, following Chion (27-28) that her voice is embodied. Greer reports Doane's "politics of the female voice in cinema," namely that "the female voice is denied the authority of creativity, restrained by her inescapable embodiment" (Greer 153). Considering Doane's argument, the close relationship between image and speech in the Entertainment results in a negative outcome for Joelle since she is deprived of the authority to speak without being immediately recognized as a female, naked, good-looking, and attractive body. Joelle speaks with a "de-acousmatized voice [...] inherently feminine, sexualised and, in the vein of the striptease, highly visual and spectacular" (153). Moreover, the image-voice pair is in the hands of a male director who opts for a certain model – in this case he probably chooses Joelle because of her stunning looks – and decides her lines. The female image-voice pair is totally determined by a male mind, once again highlighting the male-centric impositions on the female body.

Joelle van Dyne's voice has an antithetical role when she personifies the radio speaker Madame Psychosis. Greer argues that resistance to the cinematic representation of the female voice is provided by podcasts (153). Similarly, the radio in *Infinite Jest* can provide this type of resistance to Joelle by allowing a separation of voice and body. Greer writes against the cinematic representation of the woman and argues in favor of podcasts: "Though, in cinema, the female *acousmetre* is often de-acousmatized, re-attached to her body as a signification of her lack of power, alternative, aural-spatial media like the podcast have offered new, alternative routes of resistance for this female *acousmetre*, allowing her to maintain her powerful disembodied status" (153; emphases in original). This consideration on the effective disembodied status of the *acousmètre* can be applied to the character of Madame Psychosis, since her acousmatized voice allows her to maintain her disembodied condition through which she gains authority and power. In this case, the radio program permits Joelle to affirm her "authority of creativity" (Greer 153). As a matter of fact, she herself decides on the music and the content of her program, consisting mainly of monologues which "seem both free-associative and intricately structured, not unlike nightmares. There's no telling what'll be up on a given night. If there's one even remotely consistent theme it's maybe film and film-cartridges" (*Jest* 185). As the reader will later discover, Joelle is a cinema student but her passion for cinema and her creativity can only be freely expressed through another medium – radio –, which intrinsically excludes images. The radio becomes thus a safe sonic space for Joelle. Despite the eclectic and unpredictable content of the show, Joelle's monologuing and acousmatized voice is the recurrent feature of all episodes.

Joelle's acousmatized voice plays an important part in the program because it constitutes another way to infer Joelle's embodiment. So far, embodiment has been defined by the coincidence of the voice and the image of the body on a screen. In her work *Sounding the Novel* (2018), Nathalie Aghoro proposes a way to affirm bodily

presence that involves the auditory instead of the visual and precisely includes the voice. Aghoro discusses the body-voice pair, arguing that the voice “becomes an autonomous phenomenon reflecting the body while distancing itself from it [...] the sounding voice manifests as the body’s ephemeral sonic double in the world” (40). Following Aghoro’s argument, the voice can be conceived as an independent manifestation of corporeality. Aghoro’s statement that the voice distances itself from the body is crucial to understanding that, despite the body not being visually recognizable, the voice allows listeners to imply it. Even in the case of a synthetic voice, listeners are still able to attribute “virtual” or “perceived corporeality” to it (42). In *Infinite Jest*, the audience of Joelle’s show is totally clueless about Madame Psychosis’ identity, and they can only imagine her look. Nevertheless, they assess her voice as embodied since they perceive the corporeality behind it, even without any visual proof of its connection to a real body. In this case, listeners’ perception is central for attributing corporeality to Joelle. While Doane and Chion define embodiment in strictly visual terms, the sound of the voice and the way listeners decide to interpret it are pivotal to define a different type of embodiment, a sonic one. In *Infinite Jest*, listeners never seem to question Joelle’s embodiment, meaning that they do not doubt the presence of a real person beyond that voice. Joelle’s sonic embodiment implies thus a meaningful relationship between listeners and speakers, which will be explored in the next sections.

### **Beyond Visual Escape: A Positive Sound Space**

In addition to constituting a safe sonic space for Joelle van Dyne in the persona of Madame Psychosis, the radio show arguably offers this opportunity to her listeners, too. As a matter of fact, the radio program permits listeners to remain invisible to the gazes of others and provides them with the same ease as of being under the veil of the U.H.I.D. When Joelle disappears from her radio program to recover from her drug addiction, audience members surprisingly show up to the student engineer in charge of the radio station to gather information about her absence. In doing so, they become visible to the narrator’s eye who cannot refrain from describing them: “Almost all the personal wee-hour inquiries are from listeners somehow bent, misshapen, speech-defective, vacantly grinning, damaged in some way. The type whose spectacles have been repaired with electrician’s tape. Shyly inquiring” (*Jest* 625). This audience characterized by physical “deformities” had been previously addressed by Madame Psychosis, who, in her radio show, invited them to take part in the U.H.I.D.: “The phrenologically malformed. The suppuratively lesioned. The endocrinologically malodorous of whatever ilk. Run don’t walk on down. The acervulus-nosed” (190). Madame Psychosis, as a sort of political activist, summons all these categories of people, who, she says, still hole up at home, to join the U.H.I.D. with the warranty of invisibility: “All meeting rooms windowless. That’s in ital: all

meeting rooms windowless" (190). However, what she probably fails to understand is that these people already have a "windowless" meeting space where they meet every night: her radio show.

"60 Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis" is a sonic meeting space. It is deprived of visuality but maintains its status as a room in which people share their company and create community. This is possible thanks to the physical link between bodies which is guaranteed by Joelle's voice. Sound propagation is a primarily physical phenomenon deriving from mechanical waves interacting with the surroundings. As Aghoro reminds, "[s]ound waves pervade the sounding as well as the listening body. The senses of hearing and touch register their vibrations and the emitting and receiving bodies connect in a process of oscillation" (132). It is precisely through sound waves that two or more bodies are physically – not only emotionally or psychologically – connected. This concept is expanded by Amanda Greer, who includes the idea that bodies can connect through sound even when a medium interposes between them. She refers specifically to podcasts, arguing that "the podcast engages not only the mind, but the resonant and resonating body, establishing a physical connection between listener and sonic object (podcast)" (160). While Greer addresses the podcast, her argument can certainly be applied to Madame Psychosis' radio show. Even if Madame Psychosis' voice is broadcasted by radio, the oscillations produced by this sound permit her body – the sounding one – and the listeners' bodies to physically connect, despite the distance and the absence of direct contact. Moreover, the sound of her voice ends up linking listeners into a community. As Aghoro argues, "the sounding of voice is a social act, a demand or, at least, an invitation to participate in the acoustic community that it establishes – starting with a person and her or his sonic double and extending to the most complex intersubjective networks facilitated by contemporary media" (45). Not only does the radio show allow for a one-to-one connection, namely from Joelle's single body to a listener's body: it gives birth to a sonic community of multiple bodies tied together through sound. Without their awareness, all listeners of Madame Psychosis' radio show are connected through sound resonance, even if the emitting body is just one. The requirement to take part in this sonic community is merely having a body, regardless of its shape and look. Through her voice, Madame Psychosis invites her listeners to return to a simple, primordial, and resonating matter. As Strack argues in her paper on elemental compositions, "sound's material infrastructure is composed of vibrations that emerge from and are inflected by material surroundings" (24). There is no need to visualize bodies, since sound already makes them interfere and physically connect.

Madame Psychosis' radiophonic community can be defined as democratic. As a matter of fact, the total irrelevance of one's looks implies that bodies cannot be classified in terms of beauty, which is instead a tendency that television fosters. Television viewers are inclined to compare their appearance to that of television actors with the

result of feeling constantly inadequate (“Unibus” 173-74). The absence of visuality inhibits listeners from making comparisons and excludes any desire to look different. Moreover, no hierarchy is established between Madame Psychosis and her listeners. As far as television is concerned, Mander affirms that it cannot be defined as a democratic medium and that “[v]iewers at home do not make television; they *receive* it” (“Privatization”). Despite listeners not “making” Madame Psychosis’ radio program, they are often invited to participate: “Sometimes Madame Psychosis takes one random call to start ‘60 +/-.’ Tonight the one caller she ends by taking has a cultured stutter and invites M.P. and the YYY community to consider the fact that the moon, which of course as any sot knows revolves around the earth, does not itself revolve. Is this true?” (*Jest* 192). The possibility to take part in the program anonymously permits listeners to feel totally free to reflect on the most diverse topics. The eclectic content of the program highlights its inclusivity, since listeners bring their contributions with the assurance of total neutrality and acceptance of their thoughts. The narrator hence reports that Joelle’s voice is “not bored or laconic or ironic or tongue-in-cheek. [...] It’s reflective but not judgmental” (189). Considering their active participation in her program and their prompt demand for information when she disappears, Joelle’s radio listeners may be considered rather dynamic. This differentiates them from TP watchers, who are rendered totally inactive by the images of the Entertainment cartridge. By allowing listeners to freely express their thoughts, the radio program provides a solution to the non-democratic entertainment delivered by television and TP and fosters critical thinking and the circulation of diverse opinions.

When Madame Psychosis disappears from the radio program, all that remains is silence: “A terrible silence now, weeknights. A different silence altogether from the radio-silence-type silence that used to take up over half her nightly show. Silence of presence v. silence of absence, maybe. The silences on the tapes are the worst” (*Jest* 625). Silence is perceived by Madame Psychosis’ listeners as a loss. The absence of sound is identified as absence of physical connection and implies the dissolution of the sonic community. As Strack argues, “[l]oss is thereby sensed more than known or seen, as shifting vibrations affectively work on mind-bodies and transport messages without approaching the level of consciousness” (35). Since the emitting body stops producing sound waves, the audience’s bodies are no longer connected through oscillation, ending up physically separated from one another. Listeners of Madame Psychosis’ show feel this loss at the mind-body level before consciously or emotionally mourning their radio star. Through the concept of silence as absence of sound waves and vibrations, it is possible to argue again for sound as a generative and linking force. This reinforces the thesis that the sound of Joelle’s voice in “60 Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis” permits the creation of a socially active and democratic community of listeners.

### **Sound, Meaning, and Affection: Sad Speakers and Loving Listeners**

The radio show hosted by Joelle van Dyne in the persona of Madame Psychosis links listeners physically while allowing for emotional connection with the speaker. The sonic space Joelle creates during her radio show is a shared space which is also affectively full. In *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2020), Marshall Boswell suggests that Madame Psychosis “provides listeners with something close to maternal security, the primary allure of the show residing in the quality of her voice” (77). In other words, he implies that listeners find in Madame Psychosis’ voice the security of a mother, which seems to resonate with the fact that, in the Entertainment, Joelle represents motherhood and death. Boswell, however, does not distinguish between Joelle’s cinematic voice in the Entertainment and her radiophonic voice. Instead of overlapping reflections on Joelle as an actress and as a radio speaker, it is more useful for our analysis to keep cinema separate from radio. While *Infinite Jest* contains references to some characters’ need to be reassured by a maternal figure as if they were children or infants, this work suggests that within the sphere of the radio show, Joelle and her listeners establish a relationship of equals. Joelle’s voice conveys emotions and affection that result in empathetic understanding and care among peers. Not only does Joelle care for her listeners, but they are invited to care for her.

Mario Incandenza, one of the main characters of the story, and the student engineer, who can only grasp Joelle’s silhouette from behind a “trptych screen of cream chiffon” (*Jest* 183), seem capable of grasping the emotional distress that stems from Madame Psychosis’ voice. Mario is described as one of the main fans of “60 Minutes +/-” and cannot miss one single episode of the radio show:

He treats the lavish Tatsuoka fringe-FM-band tuner in the living room of the Headmaster’s House like kids of three generations past, listening the way other kids watch TP, opting for mono and sitting right up close to one of the speakers with his head cocked dog-like, listening, staring into that special pocket of near-middle distance reserved for the serious listener. (189)

Mario, who is also one of the characters displaying the most severe disability, is outlined as a “serious listener” given his devotion to the radio show. However, he is also metaphorically described as the “ultimate listener” (Frantzen 274) since he is probably the most empathetic, caring, and selfless character of *Infinite Jest*. Mario and the student engineer can perceive melancholy and sadness transpiring from Joelle’s radiophonic voice: “Mario [...] felt like he was listening to someone sad” (*Jest* 592); “Sometimes she seems very sad” (185). These two characters’ approaches to the radio show are other-directed rather than self-directed. They can transcend potential feelings of pleasure conveyed by the radio voice and focus, instead, on the voice’s mood. This would not be in the interest of TP watchers, for instance, since their need to be constantly entertained by the cartridge explains their selfishness: “a people choos[ing] nothing over themselves to love” (318). Besides Mario and the engineer, most of the audience is able to perceive Madame Psychosis’ agony, since several

members are later worried about her disappearance. The ability to feel the others' emotions through the voice is suggested by Aghoro, who argues: "voice simultaneously conveys several layers of acoustic signification beside the mediation of language, such as the particular affective state or bodily condition of the voicing subject" (49). The sound of Joelle's voice permits listeners to grasp her emotional pain and, therefore, worry for her. As Honold argues, voice is fundamental for language since it conveys the emotional and the affective aspects of language that add to its cognitive and intellectual qualities (191). Through the sound of Joelle's voice, listeners can go beyond the meaning of her speech and, while sympathizing with her emotional condition, they try to find a solution to her distress.

Mario, for instance, believes that Madame Psychosis would "feel a lot better if she listened to her own show" (*Jest* 190). He recognizes Madame Psychosis' compelling talent but also her necessity to experience the same sensations her audience feels when listening to her. As the narrator reports,

One of the reasons Mario's obsessed with her show is that he's somehow sure Madame Psychosis cannot herself sense the compelling beauty and light she projects over the air, somehow. He has visions of interfacing with her and telling her she'd feel a lot better if she listened to her own show, he bets. Madame Psychosis is one of only two people Mario would love to talk to but would be scared to try. (190)

Mario perceives that, despite Madame Psychosis producing positive emotions in others, she is unable to feel them herself. Mario thus feels trapped in a position in which he would "love" to help Madame Psychosis, but he is "scared" to do so. In this passage, Mario acts as a lover who is unable to face the loved one. Some adjectives such as "obsessed" or "scared" show the anxiety Mario feels toward Madame Psychosis. At the same time, he perceives her "beauty and light," as if an aura emanated from her voice. The idea of falling in love is explicitly reiterated some pages later: "Mario'd fallen in love with the first Madame Psychosis programs" (592). The characters involved in Madame Psychosis' radio show display both fear and love. Mario, for instance, fears a potential interaction with Madame Psychosis but is still the first one who wishes to display his unconditional love. At the same time, while Madame Psychosis fears the reaction people may have toward her looks and conceals herself under a veil, she probably loves her radio show and uses it as a tool to convey the affection she has for her listeners. Similarly, listeners care for the speaking voice, despite their inability to transcend the invisibility that the radio warrants. *Infinite Jest* does not provide the ultimate solution to fear and anxiety, derived from the toxic culture of "watchableness" infused by televised media. Yet, it allows for an inclination toward love, care, and affection within a democratic community that may still count on meaningful values and emotions. The latter would be impossible to feel by Entertainment watchers, trapped in their individualistic loop of pleasure. Madame Psychosis and her radio show are not the ultimate solution to the culture of "watchableness" but provide at least a niche countermovement to selfishness and a tendency

toward infusing life with those important “single-entendre values” that David Foster Wallace tried to instantiate through his fiction (“Unibus” 192).

## Conclusion

Criticism of visuality and its effects on people is widely present in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Some elements of the novel such as the Entertainment can be discussed considering some of the twentieth-century theories on visual culture, television and entertainment by scholars such as Mirzoeff, Postman, Mander, and Wallace himself. *Infinite Jest* negotiates the negative consequences of the extensive consumption of images accentuating their effect on characters. Yet, this work proves that the novel contains possible solutions to the pervasiveness of visuality in this fictional world. By focusing on the radiophonic voice of the character of Joelle van Dyne, it is possible to argue that sound, as opposed to image, and listening in contrast to watching, can prove a valuable countermovement to ever-present images and their harmful outcomes. Contrary to her de-acousmatized voice, which is bound to the image of the body in cinema, Joelle's acousmatized radiophonic voice empowers this character providing her with the freedom, power, and creativity she is prevented to benefit from in the role of cinema actress. Still, listeners may infer her corporeality through the sound of her voice, resulting in Joelle's sonic embodiment. In addition, Joelle van Dyne's radio show allows for bodily connections between speaker and listeners through sound resonance. Joelle's voice functions as the very medium that fosters sociality and creates a sonic democratic community in which bodies can physically connect regardless of their appearance. Moreover, the radio program nurtures affection and care between the radio speaker and her loving listeners. Through the sound of her voice, Joelle's emotions of sadness and melancholia are conveyed while listeners are induced to empathize with her. Following Wallace's reflection on the necessity to turn away from cynicism and irony and embrace human values and emotions (“Unibus” 171; 192), our analysis of *Infinite Jest* proves that human connections are possible within a sonic mediated space, the radio program of Joelle van Dyne. Joelle's voice represents a tendency against the culture of “watchableness” and toward a culture of human connections.

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## 10. Towards a Narratology of Age(ing): A Study of Narrative Time in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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### Abstract

As part of the so-called postclassical narratologies, contextualist or thematical narratologies allow for the inclusion of gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity in the study of narratives, thereby successfully undermining 'classical' narratology's claim to universality. While many contextualist approaches like feminist, queer, and postcolonial narratology have already been firmly established, it is striking that there is, as of yet, still no approach that considers age(ing). Age(ing) is oftentimes overlooked as an (intersecting) category that completes considerations on identity (politics). Thus, as part of a postclassical, contextualist approach, I seek to link concepts of age studies and narratology to reveal that the 'classic' narrative category 'time' is not 'neutral' or 'universal' but has to be understood as a function of age(ing). Time is closely linked to ageing processes. Nevertheless, I aim to study its narrative realisation through a narratological lens and show that the apparent linearity of time and the life course has to be questioned. Informed by a revisionist view, I will present a study of narrative time in Kazuo Ishiguro's famous novel *The Remains of the Day*. A context-sensitive reading of the novel will offer new insights and reveal age(ing) as a major theme of the text. I argue for an age(ing)-conscious approach to narrative theory in order to provide a more detailed study of narrative structures and continue to diversify narratology.

### Keywords

Postclassical narratology, contextualist narratology, narrative time, age studies, Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*

### Introduction

Since the introduction of feminist narratology, there have been various new trends in the field of narratology that look to uncover the inherent diversities within an area once believed to be incurably addicted to formalism and structuralism. In its so-called postclassical phase, David Herman finds that "research on narrative does not just expose the limits but also exploits the possibilities of the older, structuralist models" (2-3). While there are many exciting additions to the field of narratologies, like, for example, "Transgeneric and Transmedial Applications and Elaborations of Narratology", or "Postmodern and Poststructuralist Deconstructions of (classical) Narratology" (Nünning, "Narratology" 249-51), I wish to concentrate and expand on the so-called contextualist, thematic strand of narratology that includes for example feminist and queer narratology.

In the most basic sense, contextualist narratology refuses to uphold the meticulous borders structuralist, classical narratology has erected between textual properties and the context of textual production. Within contextualist narratologies there is a consensus that “narrative theory should not confine its attention to the texts themselves, but should also take account of their contexts” (Kindt and Müller 207), by developing from a “structuralist analysis to a functional study of literature” (207). As Herman suggests, the ‘old’ structuralist model and achievements are exploited and remodelled to put the analytical toolkit of narratology “to the service of context-sensitive interpretations of novels” (Nünning, “Surveying” 61). Contextualist narratology combines narrative theory and the interpretation of narrative texts (51). Roy Sommer, who sees contextualist narratology as belonging to the “so-called ‘hyphenated’ narratologies which combine structuralist and cognitive frameworks with context-sensitive approaches to fiction” (62), draws attention to the fact that “the hyphen in hyphenated narratologies always invites and requires mutual exchange” (71), thereby naming another strength of a contextualist approach to narratology. With opening its borders, narratology stands to gain the opportunity to create “lively dialogue and mutual exchange between various critical traditions interested in novels, stories, films and plays” (71). In this article, I want to draw attention to the possibility of a connection between age studies and narratology and argue for a narratology of age(ing). My aim is to study the narrative category ‘time’ with the Genettian system as well as Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope and show that narrative time is dependent on ageing in its realisation, thereby questioning the universality that classical, structuralist narratology attributes to it.

## **Age Studies**

Even though age studies have been a highly productive field for the past forty plus years, Leni Marshall points out that almost every new contribution is hailed as groundbreaking and comments that after “[f]orty years of scholarship [...] we are just breaking ground – what rough territory this is!” (14). This is probably why Elizabeth Barry has labelled age studies as the ‘poor cousin’ of other identity politics (5). In turn, it seems hardly surprising that there has – as of now – not been a connection between age studies and narratology. In order to provide a solid base for a narratology of age(ing), I will introduce some of age studies’ most prominent assumptions in the following.

For those studying age, it has long been clear that age(ing) has to be understood as “the difference that time makes” (Kunow 295) rather than as an “essence, biological chronological or otherwise” (295). Roberta Maierhofer proposes a differentiation between “chronological age and the cultural stereotypes associated with [...] people [growing older]” (322). After all, we are “aged by culture” as Margaret Morganroth Gullette shows in her 2004 eponymous book. It is the stereotypes associated with

older age and the representation of aged bodies in western culture that inform society's opinion of the process of ageing. Gullette shows that we are confronted with narratives about ageing from early childhood onwards. In western societies, the prevalent narrative about ageing is one of decline. There is a far-reaching divide between young and old, two 'states' that are pitted against each other as binary oppositions. Kathleen Woodward finds that even though "[a]ge is a subtle continuum, [...] we organize this continuum into 'polar opposites'" (6). She further explains that age, as an important category in our society, is organized hierarchically (6): "In the West youth is the valued term, the point of reference for defining who is old" (6). In western culture youth is perceived as good whereas age is perceived as bad (7). However, we can also find the cultural narrative of decline juxtaposed with positive attributes that are oftentimes simultaneously associated with growing older; this poses another binary opposition within the category 'old age' itself. Gullette has termed the two narratives 'aging-as-decline' and the 'positive aging' narrative ("Against" 262). For Gullette, naming the prevalent narratives around ageing disrupts "the automatic assumption that we know what aging is without stories" (262). The decline-narrative is one of age studies' most productive theories that will be quietly present in my analysis.

Another important age studies fundamental is Robert Butler's notion of the life review. For Butler, the life review is a "naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (350). The unresolved conflicts can then be "simultaneously and normally [...] surveyed and reintegrated" (350). Most commonly, the life review is observed in older people due to the "actual nearness of life's termination – and perhaps also because during retirement not only is time available for self-reflection, but the customary defensive operation provided by work has been removed" (351). As humanity is diverse and everyone has led different lives, the process of the life review can vary greatly. It can proceed silently, and people might not even be aware of it. However, Butler establishes a rule of thumb: "Speaking broadly, the more intense the unresolved life conflict, the more work remains to be accomplished toward reintegration. Although the process is active, not static, the content of one's life usually unfolds slowly; the process may not be completed prior to death" (352). The life review manifests itself quite differently; sometimes thoughts will arise at random and "may first be observed in stray and seemingly insignificant thoughts about oneself and one's life history. These thoughts may continue to emerge in brief intermittent spurts or become essentially continuous, and they may undergo constant reintegration and reorganization at various levels of awareness" (352).

Generally, Butler finds that

[a]s the past marches in review, it is surveyed, observed, and reflected upon by the ego. Reconsideration of previous experiences and their meanings occurs often with concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganization of past experiences may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meanings to one's life. (353)

### ***The Remains of the Day***

We meet Stevens, our autodiegetic narrator, in July 1956 in Darlington Hall (the place of his employment), right after his new employer, American gentleman Mr Farraday, has suggested he take some time off and embark on a holiday while he, Farraday, is out of the country for several weeks. Stevens's narration is structured by internal focalization, and Sauerberg characterises it as a "brilliant dramatic monologue in prose" (7). We rely heavily on Stevens's subjective account; he is the centre of his story. Throughout, his narrative is interwoven with implicit and explicit self-characterisation and readers quickly realise that Stevens is an unreliable narrator (Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 257-61). At the core of *The Remains of the Day* is Stevens's attempt to retrospectively make sense of and find meaning in his life so far.

*The Remains of the Day* is arguably one of Ishiguro's most famous novels. There is no shortage of academic insights into the various themes that can be found in it. Thus, it has long been established that Stevens has an undeniable nostalgia for the former, glorious days at (and of) Darlington Hall (Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 260). In his memories, he relives the great years he spent working with Miss Kenton for Lord Darlington between the wars. We learn of the great conference of 1923, where the naïve and credulous Lord Darlington made it his mission to mediate between post-war France and Germany and encourages the strengthening of international bonds between Britain and Nazi Germany in the following years, culminating with a secret meeting of Herr Ribbentrop and the British Prime Minister in 1936. These events, however, are not the focus: "The focus of the novel is [...] not only the past events themselves but Stevens's reaction to them at the time and his retrospective sense-making" (262; my translation).<sup>39</sup> Stevens's frequent preoccupation with his memories and his continuous acts of remembrance can thus be productively framed as his life review and his story can be read as an active attempt at achieving integrity.

Stevens's story begins *in medias res* as he considers taking his current employer Mr Farraday up on his offer to lend him his Ford (with money for gas) for a holiday. Stevens narrates in the present tense. He is consequently positioned simultaneous to the action, which gives his narrative an intimate feel. However, as was established

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<sup>39</sup> "Im Mittelpunkt des Romans stehen [...] nicht nur die vergangenen Ereignisse an sich, sondern Stevens' damalige Reaktion auf sie und seine retrospektiven Sinnstiftungen".

already, the premise of *The Remains of the Day* is Stevens's life review; thus, his story is frequently pierced with external<sup>40</sup> analepses as he remembers his past. Therefore, the narrative voice shifts between simultaneous and subsequent narration, which gives Stevens's narrative an ambivalent quality and an inherent tension. The fact that we deal with heterodiegetic external analepses underscores an interpretation of Stevens's reminiscence as life review. The events and his actions lie in the past and stay there; they have no direct effect on his present. Stevens's subconscious objective is to find meaning in and acceptance for his choices and – on a larger scale – for the person he has become. Through his past we get to know Stevens intimately. Since we do not only learn about how he has behaved and reacted once but are also witnesses to his retrospective interpretations, forming an informed opinion about Stevens is possible. Stevens is a meticulous person who attaches great importance to his work. In fact, his whole identity is his profession: Stevens is a butler (Westerman 160; see also Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 263-64).

His repetitive analysis of what a 'great' butler is and his thoughts on dignity – in Stevens's eyes a quality that makes a 'great' butler – exemplify his attempt to come to terms with and make sense of his own identity. While Stevens seems not to be actively aware of the meaning of his life review process, he does undertake it somewhat consciously and readily shares his process: "It would seem there is a whole dimension to the question 'what is a "great" butler?' I have hitherto not properly considered. It is, I must say, a rather unsettling experience to realize this about a matter so close to my heart, particularly one I have given much thought to over the years" (Ishiguro 119). The repetitive mode of Stevens's considerations of "what is a 'great' butler" (199) allow us to simultaneously feel that time has passed, and that time is passing at the moment, which is especially emphasised by his dual mode of narration. Even though the matter is "close to his heart" (119), Stevens is reluctant to identify himself as a 'great' butler. However, he does admit that "there are those who, perhaps out of misguided generosity, tend to" place Stevens alongside "the likes of the 'great' butlers of our generation, such as Mr Marshall or Mr Lane" (114). Only once, in a pivotal scene of the novel where his father had just died, and Stevens did not fail to attend to his duties as a butler since it was an important evening for Lord Darlington, does Stevens cautiously recognise himself as a butler who possesses the dignity he ascribes to the 'great' butlers of his generation (115).

In retrospect, Stevens shares that "[f]or all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph" (115). Here, the different temporal levels allow us to take part in Stevens's survey of a particular evening in 1923 through a scenic analepsis and his consequent reflection and

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<sup>40</sup> Genette distinguishes between three kinds of anachronies: external, internal, and mixed. Here we find an external analepsis since the events Stevens reminisces about begin and end after his momentary now (Genette 355).

interpretation in the present of 1956. However, it has already been established elsewhere that Stevens's (life) review is characterised by his own faulty assessments of his past as well as his reluctance to admit to himself that his pursuit of professional perfection has overshadowed everything else and has led him to make questionable judgements in the past. Stevens's covert and unrecognised regrets are illustrated by his obsessive preoccupation with his past and his continuous need to justify himself. The narrative time in *The Remains of the Day* creates a space where the dual mode of narration, i.e. that time has passed, and that time is passing at the moment, can exist simultaneously. In addition, this tension between narrative time in the novel stands for the binary opposition of young and old Stevens created by reliving his past and analysing his younger self while at the same time negating his own age identity and his old self in the (his) present.

In the 'now', Stevens shares that

over the past few months, I have been responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of my duties. I should say that these errors have all been without exception quite trivial in themselves. Nevertheless, I think you will understand that to one not accustomed to committing such errors, this development was rather disturbing, and I did in fact begin to entertain all sorts of alarmist theories as to their cause. (5)

Stevens's memories revolve around the times in his youth where he feels that he has come into his own as a butler or portrayed 'greatness' in his work. As we have seen, Stevens's identity is closely connected to his work and professional perfection. Therefore, it is no surprise that he finds the recurring errors in his work alarming. He is unable to integrate and accept his 'faulty self' and actively avoids identifying his age(ing) as a possible cause. Stevens's inability to accept his age(ing) can be interpreted as related to a prevailing decline narrative: Stevens connects growing old to decline and the loss of one's professional ability since he has, as a young man, witnessed just this happen to his father. Stevens places his father among the butlers he considers as 'great' (34-45). Through flashbacks to his father's earlier days in the profession, Stevens allows further glimpses into what makes a 'great' butler in his eyes. It seems as though Stevens has inherited the love for professionalism and his attitude towards work from his father. The flashbacks to his father's prime mirror the tension that is created between Stevens's simultaneous and his subsequent narration since there are also analepses to Mr Stevens Sr's last days and his subsequent death.

In *Aging and Its Discontents*, Kathleen Woodward introduces the mirror stage of old age. Woodward analyses the psychological phenomenon that as we age, "we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies. We say that our real selves – that is, our youthful selves – are hidden inside our bodies. Our bodies are old, we are not. Old age is thus understood as a state in which the body is in opposition to the self. We are alienated from our bodies" (62). While Woodward

discusses this phenomenon in reference to the actual mirror image of old people, who do not seem to identify their inner selves with their older bodies (an observation that Butler has also included in his theorising of the life review), the concept of the mirror image of old age will be used metaphorically in the following analysis to study Stevens and his father. At the centre will be the assumption that Stevens, in the 'now', fails to see the similarities of his present situation to that of his father in 1923. Multiple analepses take us back to a conference held in Darlington Hall in 1923, a time in Stevens's career that he feels "constituted a turning point in [his] professional development" (Ishiguro 114).

Stevens shares that around a year earlier, in 1922, his father had started working as an under-butler at Darlington Hall. Interestingly, Stevens had started his career working as a footman under the supervision of his father and his father ends his career working as an under-butler to Stevens. Unconsciously, Stevens always associates their relationship with work, and their paths seem to cross only when sharing the same workplace. By the time of the conference a year later, Stevens's father is 72 years old and has been steadily growing weaker. This has greatly affected his ability to provide the services of an under-butler to his employer's satisfaction. However, even though Stevens shares various little incidents where Miss Kenton has drawn his attention to the shortcomings of his father, he dismisses them as quite trivial in nature.

It is only when his father falls in front of Lord Darlington and two guests that Stevens is forced to admit to his father's growing fragility. This realisation is brought about by a conversation with Lord Darlington, who urges Stevens to not dismiss the "larger significance" (63) of the situation and orders Stevens to lighten his father's "burden" (64). Mr Stevens Sr is reluctant to accept that his employer finds his work no longer satisfactory; when Stevens addresses his (perceived) shortcomings, Mr Stevens Sr blames his fall on some "crooked" (69) steps; he is unwilling to face the loss of his abilities and accept the decline that he (and his surroundings) associate with it. After all, his professional dignity is how he defines himself, always putting work before personal matters. He has worked in the profession all his adult life, and it seems that he has great difficulty separating himself from his work. In one scene of the novel (that is actually narrated to us as a scene), Stevens and Miss Kenton observe Mr Stevens Sr as he tries to climb the steps again without falling.

My father could be seen standing by those four stone steps, deep in thought [...]. Then, as we watched, he walked very slowly up the steps. At the top, he turned and came back down, a little faster. Turning once more, my father became still again for several seconds, contemplating the steps before him. Eventually, he climbed them a second time, very deliberately. This time he continued on across the grass until he had almost reached the summerhouse, then turned and came walking slowly back, his eyes never leaving the ground. In fact, I can describe his manner at that moment no better than the way Miss Kenton puts it in her letter; it was indeed "as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there". (70)

Stevens's father's determination to prove to himself that he is still capable and has not lost his abilities shows that he has not accepted his own ageing and 'decline'. However, the scene has a tragic air since Stevens is not able to understand his father and has to rely on Miss Kenton to situate and contextualise what they observe. Her description is loaded with metaphorical meaning as the "precious jewel he had dropped" (70) can be interpreted as Mr Stevens Sr's youth which he connects to a lost professional perfection (one that he hopes to find again on the steps).

Due to the temporal structure of *The Remains of the Day*, a subtle shift from the analepsis to the present is observable as Stevens chooses to share Miss Kenton's description of the situation she has offered just recently in her letter. The fact that Stevens himself shies away from an assessment is telling of his own reluctance to accept that he (in his view) has also lost his own precious jewel. Despite the active reflection on his past, Stevens avoids any confrontation with growing older and old age because of the implication he ascribes to this 'condition'. He interrupts his own reminiscence before engaging with the subject matter, calling his memories and his preoccupation with them "perhaps a little foolish" (70). Similar to a mirror image of old age, Stevens is unable to connect his present situation to his father's situation 33 years prior. In not recognising his own image, Steven negates his age identity and fails to accept his ageing self. Using similar vocabulary to admit to his own (in his view) declining abilities (5, 255), Stevens is scared to truly see himself in the mirror and recognise his image. For him, his ageing self and his (professional) decline are alarming because he has never witnessed an acceptance of ageing processes and an aged self. Therefore, Stevens is not yet ready to face the disintegrative experience of old age, which is why he avoids his own mirror image. It is because of the tension the analepses create that Stevens's view on ageing and older age can be carved out. The metaphorical mirror image of old age represented through his father is enhanced through the nested analepses that allow glimpses of Mr Stevens Sr's younger self. The binary opposition between youth and age that is prevalent in Stevens's view is strengthened as we see it mirrored through the temporal levels of the novel.

It has been established above that Stevens's repetitive telling during his life review highlights topics that have not yet been (re-)integrated. Stevens repeatedly calls attention to the trivial mistakes that have crept into his work as well as narrating the beginning of the decline of his father's abilities repetitively (58, 61). This repetitive narration, then, signals Stevens's preoccupation with the subject and the importance it carries. However, when focusing on the frequency of Stevens's narration, it is telling that the actual process of his own ageing as well as of his father's ageing is omitted entirely. Stevens never indicates the duration of his father's life path that ultimately leads him to Darlington Hall. And while Stevens's process can be deduced by way of the dates he shares, he does not speak about the time between 1936 (the year Miss Kenton left Darlington Hall) and 1956 (a time three years after Lord

Darlington's death). The sense of decline that Mr Stevens attributes to ageing is reinforced since we know through repeated incidental remarks (6, 132, 145, 247) that the time after the war was not a happy one for Lord Darlington (and by way of this for Stevens) and saw the demise of the reputation of Stevens's employer and the great days he associates with Darlington Hall. These indefinite ellipses create a vagueness in conjunction with the passing of time (and the inevitable ageing), which not only strengthens the binary opposition Stevens creates between young and old but also draws attention to Stevens's avoidance of an acceptance of the process of growing older and the implication it carries for him.

While Stevens 'spends' more time in his past, his movement and consequent 'log entries' on the road anchor him (and us) in the present and illustrate the inevitable passing of time and the related process of growing older. The chronological aspect of ageing is embedded in Stevens's journey. Stevens's movement on the road also underscores the interpretation of his narrative as life review. It attaches the anachronical process of retrospective sense and meaning making to time by providing a chronological frame. Metaphorically, Stevens does not only embark "on a leisurely holiday" (cover text) but on a journey that will "take him deep [...] into his past" (cover text). Being on the road implies action and change. While Stevens admits to his slow progression (71-72) and shares his recurring troubles with his car (170, 189), a progress is made, nonetheless. The road brings about meetings that are otherwise unlikely to happen. Thus, on his journey, Stevens is confronted with encounters that surprise (and overwhelm) him. The next section concentrates on three encounters in particular, which function as metaphorical mirrors since they reflect Stevens's age either through an assessment of Stevens or, in Miss Kenton's case, through her own ageing process.

At the very beginning of his trip, Stevens meets a white-haired man on a roadside sitting on a large stone (25). He waves Stevens over to have a chat and asks him how "fit" his legs are (25). Stevens is taken aback by this address, but the man continues that

[y]ou got to have a good pair of legs and a good pair of lungs to go up there [a footpath presumably going up a hill]. Me, I haven't got neither, so I stay down here. But if I was in better shape, I'd be sitting up there. There's a nice little spot up there, a bench and everything. [...] I can see you're in a good shape for your age, sir. I'd say you could make your way up there, no trouble. [...] I'm telling you, sir, you'll be sorry if you don't take a walk up there. And you never know. A couple of years and it might be too late. [...] Better go on up while you still can. (25)

Stevens takes immediate offence with this assessment. While he reflects later that the man might have "meant this in a humorous sort of way; that is to say, he intended it as a bantering remark" (26), in the moment Stevens feels the need to demonstrate his abilities and is determined to walk the footpath which "was quite strenuous [...] though [he] can say it failed to cause [him] any real difficulty" (26). We

realise how important it is for Stevens to be in control of his abilities and how offended he is when they are questioned. The white-haired man connects age to decline and impending inability, and Stevens is adamant to prove (to himself) that he is neither declining nor on the verge of inability. Stevens's reluctance to accept his ageing self, which has already been established, is especially noticeable when considering this encounter. Incidentally, if we return for a moment to the beginning of his journey, we realise that Mr Farraday urges Stevens to take a holiday not only because he [Farraday] will not be at Darlington Hall but because "[y]ou [Stevens] look like you could make good use of a break. [...] I [Farraday] really think you should take a break" (3-4). However, instead of connecting his employer's offer to himself and to the various trivial errors Stevens informs us about, he quickly finds a more suitable reason to embark on the suggested journey: a meeting with Miss Kenton (14). Due to the chance meeting on the road, we are able to view the circumstances of Stevens's journey in a different light because his reaction to his ageing can be interpreted as evasive and as Stevens turning a blind eye to how time has affected his abilities.

Contrary to his other encounters, the meeting with Miss Kenton is the only one Stevens plans. After all, he embarks on his motoring trip with the intention of bringing Miss Kenton 'home' to Darlington Hall. For Stevens, Miss Kenton is connected to happier days on the one hand but also lost opportunities on the other hand. Their relationship is the underlying focus of the novel although it is overshadowed by Stevens's emphasis on his professional development and achievements. As Stevens's story unfolds, we understand that he and Miss Kenton were in love. However, Stevens was unable to admit these feelings to himself (or perhaps even understand them) and consequently failed to prioritise his personal life and the possibility of a future with Miss Kenton over his work (Atkinson 212). Stevens sees the nostalgia he himself feels in Miss Kenton, too: when first reading her letter, Stevens is certain it holds "an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall, and – I am quite sure of this – distinct hints of her desire to return here" (Ishiguro 10). Similar to his father, Miss Kenton can be read as a mirror image to Stevens.

Here is where Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope unfolds its full metaphorical potential: Stevens's journey can be read as a chronotope of the road. In contrast, Darlington Hall can be identified as a chronotope resembling that of the Flaubertian-style small towns, where "a day is just a day, and a life is just a life" (Bakhtin 20). Time stands still and is circular. While the memories of his father are – albeit relived on the road – inseparable from Darlington Hall and therefore stuck in the corresponding point of time without a chance of development, Miss Kenton did leave and – literally and figuratively – move on. Even though Stevens's and her shared journey began at Darlington Hall, it transcends this point in time and thus carries an air of possible change within it. This is exemplified by the way Stevens's interpretation of Miss Kenton's letter changes while he is on the road. The further

he is from Darlington Hall, the more uncertain Stevens grows if Miss Kenton's letter actually contained nostalgic longing and the wish to return to her former place of work (Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 260). When actually meeting Miss Kenton, Stevens acknowledges that

[s]he had, naturally, aged somewhat, but to my eyes at least, she seemed to have done so very gracefully. Her figure remained slim, her posture as upright as ever. [...] Of course, with the bleak light falling on her face, I could hardly help but notice the lines that had appeared here and there. But by and large the Miss Kenton I saw before me looked surprisingly similar to the person who had inhabited my memory over these years. (Ishiguro 244)

This description is significant on multiple levels. Firstly, it marks the first time Stevens actively admits to any kind of process of growing older since he has thus far failed to accept (or even admit to) his own ageing and his age identity. Secondly, instead of associating something "sinister" (5) with Miss Kenton's aged body, Stevens is still able to recognise her as 'his' Miss Kenton. For Stevens, her ageing is not connected to decline. Here, Stevens is able to regard ageing and the aged body as natural processes. During the conversation, Mr Stevens learns that Miss Kenton, although having regrets about the past, leads an overall satisfactory life. However, even though Stevens does not articulate it, it becomes clear that they both mourn the possibility of a life together. This is especially noticeable by the repeatedly shared insight that "[a]fter all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been" (251).

Nevertheless, when parting, both look forward to the future, Miss Kenton to one where she will soon meet her first grandchild and Mr Stevens to one of "work, work and more work" (249) back at Darlington Hall. The meeting with Miss Kenton is a turning point for Stevens since he can, after having acknowledged her ageing, finally approximate his own age identity. On his last day away, before returning to Darlington Hall, Stevens allows himself the realisation that he gave his best to Lord Darlington.

I gave him the very best I had to give, and now – well – I find I do not have a great deal more left to give. [...] Since my new employer Mr Farraday arrived, I've tried very hard, very hard indeed, to provide the sort of service I would like him to have. I've tried and tried, but whatever I do I find I am far from reaching the standards I once set myself. More and more errors are appearing in my work. Quite trivial in themselves – at least so far. But they're of the sort I would never have made before, and I know what they signify. Goodness knows, I've tried and tried, but it's no use. I've given what I had to give. I gave it all to Lord Darlington. (255)

Stevens's realisation is brought about by the last chance meeting on the road. While sitting on a bench awaiting the switching on of some pier lights, Stevens has a "curious" (253) discussion with a man sitting next to him. This man functions as a last mirror, one that enables Stevens to break through and admit to himself the passing of time. During the conversation Stevens seems to accept the consequences of his

own ageing and recognise his image. The man he meets had previously been a butler in a small house but has been retired for three years now. He is in his late sixties and tells Stevens about his various ailments (253). It is because of their professional connection that Stevens begins sharing about his time at Darlington Hall, which climaxes in the recognition of his current situation. His interlocutor goes on to freely give advice and his assessment of Stevens's situation:

if you ask me, your attitude's all wrong, see? Don't keep looking back all the time, you're bound to get depressed. And all right, you can't do your job as well as you used to. But it's the same for all of us, see? We've all got to put our feet up at some point. Look at me. Been happy as a lark since the day I retired. All right, so neither of us are exactly in our first flush of youth, but you've got to keep looking forward. (256)

Stevens does not take offence in being analysed this way and being viewed as a peer by his acquaintance, he quietly accepts the assessment without commentary or active resistance. He recognises himself and agrees with the man that he should "cease looking back so much [and] adopt a positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day" (256). Stevens concludes that when he returns to Darlington Hall tomorrow, he will "begin practicing [bantering] with renewed effort. I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him" (258).

His road is going to lead Stevens back to Darlington Hall, a place where time stands still and moves in circles. Stevens has acknowledged his own age identity and has, in a way, faced himself and accepted his ageing during his time on the road, thereby participating in the metaphorical change it brings. In moving forward, Stevens holds onto his idea of professional perfection that is instilled in the standstill times of Darlington Hall. Even though this might seem like Stevens did not learn anything in the end, an interpretation in light of Gullette's progress-narrative allows the ending of *The Remains of the Day* to be framed in a more positive light: Stevens's life goes on with a newfound acceptance of himself. Even though he still wants to achieve professional perfection, Stevens's story ends with a nod to his future and not a return to his past.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope allows the anchoring of Stevens in time and thus enables us to carry out a metaphorical interpretation of his ageing process throughout *The Remains of the Day*. Since the chronotope of the road suggests movement, something we inherently connect to time, Stevens's past is connected to his present. His anachronical analepses are embedded in a linear, chronological movement of time. This fact is highlighted by Stevens's log entries while he is on the road. They structure the novel as they function as chapter headings. They allow us to trace Stevens's specific location at a concrete time. Compared to Stevens's usually rather vague time specifications (Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 260), his meticulous noting of events is significant. It illustrates the movement of time in a more concrete

way than the chronotope of the road. We witness time passing and are allowed to follow it linearly and chronologically. Stevens's rare simultaneous (in a Genettian sense) comments and the fact that he also reflects on his very recent past highlight the tension between experiencing I and narrating I (260). With the different temporal levels of the novel, a feeling of time that is passing and standing still go hand in hand. Anachronical as well as chronological temporal processes exist at the same time.

Thus far, the tension this creates has been the primary focus and it has been interpreted in light of a binary opposition between youth and age. However, the fact that Stevens is reflecting (and ageing) as he writes, therefore showing active (if possibly unconscious) participation in his life review, has yet to be addressed. Stevens partakes in life's process and (tries to) understand it backwards while living it forward (Woodward 12). This is in line with Woodward's notion of psychic time: "In psychic time we move backward and forward between the future and the past. We project ourselves into the future [...], and we bring our identifications from the past with us" (12) while, of course, always being present.

When considering the findings discussed above, we see that age(ing) is represented through the choices for narrative time. More so, in line with the focus of this article, we recognise that an interpretation of the categories in connection to age studies allows us to question the basic properties of the category 'time'. Instead of viewing it as a neutral, ageless category, we see that the form narrative time takes is dependent on age(ing). While the Genettian system allows us to sketch how time unfolds in a novel, it does not account for its dependence of contextual influences (in this case age(ing)). It is because of Stevens's life review process that narrative time in *The Remains of the Day* is presented as a circular movement rather than a linear flow. While the road stands for time's linearity, we have seen that this inherent understanding of time is frequently interrupted by Stevens's reminiscence actualised through the analepses in the narrative. His individual experience of (psychic) time cancels out physical time's inherent linearity. Therefore, narrative time cannot be understood as a universalist feature but its realisation in *The Remains of the Day* has to be interpreted in light of its dependence on age(ing). Thus, narrative time has to be understood as a function of age(ing) rather than as an ageless entity.

## Conclusion

In *The Remains of the Day*, narrative time is made up of a juxtaposition that is prompted by Stevens's life review, on the one hand, and his active movement forward on the other: "the chronological account and the present tense of the car ride contrast with the anachronical processes of consciousness of the narrator" (Nünning,

*Von historischer Fiktion* 260; my translation).<sup>41</sup> Since Stevens is preoccupied with the reintegration of particularly hard memories from his past, the analepses are external to highlight the distance to his momentary position. They also give Stevens's story the harsh distinction between his young and his old self. Interestingly, however, the contrasting time of the road lessens the severeness of the binaries since it incorporates 'all' temporalities within it. Since the life review is often triggered by the uncertainty of the imminent future, it requires temporal levels; thus, narrative time in *The Remains of the Day* serves to this contextual requirement. The analysis has shown how age(ing) unfolds in the novel, and we can clearly see that an interpretation of it as a determining factor is fruitful. Therefore, a treatment of narrative time as a function of age(ing) offers new insights to narratology and justifies the call for the need of a narratology of age(ing).

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<sup>41</sup> "die chronologische Schilderung und der Gegenwartsbezug der Autofahrt kontrastieren mit den anachronischen Bewußtseinsprozessen des Erzählers".

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# 11. Shifting Temporal Perspectives in Eco-Linguistics: A Comparative Study of Future Representations in Climate Change Discourse at the United Nations Climate Change Conferences

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## Abstract

The climate crisis is one of the most pressing issues of our time, and communication around it has evolved into a “booming industry” over recent decades (Nerlich et al., “Theory and Language” 97). Language, in particular, influences how individuals perceive and respond to environmental challenges. Specific linguistic constructions – such as temporal framing – shape perceptions of urgency, responsibility, and impact, particularly as they relate to the climate crisis (see Weinrich). Thus, this chapter explores the complex relationship between climate change communication, language, and temporal perspectives, focusing on representations of the concept of futurity in media coverage surrounding the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) and the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28). Through an analysis of English-language media outlets across diverse regions, this study seeks to uncover patterns in how language, particularly with respect to futurity, may shape public perceptions of the ongoing climate crisis. Despite its relevance, the topic of how the climate crisis is represented has only recently attracted attention within ecolinguistic research, a field traditionally centered on human-nature relationships within language (Fill and Penz). Therefore, this chapter aims to bridge that gap by examining the role of future-oriented discourse in climate communication. By investigating how temporal language is used to frame climate issues in media, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how ecological and linguistic perspectives intersect. This analysis is crucial not only for advancing climate change communication within ecolinguistics but also for enhancing public understanding of environmental issues. By examining how language frames climate discourse, this interdisciplinary approach demonstrates how strategic linguistic choices in media can encourage a more informed and proactive public response to the climate crisis.

## Keywords

Ecolinguistics, climate change communication, temporal framing, futurity, ecological discourse analysis

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in the study of climate change communication and its impact on public opinion. This rise reflects the heightened recognition of climate change as one of the most pressing issues of our time, leading to the transformation of climate change communication into a widely acknowledged and “booming industry” (Nerlich et al., “Theory and Language” 97). Despite this increased attention, the persistence of global carbon emissions, deforestation, and other climate-worsening industrial processes continues to leave society at an ongoing risk. Effective communication about these issues is important, as language in particular plays a vital role in shaping individuals’ perceptions and reactions to environmental issues. The way the climate crisis is discussed can either motivate action or foster apathy, making it crucial to evaluate not only the effectiveness of current communication tools but also the audience’s capacity to instigate changes in response to the reported news on the climate crisis (97). Moreover, linguistic constructs, such as temporalities, can significantly influence the perception of certain issues, as ecological concerns are intricately linked to temporal dimensions (see Weinrich). According to Bjærke et al. (179), it highly matters to consider and know about climate change temporalities as the phenomenon is conceptualized through images and especially texts. Within these texts, temporalities, such as the future tense, are one of the factors that structure the relationship between the concept of climate change and its conceptualizations.

Thus, this chapter explores the intricate relationship between climate change communication, language, and temporalities, focusing on different perspectives and representations of futurity in contexts surrounding the United Nations Climate Change Conferences in 2022 (COP27) and the United Nations Climate Change Conferences in 2023 (COP28). By analyzing media outlets in English-speaking nations, this study seeks to discern patterns in how language, particularly constructions representing futurity, might influence perceptions of the ongoing climate crisis.

## **How to Talk about the Climate Crisis: The Influence of Language and News**

Despite substantial efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, many climate change impacts are now considered to be ultimately inevitable, which is why the communication about the crisis, mostly analyzed within ecolinguistics, has changed from “persuading people that climate change is happening to persuade people to adopt practical measures to deal with it” (Nerlich et al., “Theory and Language” 98). However, for many, the effectiveness of discourse on climate change is questionable, particularly because the perceived risk on a larger scale is often considered more a virtual than a real issue. This perception is heavily influenced by individual considerations and how much attention one can afford to give to the issue. Hence, if

there is a general lack of awareness about the issue, comprehending discourse on these matters could prove to be particularly challenging. Nevertheless, according to Nerlich et al. (98), communication on climate change goes beyond the effort of trying to raise awareness. Hulme even suggests that “we need to use the idea of Climate Change—the matrix of power relationships, social meaning and cultural discourses that it reveals and spawns to rethink how we take forward our political, social and economic projects over the decades to come” (Hulme qtd. in Nerlich et al., “Theory and Language” 98). This approach encourages a reevaluation of current climate discourses with the use of linguistic tools in order to advance taking action against the climate crisis. Comparing it to several other communication enterprises such as health communication or risk communication, Nerlich et al. consider climate change communication to be very complex (98). This complexity arises from the inherently complicated nature of the climate change issue itself, as well as the challenges associated with communicating about it.

Therefore, language constitutes a major factor that has developed in relation to climate change (104). In general, linguistic repertoires can serve as significant indicators of how individuals think and converse about climate change (see Ereaut and Segnit). People form their opinions and conclusions about the necessity for behavioral changes regarding climate change through these repertoires, which are influenced by various sources, including politicians, journalists, popular culture, media, and everyday discourse (Nerlich et al., “Theory and Language” 102). In many cases, communicators of all kinds are encouraged “to adapt their language to suit the tastes, meanings, and concerns of ordinary people” (103).

In addition to the applied language, it is imperative to consider the influence of media news outlets in the context of this discussion since beyond the scope of media coverage, scholarly investigations and research concerning the portrayal of the climate crisis in the media have witnessed a significant and sustained increase over the past two decades (44). In fact, climate change has stood out as one of the most contentious topics in politics, scientific research, and public discourse (see Carvalho and Burgess). Generally, it is of great importance to research media coverage in relation to the climate crisis, given that the majority of individuals gain awareness of these issues primarily through the media. This reliance on media is driven by the inherently complex nature of the information involved (Nerlich et al., “Climate in the News” 45).

According to Fill and Penz, media representations therefore play a pivotal role in shaping the communication of climate change (227). Carvalho and Burgess agree that news media play a crucial role in popularizing science-related matters and risks such as the climate crisis (1458). This is because individuals’ awareness, attitudes, and especially their actions towards the ongoing environmental crisis are claimed to be shaped by diverse mediated information. The communication of various

ideologies and perspectives through media coverage has a noteworthy impact on people's viewpoints and their engagement in political actions, hence, this influence should not be underestimated. Thus, the framing of climate change issues holds significant importance in how the problem is conveyed and formulated; for instance, there is a notable emphasis on dramatic and sensationalized events rather than the prioritization of forecasting or planning. This understanding arises from the recognition that environmental disasters tend to align more closely with news values being newsworthy when compared to other aspects of reporting on environmental-related matters. This can be attributed to the development of preferring particularizations and sensational stories within climate change discourse rather than focusing on statistics and scientific planning (Carvalho and Burgess 190).

Generally, media portrayals of environmental issues or other topics do usually not only present facts but also reflect and navigate power dynamics. These portrayals are often instrumental in shaping knowledge and conversations among individuals and within communities (Boykoff 549). Therefore, media outlets have a significant impact on agenda-setting, as the importance assigned to an issue often hinges on its media coverage. For instance, the media can direct public attention to subjects like climate change. In fact, it has the ability to shape people's attitudes towards certain matters, including the climate crisis. In the context of scientific knowledge, the media serves as a crucial midway in translating research findings for the general public. For instance, the phenomenon of a changing climate may not be fully evident in individuals' day-to-day lives, especially if they do not live in territories that are directly affected by the climate crisis. Thus, through the media, a connection between one's own existence and the global climate crisis can be established, which would not be likely without such portrayals (Dirikx and Gelders 98).

### **Expressions of Time within Environmental Discourse**

To underscore the connection to the concept of time, it is crucial to acknowledge that environmental discourse, as emphasized by Harré et al. (120), frequently exhibits an inherent link to discussions about time. Generally, this relationship has to be recognized since “[to talk] about the environment is to talk in temporal terms” (120). In fact, it is argued that talking about instances of nature always requires certain assumptions about certain temporal orders. As articulated by Mühlhäusler, “paying attention to temporality can help increase the efficacy of ecolinguistics” since the integration of temporal perspectives emerges as a pivotal element in enhancing the field (4). This temporal consciousness aligns with Fill's argument that ecological thinking acknowledges the significance of small-scale elements alongside the larger context by stating that “thinking ecologically always means considering the small as important as the large” (Fill 8; my translation). Therefore, upon a close examination of climate change discourse, it becomes evident that effective communication efforts

undertaken by policymakers, politicians, scientists, and environmental organizations should incorporate not only spatial dimensions but temporal scales as well.

Generally, the conceptualization of narratives related to the environment is necessary in order to create an effective approach in addressing climate-related challenges (Bjærke et al. 6). For instance, when analyzing discourse about the climate crisis, not only the interplay between present-day actions and consequences in the future have to be considered but also prospects of the future as well as, for example, comparisons of temperatures over different time frames (Harré et al. 3). Bjærke et al. take it one step further by arguing that for the understanding of the climate crisis and the development of solutions it is always necessary to understand the different concepts concerning timescales and temporalities that are involved (3-4). Furthermore, Bopp and Bercht highlight the qualitative understanding of time and climate change, thus offering a chance to relate better to the concept of time within the climate crisis while considering different climate justice debates. Considering time as an essential concept as “we all exist in time” (Bopp and Bercht 29), they do not only highlight the fact that without time, there would neither be orientation, causality, meaning-making nor memory but also that there would be no climate change (29). Their main idea that certain time lenses can make things visible that might otherwise be unresolved or unexplored needs to be considered when investigating discourse about the UN Climate Change Conferences since the impacts of climate change usually depend on people’s exposure to “climate change in time and space” (30).

### **Environmental Futurity**

Compared to other political movements, the relationship to futurity is perceived differently by, for instance, environmentalists because “it is engaged with safeguarding the future of the future in presenting ecological viability as the foundation for all human and more-than-human worlds” (O’Brien and Lousley 1). To delve into the concept of futurity, three key ideas will be examined: future tense marking, temporal discounting, and temporal displacement.

By combining linguistic structures and the analysis of the determinants of environmental actions and policies, Mavisakalyan et al. conducted research on future tense markers in connection with climate change. By using data from individual speakers of languages with obligatory future marking and languages that do not grammatically differentiate between the present and future tense, they tried to prove that environmental behaviors toward climate change vary due to those factors. Chen highlights that the use of the future tense can significantly influence how speakers perceive and respond to various elements, such as a piece of text (690). There are vital differences depending on whether a language requires speakers to grammatically mark future events or not. Chen’s study suggests that not only the perception of

futurity within environmental discourse, but also environmental behavior is influenced by these factors. Moreover, Mavisakalyan et al. suggest that future tense marking is a crucial determinant of climate change policies as well as individual perceptions and behaviors towards climate change. Their frame of orientation concerns the presence of future tense marking in language as a new source that might explain, among other things, environmental perception and behavior. While environmental perception refers to how individuals view environmental issues such as their sense of responsibility and urgency, environmental behavior refers to actions individuals take to protect or harm the environment.

Moreover, according to Goldstein, there is a general public struggle with the concept of temporal distance since “lay understanding of climate change and global warming is challenged by complicated cause-and-effect relationships in which long-term climate patterns are harder to perceive than short-term localised weather” (Goldstein qtd. in Bjærke et al. 18). Often, global warming is understood as a concept that replaces the temporal distance with the immediacy of the everyday since several surveys have argued that the lay understanding of the climate crisis is limited due to a lack of understanding that humans do have detrimental impact on the environment (18). Therefore, future instances are often discredited. The concept of temporal discounting is reflected in the many different ways of talking about the future within climate change discourse. Hanson-Easey et al. suggest that scientific narratives on climate change typically span from decades to centuries, however, individuals mostly base their behavior and make decisions on shorter time frames (228). Oftentimes, inevitable future events are discredited since the expansion of time frames shifts the understanding of immediacy. For instance, after conducting several interviews with laypeople, Hanson-Easey et al. conclude that people are irritated when the media refer to time frames far in the future such as “2050” since several argue that “I am going to be dead by then [...], 2050 is a long way away and I will see about it [...] in 2045” (228). Thus, their findings suggest that a considerable number of people do not have major concerns regarding the temporal horizon in 40, 50 or 100 years into the future. This attitude is attributed to the perception of climate change as a temporally distant phenomenon, which is consequently seen as removed from their immediate personal lives. According to Harré et al., only a small minority of people inherently understand the major consequences of climate events in the distant future while a large proportion of the world’s population cannot think ahead for more than a few days. Therefore, climate change can be considered as a crisis that is lacking “the immediacy of now” (see Stern). Described as “slow violence” by Nixon (2), climate change occurs gradually and is perceived as a “violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time” (2). Moreover, it is often understood as irrelevant as it is very hard to see the immediacy of a construct that oftentimes remains mysterious.

Besides temporal discounting, temporal displacement must be taken into account when considering the reasons for why a grammatical form can change a speaker's perception of time. Temporal displacement describes the idea of using "a dedicated grammatical form to talk about future events subjectively [which] projects these events further away from the speaker's now – they appear temporally more distant to the agent" (Mavisakalyan et al. 5). Thus, on the one hand, by using a separate grammatical form, the future is represented as discontinuous with the present. On the other hand, when one speaks about the future in the present tense, it is depicted as more continuous with the present (5).

### **Ecological Discourse Analysis at the UN Climate Change Conferences**

The empirical part of this study explores different representations of the future in the context surrounding the United Nations Climate Change Conferences in 2022 and 2023. The aim of this analysis is to analyze the three media outlets *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The New York Times* in English-speaking nations to detect patterns in how language, particularly references to the future, are articulated and may influence perceptions of the ongoing climate crisis. The ultimate goal is to provide a cohesive examination of the interplay between language, temporalities, and climate change discourse. By employing Ecological Discourse Analysis, which is defined as the examination of diverse discourses within an ecological framework and is not limited to the analysis of discourse solely related to the environment, I will raise questions about several chosen texts of discourse by focusing on diverse representations of the future.

The corpus was chosen from a range of broadsheet newspapers produced in English. The selection process of specific articles was conducted according to most popular search-outcomes on the search engine [www.ecosia.org](http://www.ecosia.org), pre-given the fact that they must be English broadsheet articles produced within the time frames of the 2022 and 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conferences. The final corpus was chosen according to the following search keywords: *COP27*, *COP28*, *COP27 news*, *COP28 news*, *UN Climate Change Conference 2022*, *UN Climate Change Conference 2023* and *UN Climate Change Conference news*. All in all, a total of 80 articles were selected, 40 produced within the time frame of COP27 (the 2022 conference) and 40 within the time frame of COP28 (the 2023 conference). Since representations of the future only occur individually in the mentioned newspaper articles, having a diverse collection of newspaper articles was essential to obtaining a comprehensive overview and identifying discernible patterns.

Generally, there are several reasons why the analyzed articles were chosen from the time frames during COP27 and COP28. Firstly, the temporal relevance of the two conferences ensures discourse about future actions and policies that temporally align with the global discussion about issues related to the climate crisis. The

specific context of the conferences provides media coverage that specifically focuses on the future of the climate crisis, since negotiations concerning the future of the participating countries are being held. Moreover, the Climate Change Conferences are one of the most significant events concerning climate change, which is why a lot of media coverage is produced during these time frames as well as high points of general media coverage can be detected while climate change conferences such as the United Nations Climate Change Conferences are happening.

## Findings

### Temporal Dimensions: Instances of *Future*

Before delving into the grammatical analysis of representations of the future within this small, heterogenous corpus, I generated a visualization that is proposed on the basis of the context of the word *future*, thus investigating the immediate surroundings of the word. While the primary focus of this chapter revolves around qualitative research methods, specific aspects, such as the frequency of the word *future*, are portrayed quantitatively. The quantitative analysis, as depicted in *Table 1*, was conducted using the MAXQDA software. This approach aims to enhance the overall comprehension of relations to the future and provide a more thorough overview of the analyzed articles before investigating the meanings behind these portrayals.

Frame	Context	Keyword	Context
COP 27	their promises to safeguard a <i>livable</i>	<b>future</b>	." John Kerry, Joe Biden's climate
COP 27	a tolerable existence and an <i>impossible</i>	<b>future</b>	."
COP 27	is needed to stop a <i>perilous</i>	<b>future</b>	becoming a cataclysmic one. Bill McGuire
COP 27	will be needed in the <i>near</i>	<b>future</b>	.
COP 27	any measure, that represents a <i>bleak</i>	<b>future</b>	for humanity. Agreements on loss and
COP 27	for developing countries, a <i>clean energy</i>	<b>future</b>	is a distant dream.
COP 28	touch 1.5C in the <i>near</i>	<b>future</b>	. But a single year is not
COP 28	the global economy for a <i>hotter</i>	<b>future</b>	. Climate Forward There's an ongoing
COP 28	off track" in delivering a <i>sustainable</i>	<b>future</b>	for the climate. Charles said the
COP 28	we work towards a <i>zero-carbon</i>	<b>future</b>	, we must work equally towards being
COP 28	to expand production for the <i>foreseeable</i>	<b>future</b>	. The Alliance of
COP 28	latest. The alternative is an <i>unmanageable</i>	<b>future</b>	for humanity." Dr Friederike Otto, of

Table 1: Sorted concordance with the pattern 'a/an/the ADJECTIVE future'

Table 1 shows a concordance which reveals the pattern *a/an/the ADJECTIVE future*, to envision certain properties that are attributed to the word *future*. When considering the question of how the future is represented within these articles, it appears relevant to investigate certain properties and meanings that are conveyed by diverse representations. While both sets of articles show the exact same number of adjectives followed by the word *future*, three different adjective categories included in both sets could be developed, namely *sustainable adjectives*, *negative adjectives* and *temporal adjectives*. While phrases such as *clean energy future*, *sustainable future* and *zero-carbon future* find their place under the umbrella term *sustainable adjectives*, *impossible future*, *perilous future* or *bleak future*, for example, are categorized as pessimistic representations of the future within the category of value-laden *negative adjectives*. Conversely, only a minority of adjective phrases fall into the temporal category, for instance, *near future* or *foreseeable future*.

In relation to temporal adjectives, the portrayed future within the analyzed corpus is often characterized by time-related phrases, such as a close, distant, long-term, or short-term future. Interestingly, within this concordance, more evidence for short-term patterns such as *near* and *foreseeable* have been detected in comparison to long-term patterns, which are not present within the chosen articles, thus highlighting the immediacy of the climate crisis. The concept of the near future in connection to the noun *future* is used in the context of concerns as well as unfavorable consequences of the climate crisis.

### Quantitative Time Expressions

In line with the above-mentioned distinctions regarding close, distant, long-term, and short-term representations of future instances, an examination of future calendar years in newspaper articles on both United Nations Climate Change Conferences (COP27 and COP28) reveals a correlation with the aforementioned patterns. By categorizing these years based on their proximity to the present, one can distinguish between near-term future calendar years, which span from the current year to 2040, a mid-term reference period, which involves the years 2041–2060, as well as a long-term reference period, which spans from 2061–2100. With 113 instances of future calendar years mentioned, the corpus of texts includes several references to future years including 2025, 2030, 2035, 2050, 2060 as well as few mentions of the year 2100. While several targets and commitments are associated with the mentioned future years, a prevalence of plans and expectations linked to these time frames is evident as well. In fact, the focus clearly lies on events and targets connected to near-term reference periods. Interestingly, articles covering COP27 prominently feature mentions of the year 2025, while articles on COP28 shift their focus to the year 2030.

The articles from COP27 predominantly highlight the year 2025 as the dominant year for achieving a peak of global emissions, as can be seen in examples (1) and (2).

(1) Global emissions to peak by 2025, in line with the goal of limiting temperature rises to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels. (*The Guardian*, “Brink of Climate Catastrophe” 2022)

(2) Emissions peaking before 2025, as the science tells us is necessary. (*The Guardian*, “Brink of Climate Catastrophe” 2022)

In contrast, articles released one year later, produced during COP28, show a certain shift in perspective when considering the referenced time periods. For instance, excerpts such as the following were prevalent,

(3) A resolution to cause emissions to peak by 2025 was taken out, to the dismay of many. (*The Guardian*, “Small Step” 2023)

These statements highlight the shifting priorities and reevaluations of targets within the climate negotiation processes. While in 2022 the goal of a possible decline in greenhouse gas emissions after 2025 was still considered realistic, certain articles released in 2023 indicate a shift in focus as the narrative oftentimes is extended to the year 2030. To the readers, the concept of temporal discounting is evident as the immediacy of the achieving of certain goals by 2025 is extended to a time frame further away, namely 2030. Since laypeople mostly deal better with more immediate timescales, the target of 2030 might still be too far away for them to recognize the connection to their immediate personal lives (Nerlich et al., “Theory and Language” 99). Narratives about the climate crisis are often based on timespans from decades to centuries. However, most people usually think within more immediate timescales (see Hanson-Easey et al.), thus regarding dispersed future time frames as mysterious. Also, they often find it difficult to recognize the immediacy of the issue, a challenge that can be attributed to concepts like temporal discounting and temporal displacement. These concepts must always be considered when examining why linguistic forms can influence a speaker’s perception of time.

Notably, articles from the earlier year show references that are closer to their year of publication, whereas articles from 2023 predominantly focus on the year 2030, a period which is seven years distant from the readers’ current experience of these news about the climate crisis. Consequently, one can assume that many of the significant consequences projected to occur by 2030 may not be inherently comprehensible to the readership due to the considerable distance in time from the present, despite this time frame being one of the earlier references included in the articles.

Additionally, references to temporal horizons between 25 and 75 years into the future are only mentioned sporadically, presumably considering the concept of “slow violence” (Nixon 2) by the articles’ authors. Solely two instances of 2060 and two instances of 2100 could be detected, which suggests the continuation of present

actions, making it more probable for the described outcomes, such as the overshooting of the global carbon budget by food production, to occur. To demonstrate,

(4) By 2100 food production will, on its current trajectory, bust the global carbon budget two or three times over. (*The Guardian*, “Anti-Livestock” 2022)

To conclude, the examination of future calendar years within articles produced during COP27 and COP28 highlights a shifting narrative towards mid-term and long-term climate goals.

### Future Tense Markers

In previous research, future tense marking in language has been considered detrimental in defining responses on environmental issues in climate change discourse. In the media coverage analyzed in this study, a clear prevalence of one grammatical future tense marker is visible. With a total of 382 instances of the grammatical future tense marker *will* and merely 23 instances of the grammatical future tense marker construction *is/are/adverb going to*, it becomes evident that environmental topics coincide with uncertainty, considering that *going to* usually expresses more certain events compared to *will*. However, in many analyzed examples, the grammatical future tense marker *will* is also used to convey a sense of inevitability regarding the consequences of environmental actions. This highlights that *will* does not solely function to express uncertainty or possibilities about future events. Instead, it has also been employed assertively to signal clear expectations or predictions about outcomes in the future. Recognizing this dual function is important, as it shapes how speakers frame environmental issues.

Thus, it is crucial to consider that the use of the grammatical future tense marker *will* cannot solely be used to express uncertainty and possible future events, but in certain cases also assertively express expectations about outcomes in the future.

For instance, example (5) highlights the emphasis on a deal regarding certain stakeholders by assertively stating its anticipated impact using the future tense marker *will*, which conveys a sense of inevitability. However, this example could also imply a discounting of future costs, as the timing of its impact on the real world may not be easily graspable, leaving readers uncertain due to the concept of temporal distance. In contrast, example (6) describes the potential disappearing of the rainforest. Stating that the world needs to act by reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the use of future tense marking in the second part of the phrase enhances the idea of immediate action since the consequence is clear: if temperatures rise, the Amazon will disappear. Despite this long-term climate pattern, the clear cause-and-effect relationship makes the concept graspable more easily.

(5) The deal will have an impact on the real world, in the decisions made by investors, banks, financial institutions, by governments and by private companies. (*The Guardian*, “Elephant in the Room” 2023)

(6) But the world needs to do its part to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, because if not, even if we stop deforestation, the Amazon will disappear if the temperature rises. (*The Guardian*, “Lose 1.5C” 2022)

Finally, the chosen examples of future tense markers within the discourse produced during COP27 and COP28 show that the applied grammatical future tense markers might indeed influence how readers perceive certain issues that are included. The predominant use of the future tense marker *will* in several cases highlights a certain sense of temporal distance because the future tense marker, besides conveying a sense of inevitability, can also introduce temporal distance, which influences how readers perceive the urgency of an issue. This temporal distance arises because *will* positions events in the future generally, making them oftentimes feel detached from the present moment.

### **Modality in Temporal Contexts**

As can be seen from the most frequently used modal verbs (excluding *will*) in *Table 2*, the articles in reference to COP27 show a higher frequency of modal verbs than the articles in reference to COP28. While *would* is the most frequently used one with 172 instances in 80 articles, *might* can only be found fourteen times. Despite acknowledging that these verbs also serve functions beyond indicating modality in the newspaper articles in this corpus, a frequent use of modal verbs such as *would* can simply suggest a polite tone in the way it is frequently implemented in broadsheet newspapers.

A further interesting finding regarding modal verbs is the correlation with the topic of fossil fuels, ranging from a weaker expression of obligation using the modal verb *should* to a stronger assertion of obligation with *must*. With *should* often expressing the deduction that something is probable now or in the future, this case (7) implies advisability that winding down the burning of fossil fuels is necessary to avoid terrible consequences. Example (8) proposes a certain level of necessity by implementing need, however, it is not as strong as the subsequent modal *must*. Moreover, the use of *must* in example (8) reinforces a certain sense of obligation as well. Nevertheless, one has to note that *should* is often used as a weaker form of *must*, since sentences including *must* convey the idea of being absolutely necessary while sentences including *should* often only suggest a good idea. Generally, the continued reliance on fossil fuels, its consequences and calls of mitigations are particularly evident in articles produced during COP28, most likely due to the initiated global stock take.

(7) That the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas should be wound down to avoid further catastrophic global warming. (*The New York Times*, “Two Words” 2023)

(8) For the first time, the outcome recognises the need to transition away from fossil fuels. [...] The era of fossil fuels must end, and it must end with justice and equity. (*The Guardian*, “Elephant in the Room” 2023)

Furthermore, articles produced during COP28 underscore that numerous elements of the COP28 agreement were under debate. Several drafts only employ the modal verb *could* instead of specifying definitive actions when referring to the future of sustainable energy. In fact, the draft only states that countries *could* take action. Thus, a degree of ambiguity and lack of commitment are expressed by indicating that at present no specific actions have been settled, which is not only the case in the media produced about the agreement but especially in the agreement itself. With the agreement’s language leaving room for countries to decide about the implementation of certain actions in the future, the negotiations are not definitive enough to foster immediate change. Thus, the effectiveness of the drafted document produced at COP28 is questioned due to the modal verbs used within the deal.

Modal Verbs	Frequency	Cop 27	Cop 28	Documents %
would	172	96	76	70.89
can	161	101	60	73.42
need	133	81	52	73.42
must	100	56	44	44.30
could	98	47	51	65.82
should	61	35	26	45.57
may	37	20	17	29.11
might	14	7	7	17.72

Table 2: Comparison of selected modal verb frequency in COP27 and COP28

### Figurative Language

By exploring how futurity is portrayed in the newspaper articles investigated here, numerous metaphors were found that shape the way the future is expressed. The use of metaphors conveys a heightened sense of urgency regarding current global climate issues, possibly engaging the readership more effectively. Besides metaphors specifically referring to time, i.e. the present and the future, this analysis also includes metaphors that encompass broader concepts that contribute to the overall analysis.

An interesting metaphor that is well-known in ecolinguistics analyses was detected in an article published in *The Independent* during COP28, namely *running out of time*. Mühlhäusler suggests that when individuals say that they are running out of time, it suggests they have barely enough time to accomplish necessary tasks (5). Clarifying the original metaphor’s reference to time measured by sand in an hourglass, it becomes apparent that time would physically run out from the top bulb into the bottom bulb of the hourglass (5). He adds that “a linear perception of time underlies

the view of accelerated decline and the associated perception that time to arrest it is running out” (5). Emphasizing that predications about the end of the world are deeply embedded in Western cultures, the thought of imminent climate catastrophes has a long history too. Thus, referring once again to the final document produced during COP28, it is stated that there is no time left since it is running out, as can be seen in example (9).

(9) I think for the fossil fuel phase-out, what we’re looking for is language that does exclude this term unabated. [...] There’s no time left to mess around. We’re running out of time. (*The Independent*, “Fairytale Solutions” 2023)

Another noteworthy metaphor used within an article produced during COP28 concerning the warming limit of the planet is the phrase *minutes to midnight*. Most likely referring to the Doomsday Clock, the metaphor highlights how near humanity is to self-destruction, driven by the threats of human-made technologies and the worsening climate crisis. According to Lerner, the Doomsday Clock warns how many metaphorical minutes to midnight humanity still has left. The clock is set every year by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, who originally introduced it to represent the threat of a nuclear conflict – the potential use or exchange of nuclear weapons with devastating consequences for humanity. Today, it also refers to the climate crisis with its tipping points that one cannot come back from (Lerner n. pag.).

(10) Earth’s vital signs are failing [...] we are minutes to midnight for the 1.5C warming limit. [...] We can — you can — prevent planetary crash and burn. We have the technologies if we act now. (*The Independent*, “Hope of the World” 2023)

Overall, these examples of metaphors as linguistic devices are used to convey complex ideas in more accessible terms, shaping the way the public might perceive the context.

## Conclusion

The overall objective of this article was to investigate the interplay between climate change communication, language, and time, focusing specifically on how futurity is represented in discourse surrounding the United Nations Climate Change Conferences in 2022 and 2023. It questions the efficiency of current communication tools, specifically the broadsheet newspapers in this study’s corpus, and raises more general concerns about environmental discourse often being perceived as implausible, thus hindering action, particularly among readers who do not feel directly affected by certain climate issues.

Through the analysis of articles from three prominent media outlets, a small yet diverse corpus was established. This corpus reveals various patterns in the articulation of language, particularly in reference to the future. Firstly, the specific analysis of references to future calendar years in the articles reveals a shift in focus over time.

While COP27 articles center around achieving goals by 2025, COP28 articles increasingly discuss targets for 2030. This temporal shift indicates a progression towards longer-term climate objectives. While references to 2050 are also present, mentions of time frames beyond 2050 are less common, suggesting a focus on more immediate and mid-term climate goals. This evolving narrative underscores the importance of considering both short-term and long-term strategies in addressing the climate crisis. Moreover, temporal adjectives linked with the noun *future* portray the temporal concept as mostly proximate. In fact, short-term patterns like *near* and *foreseeable* are more prevalent while long-term patterns are mostly absent.

Also, the analysis of grammatical future tense markers within COP27 and COP28 articles underscores the markers' possible influence on readers' perceptions of environmental issues. With a clear prevalence of the grammatical future tense marker *will* over *going to*, the discourse surprisingly asserts expectations about future outcomes with a sense of inevitability.

Furthermore, the analysis of modal verbs reveals their significant role in conveying predictions, obligation, and possibilities regarding future actions related to climate change. Modal verbs such as *should*, *would*, and *need* are frequently used to suggest hypothetical scenarios and emphasize the necessity for recommended actions, particularly concerning annual future reference periods like 2025 and 2030. However, ambiguity is expressed in COP28 articles through modal verbs such as *could* in discussions about specific actions within the UN deal agreement, indicating ongoing negotiations and uncertainties. Overall, the strategic use of modal verbs shapes the discourse surrounding climate change by conveying varying levels of certainty and urgency regarding future actions.

In the examination of figurative language, an exploration of how futurity is depicted in these newspaper articles reveals numerous metaphors that portray the future in diverse ways. Phrases like *running out of time* and *minutes to midnight* underscore the urgency of action. Overall, these metaphors serve to simplify complex climate change concepts and engage readers emotionally towards addressing the future of the crisis.

To sum up, the main conclusion to be drawn from this study is the importance of futurity language in climate change communication, emphasizing its role in possibly shaping perceptions and influencing attitudes. Through the examination of representations of the future, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how climate change discourse is depicted in public discourse, particularly during one of the most important conferences on the subject. Finally, since we are in the midst of confronting the challenges of the ongoing climate crisis, it is necessary to continue exploring linguistic strategies such as discourse surrounding the future that effectively convey the urgency of the situation.

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## 12. Food for Thought: An Introduction to Contemporary Issues in Food Studies

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### Abstract

This article invites its readers to engage with the growing interest in food studies as an academic discipline. In the first place, it examines the rather strange phenomenon in which the importance of food and its consumption in world history is not corresponded by scholarly inquiry. In fact, historically, practically no one wrote on the subject. This requires us to return to the Bible, to the very roots of western civilisation, where food and pleasure appear sinful. A vivid contrast is provided by the contemporary world, where the presence of food programmes, celebrity chefs and similar has become global. Once we have an historical perspective, we can reach an understanding of what comprises food studies. The second half of the article examines our current interest in if not obsession with healthy diets. We also scrutinize the counterargument that proposes that we tend to understate the role science, in the form of convenience, has played in recent food history. The article concludes with suggestions as to how food studies can enrich our understanding of the arts.

### Keywords

Food studies, global economy and culture, foodie, foodways, food systems

In a volume dedicated to diversity, whether encountered in linguistics, literature, or other cultural manifestations, it is only right that food studies finds its just place in the discussion. This emergent and expanding discipline examines the diversity and interconnectedness of the global economy and culture, questioning many common assertions about the way we eat, drink, and live. Food studies is both an eclectic and potentially limitless field of studies.

Such a grand assertion might read to some as convincing but to others hollow. Consequently, I intend to avoid assessments of what is right and wrong. Instead, I will lead us down another path, namely, to try and make sense of a large subject in a few pages or so, hopefully inspiring some to pursue their own research as a result. I have therefore organized this paper into two sections. In the first, I briefly trace the role food has played historically, prior to attempting to tackle the arguably impossible task of concisely defining what food studies is. In the second, I will outline three contemporary issues. These comprise our common concern for a healthy diet, the opposing argument for convenience, and, finally, I will make a few suggestions as to how food studies can enrich our understanding of the arts. These ambitious tasks require rigorous selection, undertaken, I believe, without cherry-picking the

evidence. Rather than overload readers with a voluminous bibliography, I will refer often but not exclusively to two classic introductions to food studies: Warren Belasco's *Food: The Key Aspects* (2008) and a more recent publication, Willa Zehn's *Food Studies, a Hands-on Guide* (2019). For those wishing to find out more, these are good places to begin. Pointing out the paradoxical nature of beliefs always forms an integral part of my methodology.

Belasco's opening page informs us that "[f]ood is the first of the essentials of life, the world's largest industry, our most frequently indulged pleasure, the core of our most intimate social relationships. Despite its importance, food is often taken for granted, especially by academics, who have long considered food matters to be too coarse for scholarly attention" (1). His grand assertion invites us to see not only the fundamental role food plays in our lives, but how many disciplines that hypothesis implicates. If we accept that food is indeed "the world's largest industry", then we enter the realm of economics and globalization that runs along that lengthy chain from producer to consumer across seas and continents. If it is "our most frequently indulged pleasure" located at the core of social relationships, then sociology, psychology, and culture must be examined, too.

Zehn's opening chapter promotes two intertwined ideas. First, that our culture is much more foodie than, say, twenty or thirty years ago, and second, that contemporary students are likely to be foodies themselves (12). The first point is difficult to repudiate. For instance, the *OED* provides five examples of the term "celebrity chef", one from 1941, while the others date from this millennium ("Celebrity Chef, *N.*"). That said, it must be pointed out that the first use refers to a chef who cooks for celebrities rather than the contemporary meaning of a chef who has become a celebrity due to public recognition of their consummate skill. In some instances, which the future might clarify, it is not always clear in day-to-day discourse whether a wedge is being driven between a professional chef, like Ferran Adrià, Alain Ducasse, René Redzepi, or Thomas Keller, and those whose career is based primarily on media presence, such as the notorious Salt Bae or the much more likeable Julia Child, as well as that host of TV chefs, such as Jamie Oliver, whose programmes and franchises are so popular.

Zehn's emphasis on media presence bases itself on two important premises, which may help clarify her second proposal, students as foodies. Reporting events such as the *S. Pellegrino's* "The World's 50 Best Restaurants" is constant if not growing. Coverage extends to issues such as why this restaurant has risen or fallen in the list, the increasing geographical spread of prize-winners, and the individual awards, such as "The World's Best Female Chef", "Champions of Change", or "Estrella Damm's Chef's Choice Award". Expansion into diversity reflects not only a growing interest on behalf of the first world, but also the expanding market for food culture aimed at new consumers in developing countries themselves, South America being

the prime example. The Michelin Guide Award Ceremonies attract even more media attention to the extent that it is difficult to avoid *not* hearing about the latest three-star establishment, though we rarely hear about those chefs who turn down such awards. In short, the awards themselves and the literature about them both contribute to the extensive presence of elite food culture in the media. And it is perhaps the connection between “foodie” and “elite” that created controversy amongst people in general and students in particular. If “foodie” had clearer associations with other food issues such as food security, perhaps they would have accepted the term more readily.

The question that now has to be answered is why food studies has taken so long to materialize as a discipline, as all this emphasis on the contemporary scene lacks historical perspective. Belasco’s pronouncement looks paradoxical: he stresses both ubiquity and absence in the same breath. After all, the Bible is full of references to food. We all know that Adam and Eve ate a very special fruit. If we look at the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25 and 27, a classic account of pastoral life, Esau gives away his birthright for a meal. In the New Testament, in John 2, we witness the miracle of transforming water into wine at the marriage at Cana, later to become the subject of Paolo Veronese’s huge canvas hung in the Louvre. Less to do with celebration than necessity, we would turn to Matthew 14, where five loaves and two fish feed five thousand people, additionally leaving twelve baskets of leftovers. Other examples abound elsewhere; let me just mention a couple: the Dutch Golden Age still-life pictures of food; Marcel Proust’s trigger for his vast remembrance that derives from a humble cup of tea and madeleine.

It seems bewildering therefore that on the one hand food has a considerable presence in culture but at the same time it has received little or scarce attention in academia until recent times. How has this come about? As a contrast to the marriage at Cana, we should observe a different scenario of celebration, Belshazzar’s feast, as narrated in Daniel 5. Like at Cana, we find wine, but the scene does not represent the celebration of a legitimate event but the ostentation of wealth and earthly power in Babylon, something that will be evident when Daniel explains the writing on the wall; Belshazzar will be murdered that same night. Enjoyment is legitimate at Cana but it is excessive and ungodly in Babylon. The difficulty that arises in separating the moral from the immoral partly explains why food studies has had a low profile. It is specifically the association of pleasures of the body with sin that has prevailed for centuries, despite the counterculture provided by, amongst many others, the writings of François Rabelais or the rustic paintings of Pieter Breughel, where the pleasures of the table take on a central role.

The idea that pleasure of eating at celebrations forms part of a culture or even a civilization will always be an awkward point to prove, as for almost all of humankind’s history, we have struggled to survive on a diet that is highly dependent on one

cereal alone, in other words, we have eaten not to live but to survive. This has been the lot of most of the world's population for most of our history down to current times. As an extreme example, the historian Frank Dikötter points out in *Mao's Great Famine* (2010) that 45 million Chinese citizens perished as a result of failed agricultural reform in the guise of collectivisation during "The Great Leap Forward", between 1958 and 1962. In George Orwell's *1984* (1949), it is debatable whether enjoying sex or food is the greater crime though, as Belasco advises, "[t]he connections between food and sex are primal. Both are central to biological reproduction and to the establishment of strong social ties" (35). But if food is the real culprit here, that simply begs the question of whether for the enforcers of totalitarianism the act of eating or forming "strong social ties" weighs more as an indication of guilt. In other words, austerity has two clearly identifiable constituents: the extent to which it is necessary for the physical survival of others; and the extent to which the act of eating together is potentially transgressive, not for what is put in the mouth but for the potential threatening discourse that might issue forth.

This symbiosis, Zehn points out, has a long history in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In contrast, in the classical tradition, I am thinking of Plato in particular, rationality is located in social gatherings. Arguably the most influential of all, *The Symposium*, evolves not only from togetherness but from the conviviality of a social meal. This simply does not work for Christianity. As Zehn points out, the pleasures of eating are inseparable from gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins. She examines the various types of excess articulated by Thomas Aquinas, of which I would highlight two: *nimis*, eating too much, and *ardenter*, with too much enthusiasm or eagerness. Zehn argues that the latter is the worst form of gluttony. The adulterations and simplification of Aquinas's thought, evident in the countless websites run by many Christian organisations, promote the idea that gluttony is nothing more than excess.

This might sound like hair-splitting, but there is more to the picture than that. If we return to *Summa Theologica*, 2:2 148, we will see that Aquinas himself is well aware of the fluctuating status that gluttony has in the ranking of the worst sins one can commit. His emphasis on the link to sex, or concupiscence, a much closer translation, would suggest that the more libidinous the effects of eating are, the worse the sin, which would seem to underline precisely what *ardenter* infers. Hence, that typical British caricature of the bloated eighteenth-century curate, so stuffed with capons and port that he is unable to move from his seat, is a tad less sinful than the rake, whose eagerness for good food is matched by his desire for the youthful maidservant serving at table. The articulation of these differences leaves unanswered a problem raised in the Bible. The case of Jacob and Esau suggests the meals have a deep social relevance in early patriarchal societies, both in law and ritual, hence, the birthright (Genesis 25) and the patriarch's blessing (Genesis 27). But what about the miracle performed at Cana? We could argue that moderation is the antidote to gluttony, but

that runs up against two obstacles: the prohibition of drinking alcohol prescribed most emphatically by Islam, and second, that excess is likely to occur in legitimising celebrations such as marriages.

Instead of trying to unravel an extremely knotty problem, a satisfactory answer might propose that the role of gluttony and excess remains controversial because there is a distinctly grey area between “enough” and “too much” that becomes even greyer when celebrations become raucous. The Christian emphasis on frugality as the right path to follow, that we should eat to live rather than enjoy food, is eloquently expounded in Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen’s 1957 novella *Babette’s Feast*, turned into a highly successful film by Gabriel Axel in 1987, an adaptation that transfers the action from Norway to Denmark. Good food and wine animate the otherwise abstemious and incommunicative neighbours. As the dinner progresses, they become more sociable, a situation that might have been produced by the products themselves, a view that is, I suggest, a simplification. We are not witnessing a watertight case of *in vino veritas*. Zehn, Belasco, and countless other scholars emphasize that a communal meal is a social event, and it is the coming-together that stimulates conversation and neighbourliness, aided and abetted by excellent food, and wine. Blixen’s tale shows how well things have turned out, whereas the Christmas dinner narrated by James Joyce at the end of the first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-15) illustrates how social meals can have the reverse effect, bringing to the surface the problems of nutrition, religion, gender, history, politics, and so on that riddle turn-of-the-century Dublin. Both accounts share a common platform: a social meal stimulates communication.

We are now close to understanding if not defining food studies. It certainly deals with food but, as Belasco states, “[i]t is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (15). In other words, it involves a study of one or various products both in their most elemental form and/or the semiotics of that product. To take one example, which we will return to later: quinoa. We could and should study its cultivation, its role in the diet of the indigents who consume it, its exportation to the first world, its place in the western diet, its availability in different social locations, and so on. These are all material subjects. Yet we could move to a different level, though neither a superior nor inferior one, simply something different. We come on to the significance of its consumption, what quinoa communicates beyond its nutritional value. Why do we eat it? Why do some people prefer it over kilometre-zero products? If we ordered a dish in a restaurant, what does that say about us and the establishment? And so on.

Zehn gives the following working definition, distinguishing between food systems and foodways. The former focuses on “production and distribution issues” (19), the latter “consider[s] how food events impact consumption habits, as well as the foods

themselves [...] this term grows out of its connections with folklore and folkways” (20). I would add that *Food and Foodways* is also the name of one of the major academic journals dealing with the anthropology of food. Zehn also pleads with us not to lose sight of the fact that the distinction between the two concepts is not clear-cut.

Yet, the briefest survey of university courses round the world will show how deeply rooted this division is. For example, the European Master in Food Studies offered by Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands, University College Cork, Ireland, AgroParisTech, France, and Lund University, Sweden, is designed primarily for students with a BSc in Food Technology; lab practice in their curriculum is required. Partner companies include Tetra Pak, Mondeléz, Unilever, and Nestlé. A rather different angle is taken by the University of Toronto, where a Minor programme in food studies is offered by Liberal Arts, concentrating on the historical and social aspects. Similar programmes in arts and social sciences are being offered more frequently. Perhaps in your own institution that is already the case, and if not, will soon be.

Foodways might then appear to be a bandwagon on which everyone wants to jump, as predicted by Zehn’s remarks on the presence of food in the media in such places as the Food Channel and YouTube. Similarly, the nexus between science, and social science and arts confirms the contemporary belief that borders should be crossed and interdisciplinarity fostered. To use an epistemological metaphor, it is precisely the separation between mind and body, so deeply entrenched in our culture, that has held back food studies for generations. Belasco puts it more eloquently: “Such issues require that we think about matters political, historical, economic, sociocultural, and scientific *all at once*. As generalists, we study food as a *system*. Such holistic thinking actually restores our sense of power and humanity, for when it comes to eating, humans *are* generalists, i.e. omnivores” (7).

There are few more powerful words amongst educators nowadays than “holistic”. We cannot understand the role of snacking, or grazing as it is sometime called, without considering the declining role of the formal meal in our culture (foodways). At the same time, snacking increases our sugar intake, so questions of health and economics enter the scene (food systems). In short, this is a real chicken-and-egg puzzle, as the two concepts are inextricable. Perhaps, behind Belasco’s joyful assertiveness of the role of the humanities in food studies lies the belief that the “partner companies” do not want us to know that much about the science that lies behind their products, so it becomes our duty to find out. Whatever the right or wrong of the matter, food studies is essentially multi- and interdisciplinary.

In the second part of this paper, three issues will be analysed: our concern for a healthy diet; the sceptical riposte formulated by Rachel Laudan; and finally, how food studies can contribute to our understanding of the arts. Let us begin with the first subject.

One of the world's top restaurants is Eleven Madison Park in New York, run by the Swiss-born Chef, Daniel Humm. Its ten to eleven course tasting menu currently costs \$365 per person. It is expensive but not very different from similar establishments in the USA or Europe. Indeed, it would not take much effort to find a more expensive establishment. What makes Eleven Madison Park unique is that, unlike its competitors, its offerings are completely plant-based.<sup>42</sup> Humm's decision has been a recent one, the revamped Eleven Madison Park opened in 2021, abandoning the previous practice of serving dishes based on the ingredients and preparation of *haute cuisine*.<sup>43</sup> What motivated the change?

The date is significant; this new policy came into being during the second year of Covid. Catering, due to its labour-intensive structure, suffered tremendously during that time. It is certainly not an occupation that lends itself to telecommuting! During the pandemic, Humm and his team had not been idle, serving, as the restaurant's website informs us, over 1,000,000 meals "for frontline workers and underserved communities and distributed them to churches, shelters, and food banks" ("Eleven Madison Park"). Humm's charitable activities have not received as much publicity as, say, José Andrés and his World Central Kitchen, but the point here is not to emphasize the relative contribution of two individuals as much as to indicate that the world of fine-dining and charity work may go hand-in-hand.

This prepares us for tackling the thorny question of why Humm dropped caviar for kale. Humm, in numerous interviews available in print and online, states that reverting to the formula of his previous model was not an option; he felt the need to reinvent himself and fine dining. In other words, in financial terms, this change became nothing less than a huge gamble. He also plays the health card, as his most recent book illustrates through its title, *Eat More Plants* (2024). In addition, he emphasizes that the previous format was not sustainable, and here the stress lies not simply on the economics of managing a restaurant, but sustainability in its widest, most ecological meaning. In short, a plant-based restaurant represents a complete change of ideology in order to bring it in line with contemporary concerns about the survival of the planet, a trend which has a relatively short but nevertheless impactful history, particularly in Scandinavian cuisine. Those who might find Humm's reasoning suspect propose that he has astutely found a very successful new business formula long before any possible rival has done so. Whatever the ins and outs of the

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<sup>42</sup> As a caveat, it would be an interesting topic to see how "plant-based" and "vegan" interplay in discourse. When and by whom is one term preferred over the other?

<sup>43</sup> In a radical change of policy, Chief Humm has announced that from 14 October 2025, a non-plant-based menu will be available using protein derived from fish, shellfish and poultry. Subsequently, diners may opt either for the plant-based or the more traditional omnivore haute cuisine menu. Both cost \$365. However, it is noticeable that the discourse used on the restaurant's webpage suggests that plant-based represents the norm, and non-plant options are there if you so wish.

debate, the undeniable fact is that, since 2021, in the land of KFC and the hamburger, healthy dining has an establishment with three Michelin stars. To conclude, leaves need not lag behind lobster in the culinary stakes.

That might seem obvious till we recall that health and pleasure can become distant cousins. And the United States, the fast-food nation *par excellence*, provided an example that became global. During the nineteenth century, nutritional science, Zehn affirms, promoted products that were healthy rather than tasty (142). The most celebrated figure was John Harvey Kellogg, whose recipes for good health were satirized in Alan Parker's film, *The Road to Welville* (1994). It is certainly ironic, in the light of his crusade for health, that some of his breakfast cereals, due to their high sugar content, are now judged unhealthy. The United States is notorious for its obesity problem, by no means unique in the world, caused by what Belasco denotes as a "toxic food environment", brought about by "junk food advertising, [...] 'supersizing' of portions [...] loss of cooking skills [...] Obesity is a symptom of poverty, racism, and sexism" (95). In the light of such a damning pronouncement, it is not surprising that health concerns become paramount.

However healthier a more varied, more plant-based diet might be, its links to sustainability, surely one of its major reasons for being, remain tenuous, as the following example shows. Quinoa, a grain that originated in the Andean Highlands in Bolivia and Peru, is now visible in many supermarkets, especially in prepared lunch salads or for grazing at any hour of the day. To say that it is seen by many as a miracle food, gluten-free, containing fibre, antioxidants, plus a lengthy etcetera might be an exaggeration, yet only a slight one. What can go wrong with consuming this wonderful grain that even reached breakfast cereals, such as Cheerios Ancient Grains? Is it not an example of food diversity for a good cause?

Before answering, we have to consider two further issues, one having to do with foodways and the other with systems. Supporters of diversity always encounter one obstacle: Columbusing. This term refers to discovering something that was already there, indeed, the necessary first step that leads to cultural appropriation. That is perhaps inevitable, but the economic consequences can be devastating. Quinoa has become a cash crop, which has resulted in two damaging outcomes (Zehn 173). The increasing demand of the Global North has led to short-term gains for farmers, but over-production has led to decreasing soil quality, as fallow time has been reduced. One knock-on effect of cash crops, as is the case here, is that the communities that produce them cannot afford to buy their former staple for their own everyday use. This cycle of the causes and effects of supply and demand affect not simply quinoa but any crop that it is "discovered" and promoted in similar ways.

That leaves us with one final concern which will bring us back to Saint Augustine via J.H. Kellogg. Do we eat quinoa because it tastes good? That is a question I leave unanswered, but it forms part of what Zehn labels "this ideology of nutritionism.

The dietary advice that consumers receive prioritizes the consumption of specific nutrients and vitamins—while systematically decontextualizing how these nutrients and vitamins relate to broader systems of health and well-being” (142). As we saw, decontextualizing extends to ignoring the effects consumption unleashes on producers’ communities. A rather more pedestrian product that requires contextualisation is fruit juice. It is intuitively classified as healthy, despite the lack of fibre that induces consumption in large quantities, to judge from the discarded litre packs in my local gym. Very few people would eat a dozen or so oranges at one sitting, but many more would consume the equivalent in juice. In other words, on its own, taken in moderation, it is healthy, but healthiness requires us to examine our diet as a whole rather than fix our attention on one part of it. Such reasoning proceeds to consider one topic that remains almost a taboo: the extent to which nutritionism determines our food choices, rather than availability, cost, tradition, or preference. In our times, are people’s diets based primarily on what is believed to be healthy rather than what they like? To what extent is this ideology a familial rather than individual concern? The reason why this is an intriguing debate has a lot to do with the two gentlemen mentioned a few sentences back. Again, we have to reflect on the nexus between pleasure and eating. Have the frugality of the saint and the vegetarian puritanism of Kellogg gone global? Are we kidding ourselves when we consume sustainable coffee, tea, or chocolate? These are just some of the issues that face us in 2025 and beyond.

The concern for a healthy, sustainable diet often has its roots – if you excuse the pun – in the distrust of the technologization of food production. Nostalgia advertising, using names that conjure up an idyllic, rural past, partly obscures the industrial process. Think, for example, of the successful Italian firm Mulino Bianco (the white mill), or the American pancake company, Aunt Jemima (since 2021, Pearl Milling Company), or the widespread use of such words as “home-baked”. What does “fresh” mean nowadays? Modernity has replaced taste with convenience but not necessarily responsibility (Belasco 7). Distrust of science led to genetically modified food becoming labelled “Frankenstein food”, while the ultimate villain is currently ultra-processed food (UPF).

Nonetheless, as Zehn points out, even making a slice of toast puts science on show: “presliced bread was a radical technology” (119). A toaster is “radical”, too, if we consider the alternative systems that have been and are available. Besides, a toaster requires electricity, which is by no means universal. At the same time, the nutritional value of a slice of toast is minimal, hence the growing demand for healthier and more traditional cereals like spelt. What Zehn asks us to reconsider is the extent to which industrial food products are as bad as claimed and whether traditional products and methods are as good and healthy as their proponents would have us believe.

One vocal opponent of much health literature is the food historian Rachel Laudan, and in particular her controversial 2001 article, “Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food.” Published over twenty years ago, its – presumably intentionally – provocative tone represents a critique of those who too rapidly dismiss industrialized food, including the powerful Slow Food Movement. She labels them “Culinary Lud-dites” (36). For reasons of space, I will just address three of her claims. “Fresh and natural”, she argues “has become an article of faith” (36). However, she asserts that a predilection for fresh and natural is a very modern idea, as humankind has for centuries expended great effort in improving the original. “Natural often tasted bad. Fresh meat was rank and tough, fresh milk warm and unmistakably a bodily excretion; fresh fruits (dates and grapes being rare exceptions outside the tropics) were inedibly sour, fresh vegetables bitter” (36-37). The art or technology of preservation, curing, and similar improved the digestibility and taste of food. What Laudan does not mention, but is also relevant here, is that the domestication of fruit and vegetables – to make them tastier and easier to digest – was accompanied by the domestication of animals for the same purpose. Second, Laudan believes that most national, traditional dishes are not only post-industrial but “a lot of them were dependent on [industrialisation]” (39). She proposes that “Hungarian goulash was unknown before the nineteenth century, and not widely accepted until after the invention of a paprika-grinding mill in 1859” (40). She provides many other examples.

The third point of interest to our discussion is the question of time. Both historical and literary evidence demonstrate that in agricultural societies, families dedicated much time to the preparation of food. As Laudan puts it,

Nor should we think it was only the British, not famed for their cuisine, who were delighted with industrialized foods. Everyone was, whether American, Asian, African, or European. In the first half of the twentieth century, Italians embraced factory-made pasta and canned tomatoes. In the second half of the century, Japanese women welcomed factory-made bread because they could sleep in a little longer instead of having to get up to make rice. Similarly, Mexicans seized on bread as a good food to have on hand when there was no time to prepare tortillas. Working women in India are happy to serve commercially made bread during the week, saving the time-consuming business of making chapatis for the weekend. (42)

This evocative passage expounds the well-known idea that modernity contributes to freeing women from repetitive, laborious, time-consuming tasks in the kitchen. I wonder, though, how many readers share Laudan’s effusiveness, evident in her word “delighted”, which lies a long way from a perfunctory “accepted” or a more moderate “welcomed”. “Delighted” is a strong term indeed.

So where are we now? Is there a way out of what seems to be a maze: if we eat healthy quinoa, we can be accused of Columbusing; if we eat UPF, it is convenient but unhealthy. I would propose two solutions. First, at the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that sometimes food studies hypotheses seem paradoxical, and hopefully that, rather than confusion, represents a valid view of reality. Many of the problems

must be approached from different perspectives, and it is precisely this complexity which we must embrace in order to achieve coherence. For example, is Humm's project sustainable or merely a shrewd example of capitalist enterprise? I would propose that one would be naïve to judge things in such a Manichean way. There is no reason a phenomenon should be exclusively one thing rather than the other. As it is such a successful enterprise, from what moral high ground is one justified in condemning it? Second, Laudan's article veers, it would seem, precisely towards such simplification. "Cultural Luddism" would not win a prize for linguistic diplomacy. However, Laudan does not mock wokeism and direct us all towards the paradise of Taco Bell. On the contrary, she argues that Luddites are nostalgic and essentially elitist, an argument that carries much weight, but additionally proposes that issues of taste and health should be separated from judgements on industrialized food products. Just because they emerge from a factory does not mean they are inherently unhealthy or, on the contrary, nutritious. The two strands of the discussion have to be disentangled, as one of the reasons for the current confusion about diets, and healthy diets in particular, stems from advertising and informative campaigns that serve one purpose: to sell through confusion, as the quinoa controversy demonstrates.

It also reveals another phenomenon that I mentioned earlier, namely the difference between food systems and foodways, and the rather hazy area that exists between the two. For example, the issues of supply and demand, the price hike for native consumers, are clearly matters that have identifiably material origins and consequences, whereas demand, if stimulated by the ideology of nutritionism, would seem to belong to the realm of foodways. However, if nutritionism is an ideology that affects demand, there is little point in trying to achieve a working model that explains where one ends and the other begins. That is precisely the contribution food studies accomplishes. Its interdisciplinary nature allows it to cross academic boundaries. Belasco's stress on the importance of generalists and holistic approaches reinforces this idea.

Our final topic, through a brief analysis of a well-known painting, underscores the situation even further. The artwork in question is *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* (see Figure 1, p. 181) painted by two artists from the city of Antwerp: Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), and Jan Breughel the Elder (1568-1625). This picture can be viewed at the Mauritshuis in The Hague.<sup>44</sup> The museum also provides a short, informative video ("Jan Brueghel the Elder & Peter Paul Rubens"). We know that Rubens painted the human figures and horse, basically the material on the left, and Breughel, the animals and the rest. Whether or not we are interested in food studies,

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<sup>44</sup> For a digital version of the painting and the information video, please follow this link to the Mauritshuis: <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/253-the-garden-of-eden-with-the-fall-of-man>.

this painting reworks a highly familiar scene in which the Fall of Man is hastened by the disobedient woman, enhanced by the proximity of hand, apple, and serpent.



Figure 1: Jan Brueghel the Elder & Peter Paul Rubens, *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man*, 1615. Mauritshuis, The Hague. Reproduced with permission.

We can also note that the woman's upright position indicates hubris, in stark contrast to the humble, pliant, seated Adam. A standard reading would highlight gender roles, where evil runs down the tree through the hands of Eve; the apple is both close to Satan in her left whilst close to Adam in her right. We could also discuss the idyllic nature of the scene, evident in the vast catalogue of animals. We can see a domestic pooch by Eve's feet, local farm animals, and European species such as rabbits, dogs, coots, and mallards, and more exotic animals like lions, tigers, camels, and an emu or ostrich. If we had more space, we could discuss the iconography surrounding each beast, but suffice it to say that the scene falls in line with Isaiah's depiction of the messianic age, "[t]e wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). Disobedience will wreck everything, while there is no doubt as to who is to blame. The more beautiful the scene remains in our consciousness, the greater the loss we have suffered and the greater the blame that can be laid on Eve. As a curiosity, red hair, traditionally seen as transgressive, is perfectly acceptable in Eden.

Coming from food studies, other interesting proposals suggest themselves, though naturally you are invited to find more for yourselves. Idyllic beauty, judging from the two nude figures, involves, in the case of the male, a degree of muscularity, but

clearly does not demand the current requirement of a six-pack or anything else derived from nutritionism. Rather than an illustration of hubris, the figure of Eve, reinforced by the presence of an apple in both of her hands, intimates that the woman is predestined to be the gatherer and provider. There are two human figures in the company of many animals, both domesticated and wild. Noticeably, the largest is the horse, so fundamental to many of the world's civilisations, whether nomadic, pastoral, or early industrial; here, it lives freely rather than as a working-animal in civilian or military life. The scene indicates, I would propose, that the cohabitation of so many species indicates that the animals feel no threat either from humans or from other animals. In other words, perfect harmony existed because our first parents were herbivores. Subsequently, one of the consequences of the Fall is that we became omnivores, which goes some way towards the explaining why the cooked rather than the raw has such a notable presence in the story of Jacob and Esau. The early pastoral figures of Genesis, Cain, Abel, Jacob, Esau, and so on, are rude if not sinful, and this is highlighted by their meat-eating habits. In other words, the Fall was accompanied by the Fall from a plant-based diet. Adam and Eve, at least before their expulsion, were vegans; they simply chose the wrong fruit.

This example will hopefully encourage readers to concentrate on the presence of food systems and foodways in their study of language, literature, and culture. I am not proposing a revolution, simply suggesting that awareness of these two concepts illuminates canonical authors and texts. Here are a few suggestions to follow up. Earlier, I mentioned Joyce because he is arguably the writer with the keenest awareness of foodways, but his contemporary, Virginia Woolf, particularly in the lengthy preparation, consumption, and consequences of the monumental dinner in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), shares the same incisive awareness of the role food and social meals play in our lives. What about Paul Cézanne's quasi-obsessive representation of apples? Charles Dickens's awareness of food systems and foodways dominates the narrative of *Great Expectations* (1860-61) throughout. Other writers are more overtly conversant on the subject; take, for example, Günter Grass's *Der Butt* (*The Flounder*) (1977). Two films that extend foodways to metaphors of consumption and self-destruction would be Richard Fleischer's cult film *Soylent Green* (1973), and Marco Ferreri's *La grande bouffe*, released in the same year. In all these cases, I would urge you to look at the role food plays as, to cite Zehn, food communicates, it has its own powerful semiotics: "if food was simply nutrition, there would be nothing much to talk about" (35).

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