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The Interchangeability of Color in Hurston and Mitchell
By Kimberly Coleman

**THE FAILURE OF GENDER PERFORMANCE AND THE NEED FOR
POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING***
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MIMICKING THE DEVIL:
Dimorphous Identities for Corporate Women
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CAUGHT IN THE COTTON:

THE INTERCHANGEABILITY OF COLOR IN HURSTON AND MITCHELL

By Kimberly Coleman

There are many similarities between Katie Scarlett O'Hara of Margaret Mitchell's infamous novel about the Civil War and Reconstruction in the American South, *Gone With the Wind*, and Janie May Crawford of Zora Neale Hurston's tale of identity and love, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Because there has never been anything written on this topic, one can assume that almost all critics claim that there are no possible similarities between *Gone with the Wind* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, even being emphatic enough to proclaim that such comparisons are insensitive and inherently racist. According to Grace Elizabeth Hale, "[t]o be American is to be both black and white" (qtd. in Railton 2). Since Hurston and Mitchell are of different ethnicities, critics ignore most similarities between their characters. The surface issues of race and gender take precedence in any conversation concerning *Gone with the Wind* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While there are marked differences between the two female protagonists, there are also elements that join them across racial and sexual lines, creating bridges that often go unnoticed. The similarities between Scarlett and Janie in these novels—though they were written without knowledge of one another—are the authors' attempts to

harness the female energy in a historical moment between the suffrage movement and the later twentieth-century feminist movement. Through these characters, both authors advocate to southern women the need to embrace their own individuality and take control of their own lives outside of the bonds of male society *and* racial lines.

Margaret Mitchell discusses a controversial period in United States history where there was much racial and gender turmoil, and much of her novel is rightfully criticized for its overly racist and sexist language. It is interesting to note that “Margaret Mitchell wrote a strikingly white novel, so white in fact that some of the white characters seem black” (Williamson 97). The story is even more racist than it would otherwise have been because Mitchell grew up in a sheltered life and had little exposure to the real world beyond Atlanta. Critics often cite the portrayal of the relationship of rich, white, slave owners and their ‘happy’ slaves. The story of *Gone with the Wind* is that of the struggle of a young woman trying to keep her head above water and keep her quickly declining family out of the worst situations after the deaths of their lovingly controlling matriarch and patriarch. However, the story that readers overlook is Scarlett’s coming into her self, the female awakening of Scarlett among the mass of death and destruction around her. Scarlett, like most aging heroines, struggles to find an identity that pleases her in a world that she fits into the physical standards of beauty, but is mentally ahead of her time.

In seeming contrast to this epic novel is the story of a young, black woman learning to become herself through the adversity presented by her elders and men in her community. As Carol Batker says in her article “*Love Me Like I Like to Be*”: *The Sexual Politics of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, the Classic Blues, and the Black Woman’s Club Movement*, “*Their Eyes* concerns itself with the question of African American women’s sexual identity” (205). Janie is a gentle woman who longs for the passion, excitement, and freedom of a real romance, but she faces many obstacles in her path to true love and self-enlightenment. She struggles from a childhood made

difficult by the neuroses born of the violent experiences of both her mother, who abandons her, and her grandmother, who has been beaten down by a harsh reality. Janie did not grow up with a real sense of her physical and spiritual identity, and she must work through a couple of marriages to finally find that innate passion of not only a woman of the American South, but of a black woman and her own identity.

When comparing the novels, more often than not, the reader overlooks the plethora of similarities between *Scarlett* and *Janie*.¹ It is interesting to note that both of these landmark novels of southern literature appeared a year apart from one another in the 1930s and concern passionate women, and above all, love. During their novels, both women metaphorically ‘try on’ several different male personalities before finding the one that fits each best in partnership and marriage. These two women’s names create an identity for them by their very sounds: Katie Scarlett O’Hara sounds decidedly like the daughter of a feisty, Irish immigrant and Janie Mae Crawford sounds like a girl from the country. Neither woman can initially claim her identity because she is so wrapped up in the expected standards and opinions of those people around her.

Critics focus on the whiteness of *Scarlett* and the blackness of *Janie*, the racism of *Gone with the Wind*, and the liberating nature of *Their Eyes are Watching God*. What is overlooked in the conversation is the whiteness of *Janie* and the blackness of *Scarlett*. Even their appearances are the opposite of what is expected. Because *Scarlett* is a tomboy and spends an immense amount of time playing with the boys and riding horses with her father growing up, she is described as tan or dark. *Janie*, however, is almost given an alter ego by her light skin because her father was a white,

¹ Margaret Mitchell published her novel in May of 1936, and from a letter written by Hurston to Mr. William Stanley Hoole, written during her time in Haiti, in which she says, “My next book is to be a novel about a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and the earth” (Letters 366). From this we know that she had the idea for the story of *Janie* in January of the same year, publishing it in 1937. The novels first appear to be playing off of one another, but the only commiserating factor is that they were both women writers experiencing the Great Depression and its social changes.

slave-owning rapist. Even in her relationship with Tea Cake, her skin sets her apart from the community in the eyes of her neighbors, and he beats her to show the community that she is not better than her lover. Additionally, neither woman ever truly escapes her plantation/manor house roots, but by the end of the two respective novels, each woman does manage to confuse the racial and sexual boundaries within her novel/genre.

The first and most obvious comparison between these two vivacious women is that they both have multiple marriages within the course of the novels and both culminate in finding and losing the love of her life. Rhett grabs Scarlett's attention from the first scene at the Wilkes' barbeque to the very last page. However, she does not admit her interest in him even to herself until nearly the moment when Rhett gets fed up with her childish, spoiled attitude and her obsession with Ashley Wilkes and leaves her. Scarlett goes through two husbands by the time she marries Rhett. Her first husband is Charles Hamilton, a young man around her own age who happens to be the brother of Melanie Hamilton, the woman Scarlett sees as her arch-enemy and competitor for the affection of the man she views as her one true love, Ashley. She marries Charles not because she has any real love for him. In fact, she almost resents him for his gentle spirit and shy gullibility, but she can use him to hurt both Ashley for not agreeing to love and to marry her and Melanie for taking Ashley away from her. Conveniently, Charles dies of disease before the war really has a chance to begin

Her second husband, through a marriage of convenience, is a man named Frank Kennedy, whom Scarlett manipulates away from her sister Suellen. She marries Frank Kennedy because she needs something only a wealthy, new business can give her--enough money to pay the raised taxes on her family home Tara after the end of the war so the family can continue to live in it comfortably as in pre-war years and not as poor, white trash. To Scarlett, and all the O'Hara clan, including the house slaves, death is better than allowing poor, white trash to take over Tara. In

her first two marriages, she shows no concern for the emotions of the people around her, including alienating Suellen, only using the marriages as a catalyst to get what she wants or needs, usually to keep her and the people who reside on the plantation alive and fed. In this way, Scarlett is the perfect, strong woman, but she works in the dirt, in the fields, and with animals, which are all occupations that were reserved for the black slaves or white trash workers; she further confuses her color identity as she, for a time, leads the life of a field hand. Mardy Condé criticizes this very idea of the Southern woman taking over the plantation as a stereotype of Southern literature: “In each novel the heroine takes over the plantation and wages war against poverty, and marauding Yankees” (212).

However, there is a softer, more feminine side of Scarlett, and it is this side that gives the reader the feeling that she keeps marrying because she cannot find her perfect man, even when he is right in front of her face. This situation is almost painfully obvious the first time she sets eyes on Rhett Butler: “[H]er eyes fell on a stranger, standing alone in the hall, staring at her in a cool impertinent way that brought her up sharply with a mingled feeling of feminine pleasure that she had attracted a man and an embarrassed sensation that her dress was too low in the bosom” (Mitchell 134). The reader sees what Scarlett does not for several hundred pages: that she has an instant connection to Rhett, but she is too immature and fixated on her idea of the perfect man to take heed of her initial reaction to the dark, handsome stranger at the Wilkes’ barbeque.

Thus, Scarlett looks for love in all the wrong places and in men who cannot give it to her like Ashley, missing her chance to be a young woman who blossoms naturally into her own mental and sexual maturity. She is so obsessed with this one person that she sees as exactly what she wants in a man in every respect that she misses her chances to find real, fulfilling love and satisfied happiness early in her life. It is this obsession with the pale, intellectual, weak person of Ashley that keeps Scarlett from embracing her rich, internal blackness from her childhood. As the

reader sees in the novel, it is the dark, almost exotic rebellion of Rhett's that calls to Scarlett's dark passion, and eventually makes her realize that he embodies all of the adult romance she had longed for. This useless fixation on Ashley Wilkes happens to be both the one thing Rhett points out to Scarlett most often and the thing that bothers him most about her. He only admits this sentiment to Melanie Hamilton when Scarlett falls down the stairs and miscarries her first wanted baby, which was conceived in a night of savage passion with Rhett; he wanted her to have the same besotted, obsessive passion for him as she holds for Ashley: "I was mad, crazy with jealousy. She never cared for me and I thought I could make her care. But she never cared. She doesn't love me. She never has" (Mitchell 1348). Both Rhett and Scarlett have a fiery passion for one another, but they miss the chance to be really in love with each other because they lack an ability to confront each other and communicate their real emotions in the white society. Their miscommunication is just another part of their mixed-up identities, like Scarlett with her inability to fit into the mold of rich, white woman, and Rhett's inability to act as a rich, socially proper, white Southern man. However, it is also Rhett who, while encouraging Scarlett to be rebellious and accept her true nature, pulls her back into the role of the gentle, Southern woman by selling her business and setting her up in a big house to be domestic and a mother. Together, Rhett and Scarlett fulfill the role of rebels, retaliating against society, much like the black slaves did during the Pre-Civil War slave rebellions. Scarlett is too guarded to allow herself to drop the immature, fantasy version of Ashley she thinks she loves and fall into the reality of a loving, equal relationship with someone who cares for, challenges, and sees the real, socially confused woman in her.

Unlike Scarlett and Rhett, Janie's love affair with Tea Cake is fast and gentle, going from their first meeting to running away to the Florida Everglades to live and work in a relatively short space of time. Tea Cake flirts with her and pursues her until they are both completely besotted with one another and feel unable to exist

without the other. Tea Cake is also a good deal younger than Janie, and their love is fresh and tender, which is unlike the relationships she had with her previous two husbands. Tea Cake is a part of Janie's pear tree metaphor, instead of being a creature that uses the tree and its fruit for his own gain: "[O]nly Tea Cake – with Woods for a last name – and Janie, who at the chronological end of the novel sees her life 'like a great tree in a leaf' (20), experience the kind of relationship imagined in the pear tree and appear as the racially and sexually vibrant, 'undiminished human beings' (85)" (Meisenhelder 64).

Like Scarlett, Janie's first marriage is one of convenience, but unlike Scarlett, her marriage to Logan Killicks is more of an arranged, loveless marriage to a much older man. Nanny, her grandmother, arranges the match to keep Janie out of what she sees as the trouble that Janie's mother got into as opposed to someone for whom Janie has real, strong emotions. In Nanny's eyes, Logan also offers economic stability, elevating the young girl to the white woman's position on the porch. He is a cranky man whom Janie leaves because he treats her more as property, a mule, and an aid to tending his fields than a treasured and beloved wife. Her marriage to Logan pulls her out of her childhood and into the role of the protected, cared-for wife. As their time living together after the wedding goes on, he treats her more and more like a servant and worker on his land, and even when she works the fields with him and says if they bought another mule, she could help him get twice as much work done, he bullies her into quieting down and taking his orders. Her life with Logan is not a happy one, and after she asks him what he would do if she left him for another man, she leaves him for the smooth-talking Jody Starks.

Jody takes Janie away from the rough life of Logan's farm and builds her a town from the ground up with her on his arm, treating her as a rich, powerful white man would treat his wife: like one of his pretty possessions to showcase his social status. As a result, the marriage does not contain the happiness that Janie desires. Janie does not yet fit into the role of a black woman, and at the same time, she is not

happy as the white woman she identified with as a child. She is torn between the two worlds created by her conception. In this way, Janie has unintentionally put herself right back in the same position she was in with Logan instead of escaping her life as a servant and possession. It is only after she has been freed from the marriage by Jody's death that she can be physically and emotionally herself and explore her own desires, both sexually and socially. She does so by running the store on her own, letting her long hair down from its scarf and getting romantically involved with Tea Cake.

Furthermore, an interesting fact about the first marriages of Janie and Scarlett is that they are relatively short, acting as stepping-stones to the next part of the women's lives. For example, Scarlett is married, widowed, and a mother all in under a year. While Janie is not overtly or intentionally manipulative, she wants much more than her first husband can give to her, so she leaves him behind like that part of her life never happened, and she begins anew by moving onto what she thinks will be a more exciting life with Jody, possibly one that will help her locate her identity as a black woman. When Jody dies, after an unhappy period in their marriage where he resents getting older faster than Janie does, Janie finds Tea Cake. Tea Cake puts a dash of excitement back into her life and brings back some young, fresh passion into her days. While Tea Cake does not mind being the catalysts for Janie's new self-awareness, and while he allows Janie to use him to expand and explore herself, he gently demands to be treated equally with her and help her on her way to self-exploration, creating her first experience with what she has always desired: a marriage of equals. He ushers her into moving away from identifying with the white part of her genetics and instead coming into the black genes she gets from her mother. She uses their love to get out of the town that Jody built and explore more of the country, specifically the Florida Everglades, even though it is there that Tea Cake beats her, treating her as the mule she was raised not to be. This is intended to prove his dominance, and in the odd way that Janie sees it, his love for

her. "Equating light skin with passive female victimization and blackness with defiance, the men on the Muck express admiration...for Tea Cake's assertion of dominance" (Meisenhelder 73). Janie is agreeable to this treatment because she knows he cares for her, and that by beating the whiteness out of her with his deep, ebony hand, and thus pulling her from her white lady position on the porch, he makes them equals.

Scarlett, on the other hand, is obviously, to the reader, manipulative of all of the men around her who allow it; she blatantly uses them to get what she wants and to move around in society. "Though Mitchell's Scarlett more overtly combines protofeminist, strong-willed determination than does her plantation-romance predecessor, her means and ends reflect those of the belles a century earlier: with the unspoken offer of her body, Scarlett manipulates men into acting for her benefit" (Jordan-Lake 142). She uses Charles Hamilton to try and hurt Ashley, and after he dies, she uses Rhett Butler to make her mourning period more entertaining. After the war, she takes her marriage to Frank Kennedy as a business contract, and once she's rid of him, she almost immediately agrees to marry Rhett Butler for the lifestyle and money he can give her.

Both women are in control of their feminine wiles and use them to their advantage, whether the use is intentional or not. However, if one examines the attitudes set forth about Southern women, and using the idea that behind every man is a woman doing all the work and controlling the daily life of a household and giving the men the credit that they need to keep their sense of inflated masculinity, then both Scarlett and Janie act as exemplary models of strong, Southern women.

Ellen O'Hara, Scarlett's mother, exemplifies this idea in almost every action she performs as an iconic southern woman:

The man owned property, and the women managed it. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The man roared like a bull when a splinter was in his

fingers, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him. Men were rough of speech and often drunk. Women ignored the lapses of speech and put the drunkards to bed without bitter words. Men were rude and outspoken, women were always kind, gracious and forgiving. (Mitchell 80)

Women, regardless of color, followed this idea that women were always tolerant and aware of how the men in their care felt, in spite of how detrimental this behavior and acquiescence was to themselves.

Interestingly, by the end of the novels, both women lose the love they struggled through much adversity and self-discovery to locate. Janie kills Tea Cake in self-defense after he contracts rabies while saving her from a rabid dog during the hurricane and tries to kill her. Just as Scarlett has the epiphany that she loves him, Rhett walks out on her with the immortal and often quoted line: “My dear, I don’t give a damn” (Mitchell 1446). It is their own stubbornness to show emotions for one another that is their downfall, and Rhett leaves the woman he has worked many years to bring out. Janie shoots Tea Cake then walks back to the town she built with Jody, carrying on with her life where she left off before their love affair. Rhett leaves Scarlett standing in their elaborate mansion in Atlanta, and she may say that she will deal with the problem of his loss tomorrow, but she will carry on indefinitely and take care of herself, her two remaining children, and Tara plantation. Janie grows to be a stronger woman through the experience of death and returns to the land she left behind. Scarlett regains control of her strength when her real feelings are rebuffed and returns to the land she was born on to regain her strength. Both women return to their roots to get back up and fight again, embracing their new and vibrant identities. Janie accepts the fierce strength of her blackness, and Scarlett accepts her position as an adult, white woman who must use her own strength to care for those who need her, both knowing that they will never be able to fit in fully with the women in their level of society. These two are like a yin-yang, and have the touch of

the other woman in her that will always be a part of her personality: Scarlett with the toughness akin to that of the black slaves who labored in the field, and Janie with a touch of the high-born white, societal ideals that Jody and Nanny desperately wanted for her. Both of these women deal with situations throughout the course of their novels that would have broken lesser women, bringing them closer together in personalities than one would initially think after just a cursory reading of the books.

Strength epitomizes the iconic Southern woman, and by this definition, Janie and Scarlett are the perfect women to carry on after the loss of their loves. This woman of grit is always tender, always attentive, always caring for her family and those who need her, while putting her own fears, concerns, and problems aside to get through; she has grit. Grit means being a lady on the outside, gentle and tender, and hard as nails on the inside, ready to deal with any situation God or nature sends her way. Scarlett has grit because she realizes she can no longer act like a child, and she takes over the responsibilities of Tara. Janie has grit because she carries on after murdering the love of life.

Female strength and passion to survive are evident in the two scenes where Scarlett and Janie shoot a man. The situations under which the two women fire the rifles are different however, the act of protecting oneself or others against a man who is potentially dangerous is a telling moment about the strength of these women. Janie shoots Tea Cake to protect herself as he tries to kill her while under the influence of a neural disease:

She threw up the barrel of the rifle in frenzied hope and fear. Hope that he'd see it and run, desperate fear for her life...The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. Tea Cake crumples as his bullet buries itself in the joist over Janie's head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward into her arms. She was trying to hover him as he closed his teeth in the flesh of her forearm. They

came down heavily like that. Janie struggled to a sitting position and pried the dead Tea Cake's teeth from her arm. (Hurston 184)

Tea Cakes' death is a dramatic scene in the novel, and Janie's grit is beautifully illustrated by the last words of the quote where she pulls Tea Cake's teeth from their sunken position in her arm. While she is in physical and emotional pain, she keeps going, doing what she needs to do for herself, even if it is forcing the teeth of her lover's corpse out of the wound he inflicted on her as she shot him.

Scarlett, on the other hand, shoots a Yankee intruder who tries to steal from Tara the hard-earned food and her mother's sewing box, and who threatens her and the safety of those under her protection, including her sisters, who are recovering from typhoid, Melanie, who is weak from a difficult childbirth, and the house servants like Mammy:

Like lightning, she shoved her weapon over the banisters and into the startled bearded face. Before he could even fumble at his belt, she pulled the trigger...The man crashed backwards to the floor, sprawling into the dining room with a violence that shook the furniture...Yes, he was dead. Undoubtedly. She had killed a man....She had killed a man, she who took care never to be in at the kill on a hunt, she who could not bear the squealing of a hog at slaughter or the squeak of a rabbit in a snare. (Mitchell 610-11)

Scarlett, who at this point in the novel has just begun to show the reader that she is not as selfish as she first appears, is horrified that she could actually murder another human being, but she had to do it for the safety of the family. The Yankee thief enters at the moment when Scarlett has a festering foot wound and is alone in the house with three sick women and helpless babies. She slays a man to protect herself and them, and like Janie, she keeps going, cleaning up the blood. Melanie helps her by lying to the women and babies upstairs, stating that the pistol went off while Scarlett cleaned it, so that no one else but Melanie and Scarlett know that murder has

been committed in the house. Scarlett moves on with her day to keep the rest of the household safely in the dark about the real dangers of their lives.

Janie protects the greater community from a dangerous Tea Cake. Scarlett protects a plantation from an intruder. They both choose to protect themselves and the people in their care instead of submitting to the mental chaos that normally would have been expected of a gentlewoman who needs a man's care to survive. They save themselves instead of bowing to adversity. It takes grit to shoot a man, especially one who is loved by the shooter, but these women do what they have to do, with little concern for their own safety, which is a rarity for Scarlett at least.

When considering the internal strength of Southern women, regardless of race, one must also consider the men who influence them. It is obvious in both novels that men, while the stories differ on how the female characters react to and treat them, are influential on the behavior of the women. Without Tea Cake, Janie would never have left the town and experienced a scorching love. Without Rhett, Scarlett never would have allowed herself to be free of the constricting traditions that surrounded mourning during the period. Without men, the women have no one to control gently and use to get what needs to get done, finished. These men are obvious matches for Janie and Scarlett because of some of their specific personality and physical similarities. Rhett is muscular and strong, with dark features, much like Scarlett who is mentally strong and willful, and has the dark wildness to her personality that reflects in Rhett. Tea Cake's wildness and strength calls to Janie's personality, helping her to embrace her mental identity as a black woman instead of trying to force herself into the role of the white woman that everyone has pushed her towards her entire existence. While it is obvious that the two specific women under scrutiny are entirely capable of independence, it is also obvious that they enjoy the company of men and still want to have the tender, loving aspects of life that come with marriage. It is also interesting that as the final romantic interests of the two novels, the men cannot be controlled, Rhett because he understands Scarlett too well

and will not let her, and Tea Cake because he puts Janie on a level of equality with himself, even teaching her to use a gun, thus making her feel secure and like she does not need to try and control him, only care for him. This is a similar goal for both men. They want a wife that appreciates them, yet is also independent of them.

In *Gone with the Wind*, the idea of a woman having grit goes along with the definition of a woman that Mitchell puts forth in her tome. Ellen O'Hara, Scarlett's mother, offers perhaps the best definition of a Southern woman when the narrator talks about her life: "Ellen's life was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and if it was not happy, that was a woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such" (Mitchell 80). However, using this quote as the definition of what a woman can expect from life as a Southern lady in a truly misogynistic society, it is Janie who comes out on top and fits into the role. Janie is gentle, cooperative, and willing to follow the lead of the man in her life at any given point, so by definition, Janie is a Southern belle, demure and attentive to the needs of her man. This fact is interesting because it means that Janie, who comes from a black, slave mother and a white, slave-owning father, is better suited to the life of a belle than Scarlett, who was born into the role, because she had a willingness to conform to her role in life, whatever it may be. Hurston even begins her novel with this very reasoning, telling the reader that Janie did not even know she was black until shown a picture of herself playing with the white children from the house where her grandmother worked:

Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come along takin' pictures and without askin' anybody, Shelby, dat was de oldest boy, he told him to take us...So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't

recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ask, 'where is me? Ah don't see me'. (Hurstons 8)

Janie struggles along in her childhood and adolescence because of her lack of identity; she is stuck in between, straining to find an identity while she lives in two different worlds because of her light skin. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder said it best in her book *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston*: "Janie struggles between two identities in the novel, one...drawn from the white world and foisted upon her and a more vigorous model of black womanhood she tries to forge for herself" (62). In her upbringing, Janie only has a model for what an adult, white woman is supposed to be, but she has no strong, black women to look up to because of her familial situation and background.

In the same idea, Scarlett experiences this role reversal in childhood as well. To the displeasure of Mammy, she spends much of her childhood time playing with the boys and the slaves: "To Mammy's indignation, her [Scarlett's] preferred playmates were not her demure sisters or the well-brought-up Wilkes girls but the negro children on the plantation and the boys of the neighborhood" (Mitchell 81). Janie takes Scarlett's childhood role as a lady-in-training by playing with the genteel, little girls of the manor house where her grandmother works, and Scarlett takes what would have been Janie's place on the plantation and plays with the slave children and boys, ignoring the rules of little ladies. Scarlett is free to run around the plantation and play with whomever she likes because she is the eldest O'Hara daughter, and her mother knows that from playmates can come future husbands. She rides horses with her father while her sisters play sweet, little girl games with each other and the other plantation belles, while Scarlett, at least until she hits puberty, is a tomboy. Janie is a more submissive person than Scarlett, so she is treated as a playmate by the manor house children, but she knows that she will get equal punishment if the group of children gets in trouble for something; therefore, she is an equal to the white

children in theory. Janie is also light skinned and Scarlett is repeatedly described as dark.

The parallel between these two very different women is their strong personalities and ability to control their situations through manipulation or veiled cooperation with men. Again, each woman's ability to manipulate misogynistic male society comes into play. At points in the two novels, each female character runs a business, and in Scarlett's case, she does it better than her husband, who founded and owns the company. Janie helps Jody run the small convenience store that he sets up in the middle of town. This store is also the center of all social gathering, get-togethers, and gossip sessions for the people of the town. Thus, it is an influential place to be on an almost constant basis, which Janie is, since Jody would rather chat with the neighbors on the porch while playing checkers than do the work with Janie, treating her as an equal and not just one of his employees. Even after Jody's death, the store is the spot to be when anything interesting happens in town. The store is also where Tea Cake meets and commences courting Janie by inviting her to play checkers with him while the town is at the baseball game: "She found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play...She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points" (Hurston 96).

Scarlett forces her second husband, Frank Kennedy, out of his own business after discovering while he is ill that he has terrible business sense and loans money to his friends without having the backbone to ask for repayment. Scarlett becomes a vicious businesswoman, which surprises even herself: "A startling thought this, that a woman could handle business matters as well as or better than a man, a revolutionary thought to Scarlett who had been reared in the tradition that men were omniscient and women none too bright" (Mitchell 863). This is one of Scarlett's big steps into female independence and modern ways of thinking that scandalize those members of Old Atlanta society. Additionally, this is also the first move towards shaking the

establishment that Scarlett makes without the prodding of Rhett, making it wholly her own thoughts and efforts. This business is Scarlett trying her hand in the men-only world of Reconstruction Atlanta, Georgia, and she does so while pregnant with her second child. Running the sawmill is one of the very few independent things that Rhett discourages in Scarlett, even though it is partially his doing that she had enough gumption to even consider doing something so unladylike as running a business.

Because Scarlett marries Frank for the tax money to save Tara, her attachment to the land of her family plantation is made glaringly obvious to the reader. She does not even make her home there anymore, and yet Scarlett has such a strong compulsion to care for it and keep her family in ownership of it, that she goes to great lengths to save it from the tax collectors and carpetbaggers. Scarlett's mother and father rear her with a deep personal and ancestral love of land, as her father tells her early on in the novel: "Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything...for 'tis the only thing in this world that lasts, and don't you be forgetting it! 'Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for—worth dying for" (Mitchell 49). The fact that these words from Gerald O'Hara haunt Scarlett every time something changes in her life or she needs to gain strength to keep going shows how close she is to the nature that she came from, like Eve and Adam from the dust of the ground.

Analogous to Scarlett's affinity to the land, Janie's existence is rooted in natural imagery, and the further she moves towards the natural world, the happier and healthier her existence becomes, beginning with the biggest and clearest reference of how she is like a pear tree: "Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her" (Hurston 11). Literally, Janie compares herself to a blossoming tree. She is young and waiting desperately for life to begin, much like Scarlett does while she

hones her man-hunting skills on the boys of the plantations. The pear tree reference is used for not only Janie, but as an accurate reason for why none of the men in Janie's life can work out for her as happy marital unions. Tea Cake is the only one of any of the men who is also associated with natural images, like Janie's pear tree. The tree is a symbol for Janie's burgeoning sexual and spiritual growth into womanhood, and thus without being associated with the bursting joy of spring, none of the other men could ever have kept up with Janie's thirst for growth, change, and beauty. This connection with nature draws Janie to him, getting her near enough to notice his egalitarian nature, which is something she has never experienced previously in a male partner.

One strong connection that Janie and Scarlett have to one another is that they both, in their search to find love, happiness, and stability, run into the problem of male domination. True, both novels take place in traditionally male-dominated societies and at times where women were quiet, meek creatures who followed directions and stayed in the home. The problem with this idea of femininity is that both of these female characters are searching for freedom. They are not traditional women, and thus they require non-traditional men to make their lives happy and complete. Margaret Mitchell points this out when her narrator says, "Men and women, they were beautiful and wild, all a little violent under their pleasant ways and only a little tamed" (Mitchell 146). Rhett and Tea Cake, as they prove by Rhett causing Scarlett to tumble down the stairs and Tea Cake beating Janie because he's jealous of another man, are just as wild and unconventional as their female counterparts, which is why their relationships work.

It is interesting to note that, socially speaking, these novels were written in a time of change, the Great Depression, that fell during the development of the feminist movement into the postfeminist movement, meaning that the novels combine elements of both social movements, and thus the authors created female characters who would speak to women involved in both. As author Paula Anca

Farca says, “Mitchell teaches her readers that women’s happiness depends on their freedom, strength, public success, marriage, and motherhood” (1). While this author talks about Mitchell and Scarlett, the article’s point also applies to Hurston and Janie as well, because of the period of writing and publication. It is not just that Janie and Scarlett are racially confused in their personal identities, but it is that they must represent to themselves and the world an image of a strong woman who is also happy with her life and decisions. This desire of women to break out from under the feet of men and become equals in turn makes Janie and Scarlett equal because of their mixed identities. They both represent the desire to be equal and free of misogyny, regardless of their real or figurative race, and to have the chance to create their own identities, which is something unavailable in the world of male domination: “Mythic and essential, women have no room to create an identity of their own, one that defines themselves beyond patriarchal stereotypes such as the dutiful wife, the saintly mother, the innocent virgin, the beautiful temptress, or the evil witch” (Farca 1).

Both Scarlett and Janie deflect society’s attempts to press them like dried flowers, squelching their desires to blossom and grow the way they want. However, they do allow the men they actually love to guide them along the path of self-enlightenment. Tea Cake gently guides Janie away from the life of the white, plantation wife. He helps her to find her way from straddling two worlds into accepting those elements of her personality that she gained from the whiteness in her background and mingles them with the intense strength of the black woman. Tea Cake uses his own racial identity to prod Janie into self-actualization.

In the same way, Rhett uses his influence to push Scarlett into a more socially acceptable version of herself. He takes her from strong-willed tomboy, masquerading as a placid Southern belle, and helps her to find the white and subtly black components of her personality. He turns her into a more overtly rebellious woman who acts determined in her efforts to infiltrate the world of men and still be

considered a fashionable, traditional woman. Rhett forces Scarlett to accept those elements of her personality that make her black, much as Tea Cake forces Janie to accept those elements that make her white. The male lovers aid in finding the balance of personality that both fits their women and fits into the social roles that those women fulfill.

In the end, both Scarlett and Janie reflect elements of their racial backgrounds, both having grown up with two different races of people. However, they did not grow up in the same setting, since Scarlett was in the position of power over those black children with which she played, and Janie was the child of a servant in the house of the white children with whom she played. Janie discovers her blackness at the end of Hurston's novel, but she also comes to accept the power that she has by being part of more than one world in her lifetime. Scarlett discovers the freedom exposed by the black elements of her feisty, Irish personality, but she also accepts the strict social constraints that a white, Atlanta woman must follow. However, she never fully accepts her role and instead creates her own version of propriety. Both authors wrote their novels as commentary on the state of women, both black and white, in the American South after the change brought on by the Civil War. In this period of feminist growth and change, portraying such similar protagonists, coming from two extremely different backgrounds, are radical examples of female freedom through accepting one's role in life and changing it to fit. While Scarlett may be creamy pale and Janie may be the color of milky coffee, they each share the elements that make them radical, feminist examples. They are strong, vibrant characters, who choose through experience to grow and change as naturally as a pear tree in spring. They prove that it is not the race but acceptance of one's self that truly makes a Southern woman a woman. Janie and Scarlett run parallel to each other in such a plethora of ways that one can easily accept each scenario as two radical parts of one whole story on the growth of women. Outwardly they may be different, but in any critical conversation, the reader must

remember that a part of Janie will always be white and a part of Scarlett will always be black.

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THE FAILURE OF
GENDER PERFORMANCE
AND THE NEED FOR
POLITICAL
ORGANIZATION IN
KATE CHOPIN'S *THE*
AWAKENING

By Elana Friedman

“Since *The Awakening*, feminism has evolved and now is more inclusive of all women’s voices...If Edna’s solidarity with other women had been stronger and they had been able to engage in dialogue instead of

feeling like birds in separate cages, they might have achieved more than they did operating on an individual basis. The lack of solidarity, as well as the presence of sexism, racism, and classicism, needed to be unlearned in those times and still needs to be even today. If that had been so, Edna might not have felt so alone in her feminist struggle as a wife and more than one character would have awakened to new beginnings in this story.” (Clark 346)

Recent critics of Kate Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, have centralized their critiques on performances of gender and sexuality. Through Edna’s failed attempt at gaining freedom and autonomy, the novel refutes the idea that gender is a mutable category that can be performed successfully. The text reveals that no matter how the female characters perform gender, they are still biological women and therefore cannot escape their inferiority. Critics equate sexual preference and gender as an interrelated category, but I read them as separate entities all together. Elizabeth LeBlanc is one of many critics who assert that gender and sexual orientation are interdependent and definitive of one another.² In her essay, “The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*,” she argues that Edna is a “metaphorical lesbian,” because she does not fit into a particular social, political, or normative role

² Mary Biggs also examines sexual orientation in her essay “‘Si tu savais’: The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*.” She convincingly argues that Robert and Mademoiselle Reisz can be read as gay: “Encountering Robert and Reisz as real people in daily life, many of us would have little question about their sexuality” (Biggs 145). Never having married, ostracizing herself from society, focusing solely on her art, and most importantly awakening Edna’s emotions and senses, Mademoiselle Reisz can arguably be a lesbian figure in the novel.

in society. For this reason, Leblanc says that there is a “third gender.” However, Edna cannot perform this “third gender” successfully because there is no safe space in society to express it. Instead of representing a “third gender,” Edna serves as a model for advocating a new and progressive female gender in the future.

The novel discredits gender performance since performing masculinity cannot possibly free Edna, Madame Lebrun, Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele from their entrapment. Through Edna’s failed attempt at awakening her fellow women, the novel suggests a union of all women, despite whether they are gay, straight, confused, “metaphorical lesbians,” mother-women or anti mother-women. Thus the novel acts as a social force, giving readers the drive and motivation towards political activism and liberation out of the confines of their gender. But first, like Edna, we must awaken and become subjects of our own destinies rather than objects of male pleasure and desire.

The novel portrays different forms of entrapment through its female characters. Adele Ratignolle embodies an admirable femininity for nineteenth century society, as the “mother-woman;” but is unconsciously enslaved by her husband and children. Madame Lebrun performs masculinity, owning and managing the cottages at Grand Isle, but is still trapped behind the bars of her home in New Orleans. Mademoiselle Reisz is independent and possesses herself; however, she must live as a recluse in order to achieve this. Finally, Edna, as an awakened woman, conscious of her entrapment, tries to perform masculinity in order to be the possessor of her own thoughts and feelings. She distances herself from her husband and children but still does not achieve the freedom and justice that she desires.

Adele Ratignolle’s character is extremely important because she is Edna’s true role model of femininity and motherhood. Her objectification illustrates how society renders women as objects:

Many of them were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he

was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture...There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them (Chopin 181- 2)

As I mention above, Adele's most important role in the novel is the "mother-woman." Her immediate objectification is therefore the novel's way of exemplifying the debased status of the female gender in the nineteenth century. Adele portrays a desirable, edible, luxuriant, and a pricey possession through the novel's comparison of her eyes to blue sapphire and her lips to "delicious" cherries or crimson fruit. Society depicts women simply as beautiful specimens without voices or power of their own.

Adele's character possesses "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm." The repetition of the word "delicious," highlights Adele's objective role. But how can this lustful object or possession also be "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm?" By comparing Adele's husband to a "brute, deserving of death by slow torture," the novel places Adele on a pedestal of beauty, wifely and domestic duties but also traps her as an object of man's desire.

Even though Adele's description portrays the theme of female entrapment and objectification, her hair symbolizes autonomy and free will: "There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain..." (183). The words "flaming and apparent," evoke passion and sexuality. However, Adele's sexual desire is never demonstrated in the novel. Instead childbirth stands for Adele's sexuality. Her hair as free and unrestrained is surprising since she is otherwise

completely committed and dedicated to her wifely and motherly duties. Adele's wild hair hints at her potential to awaken; but first she must become consciously aware of her position as an object and debased gender in order to break free from her entrapment.

Adele had been married for seven years and had a baby about every two years (183). Even with her "condition" and the pain and hysteria associated with Adele's childbirth, she still insists on procreating. She is in a state of agony and hysteria at the end of the novel. Through this pain and exhaustion, "Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children! Remember them!" (343). Even in a heated moment of pain and distress, Adele presses her cheek, which is a maternal embrace. This exemplifies Adele's dedication to the mother-role of her gender. At the end of the novel, she sacrifices herself on the altar of motherhood. In essence, she dies for what she believes is the female duty or responsibility. Adele's death most strongly symbolizes female entrapment and represents the constraints and limitations of the female gender. Her sacrifice warns readers of the danger in living as an object.

Madame Lebrun's character, like Adele, is trapped by the constraints of her gender. Grand Isle, a summer vacation spot, is a more female-dominated space than New Orleans. The men go into the city during the week for business, while the females stay in Grand Isle with the children and are able to roam freely. However, their responsibility to their children hinders these women from going into the city or traveling the world, as their husbands do. Madame Lebrun, although she is a female, presides over Grand Isle, owning the house and cottages. She is a widow but never remarries, choosing independence, despite her suitor Montel (Biggs 164). Although Madame Lebrun performs masculinity, as the owner of the house and cottages of Grand Isle she still cannot escape the fate of her gender. Chopin illustrates this through Madame Lebrun's maternal characteristics.

Joyce Dyer explains Madame Lebrun's position as a widow in her book, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*. Women who divorced "found their salvation in remarriage" but "some single women – or divorced women – in nineteenth century novels do refuse to marry, or remarry...These women are either withdrawn from society...or commit themselves to a righteous cause" (8). Instead of remarriage, Madame Lebrun chooses independence and self-sufficiency, running her estate on Grand Isle. However, as Mary Biggs mentions in her essay, "Si tu savais': The Gay/Transgendered Sensibility of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Mademoiselle Reisz claims that Madame Lebrun "worships" and "lives for" Victor, who ironically is the more masculine of her two sons.

In addition to Dyer's discourse on the widowed woman, Barbara Ewell's essay, "Kate Chopin, the Short Story (and Me)," adds that these women, if they do not remarry, can be bold. However, they must also hide behind the shield of motherhood. This was a prevalent theme in 19th century society and literary discourse (44). As a widow, who did not remarry, one was able to perform masculinity and obtain some power. This was possible only if she still carried out her maternal responsibilities. Barbara Ewell's essay discusses the historical context of women in nineteenth century society. Although Madame Lebrun is not a writer, her character is still indicative of this historical context. Ewell uses Ann Douglas Wood's essay, "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America," to discuss working women in the nineteenth-century (Koloski 43). Wood argues that nineteenth-century women had to justify their desire to work as an economic or moral motivation. She also says that women wrote to express morality or to support their children (43). Madame Lebrun fits this mold as the widowed woman who chooses independence in the form of an "'unladylike' professional ambition," and hides behind the "pretexts of moral or economic necessity" (43).

The novel's adherence to the historical and social context of the time allows readers to identify truly with her characters. For the ultra-feminine women, there is

Adele; Madame Lebrun for the independent but cautious; Mademoiselle Reisz for the artistic and anti-social; and Edna for those in the process of awakening. By establishing characters that readers can identify with, the novel applies to the women of the 19th century, and even to women today.

Madame Lebrun is the first female character introduced in the novel. This description, contrasts, parallels, and intertwines masculinity and femininity: “Madame Lebrun was bustling in and out, giving orders in a high key to a yard-boy whenever she got inside the house, and directions in an equally high voice to a dining-room servant whenever she got outside. She was a fresh, pretty woman, clad always in white with elbow sleeves. Her starched skirts crinkled as she came and went” (172). At first, Madame Lebrun is portrayed as masculine: “bustling in and out,” which evokes a sloppy disorderly manner. She is performing masculinity when she gives orders yet she gives these orders “in a high key” and “high voice,” missing feminine and masculine performance. However, this power that she is performing is contained in the female sphere of domain: the household. The kitchen and dining room were proper places for women to take control. Therefore, Madame Lebrun’s masculine performance does not help her achieve more power and prestige. She still needs to hide behind her maternal characteristics in order to be accepted by society. Since she is maternal and has two sons whom she cares for “she remains beneath the gossips’ radar” (Biggs 165-6).

Madame Lebrun’s female attire directly contrasts and devalues her masculine performance. The novel describes Madame Lebrun as a “pretty woman,” in white, looking “fresh” with “starched skirts” (172). This white and fresh attire alludes to Madame Lebrun’s sexual purity, which further discredits her masculine performance. Madame Lebrun fails in her attempt to perform masculinity and escape the confines of her gender in this static and socially constrained community of the nineteenth century.

Although Madame Lebrun performs masculinity in Grand Isle, she subjects herself strictly to the inferior feminine role in New Orleans. Madame Lebrun's house serves as a metaphor for her entrapment: "Their home from the outside looked like a prison, with iron bars before the door and lower windows. The iron bars were a relic of the old *regime*, and no one had ever thought of dislodging them" (262). Mary Biggs, in her essay, comments that this is Lebrun's way of "shutting herself away from her society," since the city is male-dominated and not as open to feminine sentiments as Grand Isle (165). This contrast between Grand Isle and New Orleans stands as a metaphor for the failure of gender performance. Madame Lebrun is able to perform masculinity in Grand Isle but literally imprisons herself in New Orleans. Even by performing masculinity in Grand Isle, Madame Lebrun still cannot escape the fate of her disempowered gender.

Madame Lebrun's birds exemplify this paradox of masculine performance without superior status and power: "The parrot and the mocking-bird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished. Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining" (171). When first reading this scene it appears as though the birds, and in turn, Madame Lebrun, have power over Mr. Pontellier. Instead, the novel hints at Madame Lebrun's false sense of autonomy, through her masculine performance and ownership. No matter how well the women in the novel attempt to perform masculinity, the social constraints of the nineteenth century still cage them in. They can make all the noise they want but they still have no power.

The novel depicts women interchangeably as masculine and feminine. Men in the novel are similarly depicted with both masculine and feminine traits. However, this reality is overshadowed and discredited by the social control of gender. When women are masculine they are still inferior because they are women; but when men are feminine, they are good fathers, such as Edna's husband, Leonce. Their children are more attached to their father than their mother: "both children

wanted to follow their father when they saw him starting out.” (174). Through this feminine performance, Leonce becomes the “best husband in the world” (180). The novel depicts Edna’s frustration with this social inequality of gender performance: “Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (180). The fact that Edna must deem her husband as “the best,” shows her lack of power and autonomy. With this rigid social control, gender performance fails to change social order.

Mademoiselle Reisz possesses herself and does not buy into social constraints, especially of gender behavior; however, she is a social outcast and has no economic or political power. Edna looks to her for inspiration; however, she does not want to be an outcast. Mademoiselle Reisz’s society stigmatizes her as a peculiar woman:

She was dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby, which a nurse in the adjoining cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep. She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others...She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair (208).

The fact that Mademoiselle Reisz objects to a crying baby is unnatural for a woman of the nineteenth century. This controversial masculine performance demonstrates Mademoiselle Reisz’s false sense of freedom. Even when her music is well regarded, Reisz cannot communicate with her fans. Moreover, she does not communicate with anyone in the novel besides Edna and Robert. For her minimal socialization, Mademoiselle Reisz accumulates a negative reputation. She is depicted as “disagreeable;” “quarreled with almost every one;” “self-assertive” and a “disposition

to trample upon the rights of others.” These traits hardly ever play out in the novel. This rusty or masculine femininity further highlights the ceaseless theme of female entrapment. Even though she is isolated from society, Mademoiselle Reisz tries to awaken Edna, since she is at least part of society, in order to fight for the autonomy and freedom that she cannot fight for due to her isolation.

As many critics agree, it is no coincidence that the novel opens with “a green and yellow parrot,” shouting “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right,” which means: Go away! Go away for G-d’s sake (171). This foreshadows Edna’s plight since the parrot “speaks a language which no one understood” (171). Sandra Gilbert, in her essay, “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire,” equates the birds to Edna’s character: “for, as we shall see, these birds together prefigure both Edna’s restlessness and her irony, her awakening desire for freedom and her sardonic sense that freedom may ultimately be meaningless, her yearning for solitude and her skeptical worries about loneliness” (48). Gilbert admirably suggests that Edna finds this freedom, or false sense of freedom, meaningless; when it is not coupled with justice and power. Edna fails to achieve power, in the form of social justice and equality because she needs the support of her fellow women.

Edna has not won a voice or a safe space in society; she has just isolated herself like Mademoiselle Reisz. The freedom that she is searching for cannot be achieved alone but instead through a unification of all women from various social statuses. Zoila Clark, in her essay, *The Bird that Came out of the Cage: A Foucaultian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin’s The Awakening*, uses this opening image of caged birds to show the lack of fraternity, which is the true ingredient to “equality and freedom for all” (Clark 335). In this representation the novel calls its readers to take political action because this is the only way to gain freedom for all women in nineteenth century society. The fact that the bird is multi-colored and speaks multiple languages, one in particular that cannot be understood, foreshadows

Edna's character and struggle. Clark interestingly points out this "lack of communication" as the key theme throughout the novel; in Edna's marriage and in her relations with other women (337). Clark attributes this lack of communication between Edna and the women to Edna's progressivism and their blind entrapment: "Edna is unable to communicate with other women in Creole society because they keep whistling 'fluty notes,' are distracted with their charms, and do not develop that language 'nobody understood, unless (it is another caged bird)'" (337).

Contrastingly, I believe that these women need to band together and communicate especially because they are all so different. Through Edna, the novel tries to awaken its readers one "stereotypical woman," as Clark calls them, at a time (339). Not only does Edna lack the proper "language" or "communication" to speak with the women of Grand Isle and New Orleans, but these women also cannot communicate with each other past their stereotypical social roles or stances in society.

Edna possesses both masculine and feminine traits. On one hand she is very emotional, but on the other she is autonomous and deeply desires to be the possessor of her own actions and sentiments. No matter whether performing masculinity or femininity, Edna still makes an alliance with the women – butch, feminine, mother – women, widows, independent women, etc. However, she does not gain the "regal" throne that she desires. The dinner party scene depicts Edna's gender play between masculine and feminine performance. Edna wants the power to reign, as the "regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone"; but she also desires the "presence of the beloved" (308). This contrast occurs throughout the novel, at times separately, and at times side by side. Even though Edna can perform both masculinity and femininity, she still cannot escape her entrapment. Creole women are less prudish than the Presbyterian, Kentucky women, which Edna grew up around. The book, "*The Awakening: A Novel of New Beginnings*," by Joyce Dyer, depicts Edna's cultural background and the way that she blends two distinct cultures together:

The Creole women of Louisiana, though seemingly less constrained than other women, were actually among the most conservative members of their sex in the nineteenth century. Like Adele, they were frank and physical. But it was their questionable personal and religious commitment to family, chastity, husband, and children that made this open manner possible...Edna, not a Catholic but a Presbyterian, not a Creole but a southerner, adopts the candor and sensual manner of her Creole friends yet leaves their traditional notions of wifedom and motherhood behind (11).

This passage highlights the problem with Edna's character, in regards to the social construction of gender; she is not maternal or domestic. Creole society tolerated being masculine, "frank and physical," as long as the women were also motherly and servile to their husbands. Edna, however, does not fit this criterion.

Edna drinks "the liquor from the glass as a man would have done" (Chopin 294); and like a barbarian or animal "Edna bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong, white teeth. She poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down. Then she went softly out of doors, and plucking an orange from the low-hanging bough of a tree, threw it at Robert, who did not know she was awake and up" (228). The novel's language for Edna – "tearing," "drank if down," "plucking," "threw" – is active and coded in society as masculine. However, the novel adds a hint of femininity to this hyper masculine depiction through the use of the word "softly." The novel uses this common trend in its gender play. Even when a character conveys hyper masculinity or femininity, the novel still attributes subtle nuances of the opposite gender. This lack of conformity within individual characters further exemplifies the impossible standards that society perpetuates.

Even though Edna is an autonomous being, tearing at her food barbarically with her "strong teeth," she is also "a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 173). By calling Edna "property," the novel takes

her entrapment metaphor to the extreme, equating Edna's entrapment to slavery. Leonce marries Edna in the hopes that she will conform to her inherent mother role, which the social construction of gender dictates, but Edna refuses to pretend to conform to this role anymore because it is not natural for her. She cannot conform to the roles and responsibilities of her gender but she cannot perform her way out of them either. She is both manly and an object belonging to her husband. This disjunction is not possible in her society. Edna would be able to get away with some masculine traits, as Madame Lebrun does, however, her lack of maternal care is a deal breaker.

Edna compares her responsibilities to her children as the confinements of slavery: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (350). The classification of Edna's children as antagonists is extremely strong. The fact that her children overcame and overpowered Edna situates them in the masculine role with power over her, even though they are just children. As the novel progresses, Edna stops performing femininity, succumbing to her husband's desires, and instead performs masculinity, rejecting her responsibilities to her husband and children; but she cannot free herself from her debased gender.

The novel illustrates the struggle of the female cause in Edna's journey, awakening, and death. Edna's death creates space for future attempts at change and activism. Anca Parvulescu highlights Edna's awakening, or consciousness of her entrapment, through the scene where Edna insists on lying on the hammock late at night: "She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (218). This unconsciousness stems from the social construction of gender; men and women are set in their ways or positions in society and cannot

escape them even when performing gender. For this reason, the women in the novel need to unite in order to demand for their voices to be heard. The novel's language connects female "obedience" or "submission" with their unconscious state. This further depicts the novel's intention to awaken not just its characters but its readers as well.

Parvulescu claims that Edna does achieve power, which the novel portrays through the swimming and flying metaphors; however this power only functions as a "narcotic" or "intoxication" to cover up Edna's feelings of "anguish" over her "double" life (482). Contrastingly, Ann Heilman, in her essay *The Awakening* and New Woman Fiction, argues that Edna does in fact establish a sense of self-ownership and autonomy from her midnight swim. She proves this by quoting Mr. Pontellier's reference to his wife as property and Edna's quote towards the end of the novel when she states that she is no longer one of her husband's possessions (Beer 87).

Zoila Clark interestingly references Western feminism: "The oppression of upper class white and Creole women in Louisiana as portrayed in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899) is an example of how the main goal of Western feminism was to achieve liberty, disregarding equality and fraternity" (335). Clark then uses Harry Brod's words to point out that the "negation of equality and fraternity excluded women from full participation in society" (335). Through Edna's character and ultimate demise, the novel calls for justice and equality, which can only be obtained through a political organization. Since Edna struggles and truly dedicates herself to finding a free space to express her voice in society, but fails, there is nothing left for her to do but serve as a model for future generations. Interestingly, at the time that the novel was published, the women's suffrage movement was underway. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women finally achieved the power to vote, following the novel's message of female unity and political organization (Great Neck, Publishing). Clark uses Foucault's theory of the

power/knowledge connection in order to show that women have the power to change society: “Women reinforce their own oppression because knowledge is biased. We all have something to do with it; consequently, we have the power to change it” (335). This “biased knowledge” evokes the perpetuation of the social construction of gender. The women in the novel, and at the time the novel was published (1899), need to awaken out of their unconscious and subservient roles, unite, form a “community of women” (Parvulescu), or a “fraternity” (Clark) and rescue their subordinate gender. The novel’s illustration of the female struggle for power and equality still resonates today, which is why this literary conversation still continues.

Contrastingly, Parvulescu claims that Edna is not a feminist. She clarifies her argument by specifying the type of feminism she is addressing: “within the notion of feminism that the text defines” (485). Although the women’s suffrage movement was underway, feminism had not yet reached its peak when the novel was published. Therefore Parvulescu does not see Edna as a feminist because she is only looking within the text to define a feminism that does not exist yet. Beyond the text, Edna can be read as an early feminist archetype. Through Edna, the novel attempts to unite all the women in the text; not only the women who have awakened but also the mother women too. Parvulescu’s counter argument is as follows:

Edna is not a feminist. At least not within the notion of feminism that the text defines. She does not associate with the ‘pseudo-intellectual’ women that Doctor Mandelet immediately thinks of and that we now recognize as the suffragists of the day. The feminists as suffragists want something; Edna does not want anything. Or she does not know what she wants. Or she wants everything. In any case, her desire is not recuperable within feminism. (285-6).

Edna is not confused about what she wants, but instead plays and experiments with gender in an attempt at achieving justice for all women as a collective gender. The

novel shows this through her death at the end of the novel and through the bird imagery, as Zoila Clark's essay discusses. The fact that Edna's death is still talked about today shows the sacrificial intent of her death to instill change and activism.

At the end of her essay, Parvalescu touches upon my idea of a union of women. Instead she uses the idea of "a community of women," similar to Clark's concept of "fraternity." Parvalescu connects Edna's death with a sacrifice, which generally helps bring people together for a greater good. However, I do not view Edna's "death" in the terms of sacrifice but as a frustration with the social construction of gender that entraps women. When Edna does find power within herself, she cannot outwardly exhibit it because it is not socially acceptable. Edna wants independence but does not wish to ostracize herself from society as Mademoiselle Reisz does. Due to the rigid nature of the social construction of gender, Edna cannot successfully perform masculinity and must swim out into the metaphorically free space of the ocean, making way for others to follow her cause.

The novel ends with images of female entrapment: "She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (Chopin 351). This military imagery represents patriarchy and male dominance. The animal imagery symbolizes confinement and containment and the "pinks" clearly symbolize femininity. Therefore, the last image that we are left with is of Edna confined by her society, regardless of her performing masculinity or femininity; and regardless of her being a lesbian, metaphorical lesbian, or confused. The image of the dog barking represents Edna's expression of autonomy, through her masculine performance. The fact that the barking dog is chained, like the birds being able to make all the noise they want, but in their cage, represents the failure of Edna's masculine performance. She can perform masculinity and try to be autonomous all she wants, but Edna is still a biological woman, and therefore, does not have a say or voice in society. The spurs of calvary

clanking represent society's rigid order and structure, which situates Edna, as a female, below men. The hum of bees represents Edna's sexual awakening and the musky odor of pinks represents femininity. These images all together summarize Edna's entrapment. By leaving the reader to interpret Edna's fate, the novel creates space for its readers to awaken and continue where Edna could not.

A provocative book, reminiscent of *The Awakening* itself, circulates among the women of Grand Isle: "A book had gone the rounds of the pension. When it came her turn to read it, she did so with profound astonishment. She felt moved to read the book in secret and solitude, though none of the others had done so – to hide it from view at the sound of approaching footsteps. It was openly criticized and freely discussed at table. Mrs. Pontellier gave over being astonished, and concluded that wonders would never cease" (184). The book "moved" Edna in the same way *The Awakening* still moves its readers today. The fact that Edna reads the book in "secret" and "solitude" is interesting because she is searching for a safe space throughout the novel to express herself but cannot find one. If she cannot even read a provocative book in public then she is not ready to change the social construction of gender in society. This proves that Edna serves merely as a motivating symbol or stepping stone in the fight for female autonomy. Ironically "the approaching footsteps" that Edna hides from are members of society, who actually need to see Edna reading this provocative book in order to make a statement and advocate for her space in society. By reading this book, Edna learns that sexuality can be freely expressed. This newfound sexuality fuels her quest in finding a safe space in society to express herself. Furthermore, this free circulation of sex among a community of women is a unifying step in awakening and liberating them from their entrapment.

The Awakening drastically transcends its time. The book "*The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*," describes the novel's journey through the social climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "The tensions between the old and the new, the traditional and the untraditional, were great during the final years of the nineteenth

century” (Dyer 11). The novel was deemed “immoral” and “disappeared for over half a century” (17). The book, *Awakenings – The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival*, roots the novel’s problem in its honesty and realism: “It was not the truth of her book that came under attack in 1889 but the fact that Chopin had put that truth on paper and published it” (Koloski 3). Edna’s character shows us that women need to unify in order to overcome their individual entrapment. With the first wave of feminism already active, in 1899 when the novel was published, and the second wave of feminism underway when the novel resurfaced in 1964, the novel’s message was (and still is) extremely relevant.

The revitalization of *The Awakening* is proof of the novel’s success in awakening its readers. Critics with different views and interpretations of the text came together for a common cause (Koloski 8). They employed Chopin’s message, without even knowing it: “If the Kate Chopin revival was anything it was teamwork” – all the critics worked together but separately “knew of one another but were competing to make the most headway” (8). Thus the novel serves as a social force to bring women from all different backgrounds and beliefs together for a unified purpose. Critics of different perspectives came together for a common goal. Feminism in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, for which the novel sets the stage, also fueled the Kate Chopin revival (6). Although *The Awakening* is not as sexually perverse and shocking in our time, its feminist and autonomous voice still resonates with readers today. Barbara Ewell ends her essay, “Kate Chopin, the Short Story (and Me) with this message to her fellow critics and readers: “Hopefully others will be able to swim out even farther – with more confidence, greater buoyancy, and altogether better results” (45). Ewell’s message is evidence of *The Awakening*’s main message to its readers: to continue Edna’s fight where she left off.

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MIMICKING THE DEVIL:

DIMORPHOUS IDENTITIES FOR CORPORATE WOMEN

BY JULIA C. MEO

Pop culture narratives are where literature meets real-life. Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* is a contemporary text that explores and reaffirms how women must create and perform a "workplace identity" in order to succeed in corporate America. Behind the "kitschy" sayings, the brand-name dropping and the sappy romance Weisberger presents a true time-honored cultural conundrum: where do women fit into America's workforce? Pop culture authors such as Weisberger imagine, create, and bear female characters who are literarily perfect: just a bit quirky, a size six when a size two is preferred (she's not fat but *normal*—just like you!), and we as readers, eat them up. We empathize and envy how these authors can depict the backstory to our lives, but funnier and a bit more exciting. Are we forgetting to realize there is a point? Sure, in the end of *The Devil Wears Prada* the protagonist Sachs regains her ethical compass after quitting her job, but what should readers chalk that experience up to: A wayward year for a mid-twenties college

graduate? The truth is that Sachs' *Runway* tenure would have been extremely different had she performed an alternative identity to fit into the parameters set out by *Runway*.

Weisberger explores this issue most directly through her portrayal of the compelling characters Miranda Priestley and Andrea Sachs. These characters illustrate that women must de-feminize themselves in order to succeed in corporate America. Most people would assume that women should adapt masculine traits in order to flourish, but these characters prove that it is not necessarily a masculine identity that Corporate America prefers, rather a dimorphous one that mimics one's superiors. A dimorphous performance of identity occurs when a person removes certain characteristics from their self-defined identity, and in doing so, creates a newly formed self that is consistent with the dominant culture around them. Andrea Sachs must literally identify and remove her socialized *feminine* behavioral characteristics and do her best to perform a similar persona to her superior, Miranda Priestley. This new performative identity will be deemed as insufficient because it is not the original, preferred *masculine* identity that America is socialized to think of as the most desirable in the workplace—but it is the best that women can do. This is why those who work with Miranda Priestley see her as the devil. She is the devil because she is a one-of-a-kind anomaly that puts fear into her subordinates who cannot empathize with her.

According to a study through the American Psychological Association, college-aged students described personality traits of men as “assertive,” “risk-taking,” “extraverted,” and “excitement-seeking”. Women, on the other hand were seen as “anxiety-driven,” “tender,” “neurotic,” “agreeable,” “conscientious,” and “vulnerable” (Allik, Realo, Schmitt, Voracek 168-169). This study shows that as recently as 2008 there is still a major difference in how young people perceive men

and women. Women are seen through a cultural lens as anxious, agreeable (rather than assertive) and vulnerable (rather than being able to tough out any sort of situation that comes at them). These preconceived notions push women to shed these undesirable qualities in the workforce for those that are gendered as *male* such as risk-taking and extraverted-ness, for these latter traits are attributed to what a successful businessperson ought to have in the eyes of an employer. What is largely ignored in any corporate industry is that men and women effuse power in different ways:

Women act powerfully all the time, but in ways different from men. Relying on our “girlish charm” can be just as influential, but less direct and less confrontational. In other words, we wield powerless directly than men. We’ve learned to be less direct so we will not be perceived as taking too much power away from men. (Frankel 14)

Unfortunately for women, non-direct or confrontational uses of autonomy are not preferred in the workplace, therefore their power is largely ignored unless it is presented in a more direct manner.

One would assume that the pressures for working women are to adapt socialized male traits because most CEOs of American companies are men; in 2008, of the largest 1000 publicly traded companies, only 27 women were their CEOs (Brown), and studies show that “Traditionally, board members have been chosen from the ranks of existing CEOs (Gutner, 2001); and, because CEOs are mostly men, they engage in homosocial reproduction, or placing others on the board who have the same general characteristics—including age, gender, background and experience” (Arfken, Beller, Helms 180). Women understand that their superiors promote people with the same characteristics as themselves, thus even if they cannot be the same gender as their generally male bosses, they can at least adapt similar traits

to make their superiors see themselves in the female employee. This is the incentive for women to portray themselves differently. It is important to note, however, that corporate America does not want for women to act like men, but rather to possess a dimorphized identity that enables them to still be seen on the exterior as a woman (especially attractive women), but have the desired personality traits that are gendered as male. This is another form of disassociation from identity.

The Devil Wears Prada veils itself as a pleasure read and non-feminist, yet the plot always come back to the glaring realization that there is no place for a traditional female identity in the workplace. Book critic Rachel Cooke castigates Weisberger's novel, lamenting: "What a wasted opportunity this truly dreadful book is. Weisberger has taken a world rich with comic potential - a world that should have you crying with laughter - and rendered it as sober as an AA meeting" (Cooke 15). Although Cooke may yearn for a more light-hearted feel to the novel, the sobering effects that she describes are due to a cultural phenomenon that is largely ignored: the displaced identities of women in the workforce. It is a necessity that these women must appropriate a dimorphous identity in order to succeed; ambitious women such as Miranda Priestley created her performative identity by making a deal with the Devil to gain autonomy.

One would think that a fashion-based industry would open doors for women to be able to act as their innate feminine selves, however normative gender-based stereotypes are propagated even in such a female-driven industry showing that there is truly no escape from gendered performances in one's career. Why is all of this relevant when in *The Devil Wears Prada* the editor-in-chief Miranda Priestley is a woman? First consider Weisberger's title: *The **Devil** Wears Prada*. Weisberger has attributed a satanic personality to Priestley. Anyone who has read the book can certainly ascertain that Priestly is an extremely harsh boss, but it suggests that from

the literature review above that toughness and an overcompensation of effort are necessary components in achieving a prestigious job title. Priestley understood that in order to be considered for a promotion, she had to discard all of her “feminine” traits for a mean-spirited dimorphous performance: “Typical double-bind for women in leadership positions is that they must be tough and authoritative (like men) to be taken seriously, but they will be perceived as “bitches” if they act too aggressively” (Oakley 324). Priestley is certainly considered a bitch in the novel, but moreover is seen as the Devil.

The concept of the Devil is an extremely powerful one—and attributing that title to Miranda Priestley makes a tremendous statement about the dimorphous identity that she has created. In the biblical sense, the Devil is an angel fallen from heaven for going against the word of God. The Devil is generally considered to be male, and most importantly, there can only be one Devil. Through donning her Prada and other illustrious brand-names Priestley has essentially made a deal with the “dark-side” to become the ultimate Devil of fashion—and in doing so, sacrifices her family, friends and personal life in order to be able to be the sole person who decides what is fashionably admissible and what is not. This sacrifice comes with some perks, it should be noted. Priestley now has the power to marginalize her employees and force them to change just with a glance or stare: “Miranda was smarter than all this and had deliberately created a persona so offensive on every level that she literally scared people skinny” (217). She is the forbearer of fashion because it is her one avenue of hegemony, and she has given up all other elements of her life: she is a slave to fashion. Even Priestley’s employees are able to see the subsequent effects that Priestley’s pact to become the Devil has had upon her:

Have you ever noticed that she has no friends, Emily? Have you?

Sure, her phone rings day and night with the world's coolest people, but they're not calling to talk about their kids or their jobs or their marriages, are they? They're calling because they need something from her. It sure seems awesome looking in, but you can imagine if the only reason anyone ever called you was because they—[needed something]. (207)

Priestley's lack of friends, dissolution of several marriages, and latch-key relationship with her children is latent proof that although her newly appointed title of the Devil comes along with immense power, it also is concurrent with a multitude of personal sacrifices.

Weisberger uses a myriad of other adjectives to describe Priestley including: "cold" "firm" "supreme evil" and "cold hearted monster". Priestley's subordinates demonize and consider her an anomaly because she does not fit the hetero-normative category of female, even though she appears as such because of her impeccable fashion sense. This dual performance of a feminine exterior with an androgynous "bitch" personality completely isolates Priestley into a category of her own: one that is dimorphous. None of the fashion forward employees at *Runway* empathize or understand Priestley as anything else but a completely foreign force of power because the other women in the office adhere to markedly "feminine" characteristics. Priestley is the devil because she is not what people would expect her to be upon first glance: a warm, sympathetic, doting figure. She is cut-throat beyond measure. Priestley manifests her power, which is uncharacteristic for women, as they are socialized to believe that they don't deserve to project their autonomy—however if a man were to show authority like Priestley does, it would be considered normal: "Women denied their power because of the messages they received growing up. Power was associated with men and, as such, was a masculine term. Their

perceptions of power had to do with who was in control” (Frankel 234). Priestley, in her dimorphous shift, refused to deny her power and that is part of the reason why she is so different from all of the female characters around her—she refused to capitulate her authority to a man, and kept it for herself.

Weisberger clearly outlines Priestley’s journey to her successful dimorphous identity, no doubt in an attempt to show the drastic measures women have made in order to make themselves seen as more desirable in the workforce—which is not the fluffy or humorous material that a common pleasure read would attempt to convey. Weisberger depicts the extreme transformation that Priestley underwent to become the devil that she is to Andrea Sachs:

Miranda Priestly was born Miriam Princhek, in London’s East End. Hers was like all the other orthodox Jewish families in the town, stunningly poor but devout. [...] Miriam promptly dropped out of high school upon turning seventeen—a mere three months shy of graduation—to take a job as an assistant to an up-and-coming British designer, helping him put together his shows each season. [...] at twenty-four years old, Miriam Princhek became Miranda Priestly, shedding her undeniably ethnic name for one with more panache. Her rough, cockney-girl British accent was soon replaced by a carefully cultivated, educated one, and by her late twenties, Miriam’s transformation from Jewish peasant to secular socialite was complete. (38)

In order to be perceived as similar to the successful Anglo-Saxon corporate employees already in place she shed her ethnic name and disassociated herself with anyone who would be akin to her former, poor self. Identity is something completely changeable.

Priestley's makeover outlines the significance of performance in order to succeed. Priestley understood her initial socioeconomic and cultural status as a poor Jewish young woman, and removed those negatively perceived traits from her persona. The society that Weisberger creates is similar to modern day America—it is one where people are expected to alter themselves in order to be attuned with the world around them. This constantly changing performance creates the perception that: “An individual's gender identity is discursively constituted as the effect rather than the cause—an individual's identity does not exist behind the performance, but is created by the performance itself” (Lester 283). Priestley's “effect” as Lester puts it is that her employees cower when she walks into the room and revere her every move. Her effect is that no one questions her authority or autonomy over her employees because she has taken the tedious steps to remove all undesirable qualities that might undermine her clout. In order for Andrea Sachs to succeed at *Runway*, she too, must make a transformation.

Much like Priestley, Andrea Sachs creates a performative identity in order to survive in the *Runway* world. Sachs quickly realized that she could survive only based on the guidelines that had been created by her superior, being directed to adapt gendered male characteristics while still having a feminine exterior: “Women are often signaled early in their careers that traditional male traits are expected in senior administrative roles and that promotion depends on their ability to act like men” (Lester 278). Lester argues that male traits are expected in order to succeed, however I would argue that one needs to mimic the traits of their superior in order to gain attention. While women have progressed immensely by being permitted to work in corporate America, the parameters they are expected to endure have remained unchanged from when they were put into place, which was far before women were

even allowed into the workforce. According to the United States Department of Labor, women made up 46.8% of the national workforce in the year 2009 (US Dept of Labor), yet women in managerial positions make eighty-one cents to every man's dollar for performing the same position (Wolfhurst). Even though women represent nearly half of all workers in America, *The Catalyst Women's Activist Group* projects that women will not have an equal number of board seats in major companies until the year 2064 (Arfken 181). It is no wonder why characters such as Priestley and Sachs felt such a need to alter their identities after emerging into the corporate world; they realized the inequities they faced and engaged in a dimorphous identity as a form of problem-solving. It is disheartening that these two characters had to create a secondary identity in order to succeed.

Many women in America have been able to identify with Andrea Sachs in *The Devil Wears Prada*, except they inevitably have a more complicated life and aren't able to up-and-quit because life isn't fair, not to mention that their workplace setting isn't nearly as glamorous. For Andrea Sachs, every day at *Runway* is a constant uphill battle for approval. She works from eight in the morning until the dreaded mock-up book is finished anywhere from nine to eleven in the evening, all the while trying to avoid the snickering comments about her wardrobe, weight, or general inability to perform the most menial tasks. Sachs knew that she was not the usual type to work at the fashion-forward magazine straight from the beginning, acknowledging her lack of like-mindedness with the attitudes of the magazine: "I was an imposter, and not a very good one at that. I had known the minute I stepped on the *Runway* floor that I didn't belong. My clothes and hair were wrong for sure, but more glaringly out of place was my attitude" (21). Sachs' attitude was one of a dissenter, looking down upon the rest of the women at *Runway* who worshipped the brand named clothing

and impeccable lifestyle that went along with it. Sachs realized almost immediately upon her interview at *Runway* that in order to succeed she would need a major shift in identity, much like Miranda Priestley's transformation.

Sachs' "glaringly out of place attitude" was not the only obstacle that needed to be overcome in order to keep her job at *Runway*. Arguably, the most prevalent issue wedging itself between Sachs and success at *Runway* was her image, and how her other employees viewed her: "I'd already grown accustomed to being looked up and down every time I went anywhere, and I could've sworn she was looking at me with the same expression I would've given a five-hundred-pound person with eight Big Macs arrayed in front of him" (64). Essentially the people working at *Runway* saw Priestley as an alien, someone who did not understand that lunch breaks weren't for eating, but rather catching up on idle gossip and self-body loathing. Although at first Sachs did not adhere to the cultural norms of *Runway*, she changed her attitude once she realized that she could not continue to act and dress the way she did and keep her job. She quickly began trying on different outfits of self-identification. The perpetual judgment and disgusted stares were omnipresent by the devilish Miranda Priestley:

She leaned on the counter that ran over my desk, leaned over it and even closer to me, until she was able to see my entire body as I sat, immobilized, in the chair. Her bright blue eyes moved up and down, side to side, all over my white button-down, my red corduroy Gap miniskirt, my now buckled camel-hair Jimmy Choo sandals. I felt her examine every inch of me, skin and hair and clothes, her eyes moving so quickly but her face remaining frozen. (105)

This silent judgment manifests just how vital one's appearance was at *Runway*. Sachs was not the only employee under this scrutiny, but she was certainly the only one who resisted changing herself for as long as she did.

Sachs abstained from altering her outward appearance for her first three months at *Runway* before she took the plunge and starting gorging herself on the company's seemingly limitless supply of fashionably appropriate clothing. In the beginning of her one year tenure, Sachs attempted to use her own wardrobe to pick out a suitable work outfit: "I'd stood with my microwaved coffee for nearly a half hour each morning, agonizing over boots and belts, wool, and microfiber. I'd change stockings five times until I finally had the right color, only to berate myself that stockings of any style or color were *so not OK*" (123). Finally, after Jeffy the wardrobe stylist held up a chic outfit and said, "This, Andy, is what you should be wearing if you don't want to get fired" (123), she capitulated and began her identity change. Sachs needed to adapt her outward appearance in order to blend into the *Runway* world. First came the outfits, then came the assertiveness. Like Priestley making a pact to become the Devil in order to wear her Prada, Sachs was making her first steps toward a marginalized dimorphous personal life in order to gain corporate success.

The Devil Wears Prada is representative of what females endure in order to be taken seriously in their careers, whether it be in the fashion industry or not. The fashion industry was a well-chosen venue for Weisberger to portray a struggling woman such as Andrea Sachs to find herself—Sachs is literally trying on different identities as if they were clothing until she finds the correct "outfit" or identity that would suit her well at *Runway*. Because women must try on these different identities as if they were clothing in order to blend well with corporate America, a dimorphous identity foreign to their own has been born. These women have willed themselves to

change at a high price: the loss of their innate identity. Their co-workers will never know the true them, but this is the price that must be paid for success. Through Sachs' outfit changes, Weisberger mirrors all of Sachs' transitions into different identities.

The first outfitted identity that Sachs dons is for her interview at *Runway* after returning from her sojourn backpacking abroad after graduating from Brown University:

[I] managed to assemble a jacket and pants that did not match and in no way created a suit, but at least they stayed put on my emaciated frame. A blue button-down, a not-too-perky ponytail, and a pair of slightly scuffed flats completed my look. [...] *They're not going to hire me or reject me on the outfit alone*, I remember thinking. Clearly, I was barely lucid. (13)

Sachs' next change of clothing and identity occurs when she tries to wear her amateur clothing to *Runway*, and have it pass off as acceptable: "After much agonizing and clothes-flinging, I finally decided on a light blue sweater and a knee-length black skirt, with my knee-high black boots" (35). This outfit was clearly not acceptable due to the fact that none of her clothing was up-to-date with the latest trends, so Sachs tried on more identities and outfits, until she finally donned the appropriate ensemble, and identity for *Runway*: Hell, I'd already survived three full months—if wearing a Prada turtleneck instead of one from Urban Outfitters was going to help me survive the next nine, then so be it. I decided I'd start putting together a new and improved wardrobe immediately" (124). There is no doubt that the different trends of accoutrements that Sachs wears throughout *The Devil Wears Prada* is representative of the shifting identity that she performs. It is certainly troubling that women can try on and peel off identities as easily as they can clothing, but this practice is a necessary mechanism of amalgamation within the corporate world. These outfit/identity changes are maddening to Sachs because, in truth, there

is no correct outfit to be put on. Whatever outfit Sachs chooses will be wrong simply because she is wearing a performance, and a performance is never as quality or convincing as reality.

The definition of identity and the notion of shifting one's identity is important if we want to understand Sachs' transformation at *Runway*. I am using Jaime Lester's definition of identity as, "the conscious and unconscious thoughts or ways in which an individual understands herself in relation to the world" (Lester 283). Before adapting her style to the *Runway* norm, Sachs saw herself as inept. Presentation of one's self is the first thing that a person sees (and consequently assesses) of another, and therefore it was essential for Sachs to change her outward appearance in order to no longer feel "stupid, incompetent, and all-around moronic" (121). Sachs' coworkers simply would not respect her until she looked like someone who demanded respect, and in the case of *Runway*, that meant donning only the most fabulous couture. It is despicable that Sachs had to change her outward appearance to gain autonomy within her workplace. Respect should have been given for her intellect and work-ethic, but instead we as Americans base our value judgments upon materialism and the projection of self.

Luckily for Sachs, her unacceptable appearance could be easily rectified. As we have seen from Priestley's transformation, a change in identity can be as drastic and comprehensive as one chooses to make it. Sachs' goal in changing her appearance was to locate desirable identity qualities of her superiors and adapt them to herself: "Identity is not a fixed state of being, but a fluid process that is able to change. Multiple and competing identities exist simultaneously with individuals choosing to perform each identity based on the contexts in which they find themselves" (Lester 283). The context that Sachs found herself in was one of high fashion and intensity, so in order to be seen as someone who could potentially be a

greater asset to the company, she birthed a new dimorphous identity that was more conducive to the harsh gaze of the *Runway* elite: “I was working at Runway magazine for chrissake—simply putting on anything that wasn’t torn, frayed, stained, or outgrown really wasn’t going to cut it anymore” (123). The latter passage is a pivotal moment for Sachs in the novel, one where she has come to the realization that she had the ability to be herself outside of the office, and at the same time could perform an identity that would allow her to succeed within it. As many seasoned veterans of the corporate arena will tell a fresh face, “Follow the maxim, *Dress for the job you want, not the job you have*, and you won’t go wrong” (Frankel 200). There is no question that Sachs would go nowhere at *Runway* if she didn’t dress more appropriately.

Following her exterior alterations, Sachs began to understand fully why Miranda Priestley was the way she was—and adapted herself to that model. After describing her hellish job to an acquaintance, Sachs quickly ends her diatribe of complaints by rationalizing the way that Priestley acts: “Of course, she IS the most powerful woman in fashion and publishing, and you just can’t get to the top of two major industries in New York City handing out candy all day long. Um, it’s understandable that she’s a little tough to work for, you know? I would be, too” (127). This is the epiphany, the bright lights shining down from above where Sachs ceases to feel sorry for herself, and truly understands the sacrifices that must be made in order to climb the corporate ladder as a woman. From this point on, although it is not explicitly stated in the text, Sachs uses Priestley as a model for what she must become, in the sense of forming a dimorphous workplace identity as an avenue for success. Sachs understands that Priestley is not a moral compass, but rather an icon to follow to gain corporate success in exchange for her true identity.

Miranda Priestley served as an exemplar for Andrea Sachs, but who was Priestley's example? According to the text, Priestley had no precursor to follow other than what she could observe about societal norms of who succeeded in the corporate world. As growing numbers of women have entered the workforce the blatant issue that women's gendered traits are not acceptable in the workplace has emerged:

The private and public domains have become gendered spheres, with masculine values and skills governing in the public and feminine skills and values in the private sphere. Thus, men have defined the nature of organizations and work in terms of their experience (Acker, 1992). Because males developed and built [business] organizations, their cultures reflect male values and development (Mills, 1989). (Buttner, 254)

Buttner has pin-pointed the issue that inevitably plagued Priestley in her quest for success: if women are socialized to act in ways that aren't respected or appreciated in corporations, how will they ever succeed? Priestley's response to this phenomenon was the creation of her dimorphous identity, which allowed her to adapt the desirable cultured male values: she needed to beat the men at their own game. Priestley defined her own nature of organization within the walls of *Runway*, rendering her oppressive in the eyes of her subordinates, but also deserving of respect.

Weisberger did not fabricate the tactics that Priestley used in order to gain her prestige, but rather outlined the steps that have been taken by successful women in corporate America. Over 96% of all women interviewees, all of them top-female executives, gave two key factors to success; the first was to constantly go above and beyond all performance expectations—also known as the superwoman model:

“These women reported that they had to prove their ability repeatedly, and needed to over-perform in order to counter negative assumptions in a predominantly male business environment” (Ragins 29). Essentially, these women went into their respective jobs knowing that they had negative points against them simply for their gendered identity. They counteracted this negative image by out-performing all men around them in order to be considered *at least* equal to them. Priestley proved her capacity for success by being a cut-throat businesswoman who never took no for an answer when she wanted a yes, who acted like a wretch in order to command respect, and who never saw her children or husband. Priestley did not act like a male in order to gain respect, but rather acted as an entity of her own that defied gender norms, but commanded reverence in exchange for her hard work.

Priestley’s harsh treatment of Sachs can be seen in one of two ways: She can either be perceived as a tyrannical superior who was never satisfied with Sachs’ work, or a woman who saw immense potential in an employee and pushed her in order to create a successor. I believe that the latter is true—that Priestley was empowering Sachs. There is no doubt that Priestley’s treatment of Sachs was horrendous. Priestly was demeaning, dehumanizing, snide, and impossible to please—yet that was the only way for her to force Sachs to understand the harsh realities of a woman succeeding in the corporate world. Priestley’s never-ending tyrannical judgments of Sachs were to help her learn about the fashion industry. Sachs needed to realize that it was essential to put her vulnerable feelings aside, and create a dimorphous identity in order to be taken seriously. Going back to the gendered traits of the 2008 American Psychological Association, young people see women as vulnerable and tender. Priestley wanted to eradicate those qualities in Sachs just as she did for herself so that she could later succeed. An example of this is that it was imperative

for Sachs to learn the language of her business, much like Priestley did in order to be taken seriously: “Influence comes from knowing the business, and one of the best ways you can exercise your influence is to use language unique to your industry and profession” (Frankel 166). Through Priestley’s crude treatment of Sachs a harder skin emerged, one that refused to be seen as weak or accept defeat. Once Priestley saw Sachs’ dimorphous identity emerge in Paris, she knew that Sachs had the potential to truly succeed.

One of the most important factors in Sachs being a successor to Priestley was the realization for Andrea that Miranda Priestley was extremely talented, even though she was a miserable wretch:

Miranda Priestley was, as far as I could tell, a truly fantastic editor. Not a single word of copy made it into the magazine without her explicit, hard-to-obtain approval, and she wasn’t afraid to scrap something and start over, regardless of how inconvenient or unhappy it made everyone else [...] *Runway* wouldn’t be *Runway*—hell it wouldn’t be much of anything at all—without Miranda Priestley. I knew it and so did everyone else. (208)

By wholly understanding the talent and hard work that Priestley put into the magazine, Sachs was able to bypass her hatred for her boss, and learn what it took to get a corner office. Priestley was harsh, but only because she demanded the very best. Sachs saw the pattern that successors had to forge in order to succeed at *Runway*: “From everything I’d seen so far, each [subordinate employee] was humiliated, degraded, and generally abused by their direct superior, only to turn around and do it to those under them the second they got promoted” (209). This abuse was cyclical and repetitive because superiors had the foresight to train their

employees by hardening them for the demanding realities of corporate America. One of Priestley's trademark tactics in hardening Sachs was to stare her up and down, in order to show her disapproval: "She was looking at me up and down. Her eyes moved unabashedly as they checked out first my shoes and then my pants and then my shirt, and continued upward to my face and hair, all the while avoiding my eyes. The expression on her face was one of massive disgust" (246). This passive disgust was a medium in molding Sachs in a more admirable candidate for success. Once Priestley had influenced Sachs to her satisfaction, it was time for her to acknowledge that she was ready to be considered as more than a minion to fetch her daily Starbucks.

In order for Priestley to consider Sachs worthy of being seen as a potential successor, Sachs needed to prove her loyalty and commitment to her job at *Runway*. This task was fulfilled in the eyes of Priestley when Andrea decided to remain in Paris to work instead of flying home when her best friend got into a car accident and was comatose:

"Ahn-dre-ah, I'm very pleased with your decision. It is absolutely the right thing to do, and I appreciate that you recognize that. Ahn-dre-ah, I have to say, I had my doubts about you from the start. Clearly, you know nothing about fashion and more than that, you don't seem to care [...] I'll be much more willing to help you get where you'd like to go now that you've demonstrated that you're committed. You should be proud of yourself, Ahn-dre-ah." Just when I thought I'd faint from the length and depth and content of the soliloquy—whether from joy or from pain, I wasn't sure—she took it one step further. In a move that was so fundamentally out of character for this woman on every level, she placed her hand on top of the one I had

resting on the seat between us and said, “You remind me of myself when I was your age.” (338)

The devil’s icy exterior has melted; Priestley has finally capitulated in a sense by revealing a bit of her true self, and conceding to Sachs that she has not always been the person she is now. At this point for Sachs, Priestley is not so much an anomaly, rather a person whose exterior shell has come off and true self has emerged. This is a side of Miranda that has thus far been tucked away into her past life; Priestley only reveals herself to those whom she deems worthy of seeing behind the mask of her dimorphous identity. It is almost as if Priestley is initiating Sachs into the coveted, and minute world of successful corporate women. Once Sachs has proved her willingness to create a hardened dimorphous identity, she is received with open arms, Priestley was then willing to network for Sachs knowing that she would not be a disappointment.

My research within and outside of Weisberger’s text has made me come to a disparaging conclusion: women are marginalized and stereotyped in corporate America unless they do something to counteract that negative image. It is disheartening to think that women need to go that extra mile in order to gain respect, autonomy, and success—yet it is a latent truth in America today. That is not to say that there are not powerful women who aren’t extremely successful. I would argue that all of the successful women in America, like Miranda Priestley, have made a deal with the devil in order to create success for themselves. Women must try on different identities, casting aside their own, until they have created one that is accepted by the patriarchal structure holds control in corporate America. Is it worth it to throw away your own identity in exchange for job advancement? I would argue, yes. Creating a dimorphous identity that is “not too male, but not too female” is challenging and tiring, but without that identity women would still be chained to their domestic spheres. Change will come; one day women will define their own rules

within corporate America, however it will take more women like Miranda Priestley to create such a revolution. Although a dimorphous identity is a disparaging concept because women need to change themselves in order to be respected, I believe it should also be thought of as a form of empowerment. These dimorphous women have empowered themselves by circumventing the conventions of patriarchal structures.

Pop culture narratives are often written off only as “pleasure reads”—but why wouldn’t they be? An exact goal of an author such as Weisberger would be to get modern women to read her book, which would in turn begin the conversation of “Why does it have to be such a sacrifice, such a shift in identity, an either/or decision when it comes to women working?” Of course academics can wait and study texts such as these in retrospect of America’s glass ceiling issue when it all doesn’t seem so familiar, when the language has been outdated so the text is deemed challenging enough and “study worthy”, or we can act now. We can explore now in this essay or in the future why there are such an outpouring of texts where women are constantly performing different identities in order to fit into workplace parameters that simply weren’t meant for them in the first place. Characters like Miranda Priestley and Andrea Sachs empower women: they convey the message that success can be attained if you are willing to sacrifice it all. But do the ends justify the means? That all depends on how much you want the corner office.

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"CULLUD DANCING" INTO THE WESTERN LITERARY CANON:

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AS THE
AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE TRANSLATION
OF JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

By Dominique Joseph Monlezun Jr.

Dedicated to the New Eve

In a segregated Florida graveyard lies a woman of whom Robert Hemenway cites a New York daily publication describing her as the writer of the most "vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race" (6). Critics consider her most well-known novel *Their Eyes Are Watching God* "one of the most revealing treatments in modern literature of a woman's quest for a satisfying life" (6). Robert Hemenway sounds out the etched words on her granite marker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South," (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* 1). Harold Bloom documents she is the "precursor" for Alice Walker, the Pulitzer-Prize winning author and "spokesperson for African-American feminism" (*Bloom's Biocritiques: Alice Walker* 1).

Walker in turn contends that if faced with a life sentence on a deserted island with only ten books, she would include Hurston's acclaimed masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*...for to Walker, "*There is no book more important to me than this one*" (ZNHLB xiii).

The New York Times' Ralph Blumenthal pursues the question why there is so much acclaim for a writer who was buried in an unmarked grave at a time when no publishing company would print any of her books ("Party for Zora Neale Hurston, Obscure No More" par. 5). At a time in American history characterized by Langston Hughes as the period when "The Negro was in vogue," (par. 9) Hurston asserted she was not "one of the sobbing school of Negrohood" (par. 13). After a difficult career forging her own identity as an African American female writer, she contemplated suicide in wake of 1948 false accusations by her neighbor of having sexual relations with her 10-year-old son (though she was in Honduras at the time of the supposed event). "My race has seen fit to destroy me," Hurston wrote against the backdrop of a black newspaper exaggerating the story (par. 14). She died at the age of 69. No publisher would approach her final nonfiction work, "Herod the Great."

Yet in August 2002, two thousand international fans flocked to a Central Park stage for a reading of her works, following the growing swell of 29 books and hundreds of literary articles about her, triggered by Alice Walker's 1973 discovery of her grave (par. 5). Walker proposes amid the growing popularity of Hurston's work that her most distinctive quality is her "racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" (ZNHLB xii). Walker likens Hurston more to an "uncolonized African" than the African Americans of her early 1900s era; she radiated a self-confidence in herself and in black people that set her apart even from other Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, partly because she grew up in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where her father helped author the laws. "This community affirmed her right to exist and loved her as an extension of itself"

(xiii) where she would experience the word-soaked cascade of Post-Reconstruction black oral tradition on Joe Clark's general store porch, where "black people became black" (12-13).

Yet does Hurston's grave in the Fort Pierce, Florida, overgrown and seemingly forgotten, speak in somber whispers of only "a native American genius" (ZNHLB xiv)? As American readers gaze back into history, the question arises of what else can we make of Walker's claim that "With her easy laughter and her southern drawl, her belief in doing cullud dancing *authentically*, Hurston seemed—among these genteel 'New Negroes' of the Harlem Renaissance—black" (xv)? We can begin to perceive that Hurston is more than her traditional categorization as a black writer, more than a feminist writer, is perceived as American, more than 'black,' and more than a deeply criticized literary pioneer. We might begin to see that Hurston is misunderstood even by her deepest supporters, including Walker and other prominent feminist writers of the late 1900s. We see that she stands not just as the spokeswoman for some amorphous authentic 'black culture' but as the bridge between the classical Western literary tradition and 20th century black American culture, a boisterous and unconventional synthesizer of English Enlightenment and black American folklore, a powerful shaper of America's current literary community. Walker may have unknowingly detected the strand of Western mythical storytelling tendency and 'enlightened ideals' amid Hurston's writings when Walker stated in her Foreword that her black friends, on reading Hurston's *Mules and Men*, testified that "a kind of paradise was regained" (xii). At the heart of this rediscovery lies the truth that black Americans in Post-Reconstruction United States stand not outside of the Western literary tradition documenting the development of Western civilization—they stand firmly within it.

To accomplish the reclaiming of this truth, Zora Neale Hurston seized her readers with a flare of her elusive spirit and creative pen, turning black oral folklore

into written word as the ancient Greeks transcribed such western literary classics as Virgil's *Ovid* and Homer's *Odyssey*. In the dawning frontier of Post-Reconstruction black identity, Hurston serves as American Prometheus who steals the spotlight of the literary community's attention and directs it to the pulsating African American community initially dwelling in the darkness of racially-driven neglect, simultaneously illustrating to this community the value and richness of their folklore tradition. A closer analysis of Hurston's education and early writing career reveals abounding evidence of her contact with the Mt. Olympus of the Western literary canon, carefully selected and inhabited by such mythical figures as the Virgil, William Shakespeare, and John Milton. Over two centuries before her, John Milton's writing career offers striking parallels to Hurston as he created his humanist epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, uniting the literary Greek classics with Christian allusions to produce a work orientated toward hopes for national unity in the wake of the bloody and divisive English Civil War (1642-1651). I argue that Hurston follows Milton's model, drawing from her Howard University education and early literary career, to incorporate Greek mythology, a Christian upbringing with her preacher-father, and her personal desire for African Americans' unity through their celebrated identity in Post-Civil War America (1861-1865), which cries and sweats and dances amid the pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD*.

Hurston spent her childhood years with her Baptist preacher father, John Hurston, whose influence appears throughout her writings, including *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), which is a black folklore retelling of the story of Moses, and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). She wrote this earlier novel as her autobiographical account concerning her preaching father and family, alluding to biblical imagery of the Jewish prophet to the Ninevites (ZNHLB 6). This lasting influence complemented the philosophical impact of her five-year study at Howard University, particularly with the classically-trained professor Alain Locke, the Father of the

Harlem Renaissance and chair of Howard's philosophy department. This prolific professor served as the first African American Rhodes Scholar, attending Herford College within Oxford University from 1907 to 1910. Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth note Locke's familiarity with the Greek classics as he carried over his Harvard University strength in Greek to begin reading the classics (*Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* 63). Having met Tennyson's niece named Ms. Weld, Locke immersed himself in the Oxford academic world still resounding with the voice of Milton and the English literary giants over two centuries previous (63).³

Rosanna Cox in *Renaissance Studies* outlines Milton's similar response in the wake of the English Civil War which left a broken, bloody country struggling to form a unified body. Cox notes that Milton served eleven years as the Secretary of Foreign Tongues, "fashioning...an international identity through propaganda and polemic" ("The mountains are in labour, only mice are born': Milton and Republican Diplomacy" 423). He translated diplomatic correspondence on behalf of the Council of State, formed for the "entertaining, keeping, renewing, or settling of amity and a good correspondancy with foreign kingdoms and states," as per its 1649 charter ("Act appointing a Council of State," *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution* 381-3).

Alain Locke completed his English studies and returned to an early 20th century United States, marred by two surges of African American lynchings that Steward E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck note as resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1,900 black citizens ("Toward a Threat Model of Southern Black Lynchings" *Social Threat and Social Control* 33). As American society adjusted to the post-Civil War

³ Locke expressed his familiarity with the Western literary canon during his 1910 London *Daily Mail* article quoting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the monumental German writer of *Faust*, that if nations cannot understand each other as nations then "they must learn to tolerate each other as individuals" (Donald Markwell "September speech for 2010 United States, Bermuda, and Caribbean Rhodes Scholars").

Emancipation of African Americans, southern white residents sought social controls over these “potential competitors” with such methods including Jim Crow legislation and lynchings. The white ‘vigilante’ mobs viewed lynching as “an instrument of social control over a ‘threatening’ southern black population” (34). Locke’s responded to these waves of racial violence and distrust by seeking to create a new myth to counter that of the threatening Negro. He echoed John Milton’s philosophical and political model through his careful art of propaganda during the critical period to fashion the New Negro. Two and a half centuries after Milton traveled London’s alleys, the young Locke walked the streets of Washington D.C...building, keeping, and renewing bridges between American white culture and the New Negro nation he worked to construct. The volumes of writing pieces and art from his protégées, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, stretched the chasm between white-dominated American society and the diverse African American community.

Locke joined the faculty at Howard University and soon invited Hurston, who was studying there, to join the selective campus literary club that he formed, *The Stylus*. Within the group, Hurston published her first story in May 1921, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” illustrating two distinctive traits which would run throughout her later works. The first characteristic is her black Baptist Christian upbringing which expressed itself in this short story as John Redding, in an Eatonville-like village, appears like a Jesus Christ-like figure: “His arms were outstretched and the water washed over his brograns...A heavy piece of steel or timber had struck him in falling, for his left side was laid open by the thrust” (Hurston 939). The second is her decision to use Eatonville as the contextual basis for many of her pieces, which included an anthropological dimension strongly influenced by Locke’s personal friend and anthropology student of Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits. Sidney W. Mintz in his introduction to Melville Herskovits’ *The Myth of the Negro Past*, notes that Herskovits’ 1926 research plan prioritized a “search for survivals of African cultures

among contemporary Afro-Americans” (xiv). This emphasis expresses itself in the writings of Hurston, who served as Herskovits’ research assistant, which consistently draw specifically from her own such example where African culture survived, her all-black childhood town of Eatonville, Florida.

Locke strongly influenced Hurston’s early career as he guided her writing and its trajectory, along with other Harlem Renaissance writers. He systematically labored to promote Hurston and other Harlem writers because he believed their growing “cultural recognition” would “prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro,” necessary for the improvement of race relations (ZNHLB 40). W.E.B. Du Bois critiques Locke’s literary promotion, particularly his 1925 anthology of *The New Negro*, in light of his larger social agenda: “this book is filled and bursting with propaganda, but it is a propaganda for the most part beautifully and painstakingly done” (ZNHLB 42).

Locke approached propaganda similar to how John Milton incorporated it through his post as the Secretary of Foreign Tongues, helping communicate with foreign nations on behalf of the masses of English people. Amid their division in the aftermath of the English Civil War, they struggled to articulate the shared prototypical concept of the Englishman representing them. Locke heeded this Miltonic model, stating in his introduction to *The New Negro* anthology that “no sane observer...would contend that the great masses are articulate as yet” (TNN 7). Since he contends that African Americans cannot voice their identity and situation, the “new intellectuals”(TNN 7)—including Hurston, Langston Hughes, and other artists—must speak for the masses so the “voice of the New Negro is heard” (“Negro Youth Speaks” 47). However, Hemenway asserts that Hurston grew to oppose Locke’s propagandist drive as a threat to her art, eventually working with Hughes and Wallace Thurman to create the 1926 magazine, *Fire!!*, “devoted to the younger Negro artists” and committed to the inarticulate masses without propaganda underpinnings (ZNHLB 43).

Hurston's later writing, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD*, serves as substantial evidence how her post-Locke writings responded to Locke's classically influenced propaganda, which still significantly affected Hurston's philosophical writing approach. In her popularized novel, Hurston celebrates the inarticulate masses—rather than speaking for them as one of the “new intellectuals,” she lends them her written voice so they may speak for themselves. Hurston continues Locke's Miltonic model of developing a national identity as she creates the absolutist world of Eatonville in which African Americans were co-creators and definers of their world, and in turn, their own identities as residents. Similar to Hurston's absolutist world, Milton sought to create and define a new world and people for his Puritan post-English Civil War society. The narrative nucleus of this new creation is Adam and Eve's complementary otherness, the harmonizing interplay of different but equal natures, which reverberates as Hurston's primary instrument of translation in the realization of the pear tree image in the context of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship. The product is *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD* with Janie and Tea Cake as the African American female re-telling of Adam and Eve in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Locke's New Negro programme served as the catalysis for Hurston to develop a counter-approach in which she exchanges his subtle Miltonic group identity formation (i.e. stimulating the development of a group of people to assume a certain identity) instead for a personal narrative of the relationship of man and woman—Janie and Tea Cake. Her novel continues the prevalent concept in Western literature of complementary otherness, running through the ancient Greek Virgil's *Ovid*, continuing through Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and culminating in Hurston's post-Harlem Renaissance America. Essential to the development of the voice of Hurston in a segregated frontier nation of America is her understanding of how man relates to woman and woman to man, in the context of a new and exciting, yet volatile world. Hurston adapted this Miltonic literary tool of complementary otherness (rather than utilize as he did to promote a common ancestry of the English people and thus their

shared national identity) to strip it of its propaganda use. She instead proposed a celebration of African American folk life and the individual black voice, her own female voice describing the relationship she desires.

This formula represents a prominent Western literary strategy—and essentially human strategy—of a storytelling heritage for humanity which situates a relational narrative in the center of the story. Hurston adopts this narrative as she gives written word to the oral tradition of Post-Reconstruction southern blacks, similar to how Ovid and other ancient Greeks produced written epics to chronicle and disseminate oral legends. She is thus adopted into the revered home of the Western literary canon as she builds a mythic and folk narrative using classic influences to provide an account of unifying black identity, as Milton who labored toward unifying English identity through an account of a shared ancestry of Adam and Eve.

Hurston opens her novel by directing the readers' eyes upward to the same tree that Western writers focused so many of their stories and storytelling around—the Eden Paradise, holding within itself the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In her own retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, she describes how Janie the protagonist, “saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (*Their Eyes Were Watching GOD* 181). Janie as Hurston's autobiographic character recognizes her hopes and dreams and sexual nature which she likens to a pear tree. Under its branches, she continually rested, contemplating the pear tree's bloom which called her to “gaze on a mystery” (*TEWWG* 183). There is something within herself—about herself—that Janie realizes eludes quantification or verifiable proof—she is an alluring mystery unto herself. The Prometheus Hurston brings the light of the reader's attention to see how Americans, black and white, alike share the same legendary tree, similar desires and passions, and scandalous triumphs and tragedies. Milton echoes the

theme of his readers' unity, bound to their common humanity, opening *Paradise Lost* as a tale:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, heavenly Muse. (Book I 1-5)

Hurston's narrative in early 1900s Florida provides a different version of John Milton's 1600s' re-telling of the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve. Where Milton describes the fruit of "that forbidden tree," Hurston creates her own account of the pear tree of her heart of hearts that she forbids to all, except her Adam, Tea Cake. From the very onset of her piece before the pear tree, Hurston articulates her conception of the men and women's differing natures. Some men spend their lives watching their wishes "sail forever on the horizon...until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation," yet women actively shape their wishes and memories, forgetting "all those things they don't want to remember...Then they act and do things accordingly" (*TEWWG* 175). Hurston's situates her narrative using the Miltonic technique of highlighting the differing natures of man and woman, and how the interaction of their fundamental natures births drama. For this drama, Milton portrays "In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth/ Rose out of Chaos" (Book I 9-10), yet Hurston instead begins her drama by how in "the beginning of this was a woman" (*TEWWG* 175). This narrative refuses to be constrained to the categorization of simply an African American woman's romance story—Hurston's narrative surges over labels and early 1900s' expectations of black female writers. Her account proclaims its position squarely in the Western literary tradition using mythical and biblical imagery, sweetly whispers in Hurston's world with "kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world" (*TEWWG* 183).

Their Eyes Were Watching GOD offers a poignant picture of the translated version of Milton's classically-influenced Eve, cognizant of her own mystery that faintly whispers of a complementary other: "She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made" (183-184). Janie in the novel's genesis longs and waits for what she soon realizes is the blossoming of the pear tree, and her own identity. Through this blossoming, Hurston expresses her break with Locke and other upper-class black Americans as she forges her own voice in her own literary world, celebrating the polished—and unpolished—aspects of black folk life. Deborah G. Plant asserts that Hurston sides with the uneducated black American, voicing her unique writing approach through her autobiographical voice in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as she "joins forces with the 'humble Negro' in the verbal warfare directed against the elite" (*Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: the Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* 21). Though Hurston distances herself from Locke and other Harlem Renaissance writers who filtered black experience to publish only the traits considered proper for the New Negro, she retains Locke's emphasis on the importance of racial identity along with his example of heeding Milton's model of Greek mythology and Christian biblical images. Hurston thus engages the question of how to respond to the Miltonic literary tradition from an approach differing from Alain Locke, a question she largely resolves through reliance on her formative years in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida.

The novel's front gate that Janie leaned on, the Eatonville she describes, the characters and events all emerge from her childhood experiences in Florida's African American township which Locke's *Stylus* group had years before encouraged her to pursue. Her writings reveal several important motifs which simultaneously shape her stories and serve as expressions of the early family life which shaped her. Her family's move to Eatonville, Florida, in the late 1800s shaped her storytelling in

profound ways; she grew up in what has since been recognized as the country's first incorporated African American township. Black inferiority was absent from her cultural formation. Valerie Boyd in *Wrapped in Rainbows: the Life of Zora Neale Hurston* chronicles how these African American citizens were both pioneers and leaders, ground-breakers and rule-creators in this great experiment of Post-Reconstruction Florida that in her words, was "a city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jailhouse" (22). Memories of her pastor-father, John Hurston, and her Sunday school teacher-mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, manifest themselves with Hurston's skillful weaving of Biblical and black cultural motifs and images in her later writings such as *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Hurston not only was familiar with the Creation narrative of Adam and Eve, but her relationship narrative of Janie and Tea Cake reflects the Creation model in her account of Eatonville in *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD*.

This narrative features a geographical background which reflects Janie and Tea Cake's internal situation as they live and work on the shores of the Lake Okeechobee. This non-industrialized frontier land serves as an African Americans migrant work camp, hanging precariously between the dominant white 1920s society and the invisible black subpopulation. This tension mirrors Milton's portrayal of Eden which Patricia Parker describes in "Eve, Evening, and the Labor of Reading" as a "pendant world," suspended between Heaven and hell before the approaching fall of humanity (cf. 319-342). In this Harlem product, the chaos figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* translates into the American Hurricane of 1928 which wreaks havoc on Janie's fictional Florida (and biographical area), bringing death and destruction, casting her and Tea Cake out of their seemingly paradise-like dwelling and post-marital bliss. Hurston transcribes Milton's creation epic to situate Tea Cake as the willing victim of the rabid dog bite amid crying parallels to the serpent's mortal sting upon Eve. In contrast to Milton's daughters who transcribed *Paradise Lost* as their

father dictated it to them, Hurston dictates to her publishers her narrative, thus creating a written record of her own female voice for future audiences.

Hurston's female voice weaves the story of Janie and Tea Cake's pioneer mentality, distinctive for Eatonville residents. Janie and Tea Cake's set out into marital union as they together face the dawning of a new period for them on the shores of Lake Okeechobee, harkening to Adam and Eve's venture into the raw, volatile, but fertile unexplored post-fall world. For both Milton and Hurston, the central place of man and woman's relationship is at the heart of their narratives and provides the life-blood for their plot development and discussion of major themes. Hurston's piece echoes Milton's hope for fallen humanity amid a fallen world—even after an all-white court acquits Janie for Tea Cake's murder and she moves back to the accusatory environment of Eatonville, she describes her home in a self-realized resolute embrace of the hope that is hers, relying heavily on the importance of the sun as a symbol of new life. She "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder," cognizant of Tea Cake's presence, as Adam and Eve emerged from the Garden of Eden as refugees yet guided by the Archangel Michael into a new, vibrant world of creative potential. Hurston's recollection of her mother's voice articulates the culmination of Milton and her own literary trajectory: "Jump at de sun" for even if "we might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground" (ZNHLB 14).

Hurston further parallels Milton's literary model by swirling together the drama of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship with many of the same classical Greek couples that Milton incorporated into *Paradise Lost*. In the Miltonic Adam's description of his consummation with Eve of their marriage, he states that:

Joyous the birds; fresh gales and gentle airs

Whispered it to the woods, and from their wings

Flung rose, flung odours from the spicy shrub,

Disporting, till the amorous bird of night

Sung spousal, and bid haste the evening star

On his hilltop, to light the bridal lamp (Book VIII 515-520).

Alastair Fowler notes how Milton draws on the ancient Greek signal of the rising of the planet Venus which is described as the igniting of the bridal lamp—used by the lamp bearer to lead the bride to the bridegroom (ed. Fowler, *Paradise Lost* 456).

James Gollnick cites Apuleius' most renowned story second century book, *Metamorphoses*, which documents the Greek mythical tale of Eros and Psyche and how it serves as a prominent source of this lamp imagery for a bride and her bridegroom, which Milton incorporates. In this tale, Psyche is a mortal whose beauty rivals that of Aphrodite herself. One day the wind whisks her away to a wonderful valley in which Psyche encounters a royal palace amid the woods. There, she follows the directions of a mysterious voice to clad herself in a bridal dress for the wedding banquet and then afterwards go to bed. The speaker of the voice awakens her and meets her in the dark, consummating their marriage under the cover of night. Not wishing to reveal his identity until the appropriate time, Psyche eventually uncovers a concealed lamp and realizes her husband is the god, Cupid (or the Greek Eros) (Gollnick, *Love and the Soul* 5-7).

Hurston's account of Tea Cake through Janie's eyes parallels Milton's allusion to Cupid and Psyche as Janie sees him in her mind, "Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spice hung about him. He was a glance from GOD" (*TEWWG* 261), prefiguring Milton's description of Adam and Eve's consummation when the birds "flung odours from the spicy shrub." Yet Hurston's account revises Milton's Adam and Eve narrative by switching the male-female perspective; she deposits in Janie the divinely influenced vision of Tea Cake, yet Milton assigns to

Adam the vision of Eve, of whom he sees “heaven in her eye” (Book VIII 488). Like the divine magnificence of Cupid, Hurston portrays Tea Cake through Janie’s voice as “the son of the Evening Son,” for the story is seen—and told—from her perspective as a black woman.

Milton’s explicit reference to the mythical couple of Cupid and Psyche in *Comus* (1634) further supports the claim that Hurston’s account follows Milton’s model of classic allusion to Eros and Psyche. Jeanie Grant Moore argues in the *Milton Quarterly* that the Cupid and Pysche myth is the source material from which Milton “recreates that earlier innocence in *Paradise Lost*” (“The Two Faces of Eve: Temptation Scenes in *Comus* and *Paradise Lost*” 10):

Celestial Cupid, her famed son, advanced,
Holds his dear Psyche sweet entranced,
After her wandering labours long,
Till free consent the gods among
Make her his eternal bride...” (29-33).

The prevalence of Milton’s allusions to this mythical couple gives credibility to the argument that Hurston’s narrative echoes Psyche’s struggle to survive the waters of the River Styx amid its vicious guardian dragons when she describes Janie’s battle in the hurricane flood waters at the end of the novel, only to witness a rabid dog who “lashed up his fury for the charge” and sank his teeth into Tea Cake’s cheek (*TEWWG* 310). This scene invokes the mythical scene of Cerebrus—the three-headed dog who guards souls from crossing Styx—which Milton alludes to in Book II of *Paradise Lost*’s description of hell, pierced by “A cry of hell hounds never ceasing barked/ With wide Cerberean mouths full lound, and rung/ A hideous peal” (Book II, 654-656).

Hurston concludes *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD* with an image strongly reminiscent of Hermes leading Psyche to heaven for Zeus to transform her into a divine being through a nectar cup before Zeus joins Psyche and Cupid in marriage. As Milton described Adam and Eve's consummation of their marriage amid birds singing which "bid haste the evening star/ On his hilltop, to light the bridal lamp" (Book VIII 515-520), Janie "mounted the stairs with her lamp. The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire" (*TEWWG* 333). She leaves behind the mortal world's accusatory glares of the townspeople and agonizing memories of losing Tea Cake to the Cerebrus-rabid-dog, only to be accused of coldly murdering him. Once in her room, the time is finally here for this black Psyche to greet the unveiled face of her immortal bridegroom: "He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (*TEWWG* 333). Echoing the majestic Greek gods and goddesses present for Psyche and Cupid's marriage, Janie "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net...She called in her soul to come and see" (*TEWWG* 333). Considering that the ancient Greek translation of Psyche is *psukhe* (breath or soul), Janie emerges as an African American reconfiguration of the Greek Psyche which in the character's own respect serves an influential role in Milton's description of Adam and Eve.

Another Greek mythical couple which Milton draws on and Hurston adapts is Pygmalion and his ivory statue of a woman. Mandy Green in "The Virgin in the Garden: Milton's Ovidian Eve" highlights the link between the creation of Eve from Adam's rib and the fleshy woman created from Pygmalion's ivory statue, become submissive and alluring: "Without a name and without a voice, the former statue may seem as much Pygmalion's possession as the piece of ivory from which she was originally fashioned" (Green 906). Like Pygmalion's ivory-like-Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Hurston's Janie is more of Joe Starks' possession before meeting Tea Cake: "The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman...she couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit"—she is known to the townspeople not as Janie the person,

but as Mrs. Mayor Starks the possession (*TEWWG* 211, 208). Joe erects her as his possession in the town center as he did the street lamp, leaving her able only in spirit to have flickering connection with the other residents. When the townspeople celebrate the creation of the town, Tony Taylor's loud call for Janie to make speech after Joe is cut short by the new Mayor Starks' flat declaration, "mah wife don't know nothin' bout no speech-makin' (208) because to Joe, Janie does not have a personal voice. The Greek allusion in Milton and later as a translated version in Hurston portrays an owner-object relationship between Adam and Eve, in addition to Joe and Janie.

This disjunction between man and woman in Hurston's account ends with a checkerboard. A "tall man" who "looked familiar" appeared at Janie's store after Joe's death, and seeing all the other Eatonville residents gone to the ball game, he invites her to checkers. This mysterious man draws her into checkers, celebrating her presence and her decision on the board in a way that Joe --seeing her to be more useful as his store employee—ignored. The fertile male figure who reveals himself as "Vergible Woods...Tea Cake for short" (253) contrasts the sterile typology invoked by Janie's first husband named Logan Killocks, whose lonely house "was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods" (191). As Tea Cake walks Janie home that evening, she has a passing anxiety for her safety with this strange man in the dark, only to reflect "Tea Cake wasn't strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life" (255). Janie intuitively recognizes something familiar with this man that leaves her at peace.

Hurston's portrayal of Janie and Tea Cake's first encounter reverberates with the typology of Milton's Adam and Eve in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*. A faceless voice guides Eve from her slumber beside the watery pool to Adam, and on seeing him, professes, "Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim/ My other half: with that thy gentle hand/ Seized mine" (487-489). Milton expresses the concept of complementarity of man and woman in a way that celebrates their different natures

which in turn occasions their union. Yet rather than simply mimicking Milton's popular English conception of male natural superiority in how Eve's "beauty is excelled by manly grace" (490), Hurston describes the modified concept of integral complementarity which celebrates Janie and Tea Cake's different natures while maintaining their equality, and their identity as complete selves, rather than as parts of each other.⁴ Invoking the primordial Paradise, Janie tells her concerned friend Phoeby that Tea Cake "done taught me de maiden language all over," and this language is one of equals—even during difficult periods of their relationship—in which Janie is confident enough in her equal identity that she justly him repeatedly when she suspected him of unfaithfulness, rather than remaining silent as a Pygmalion statue-turned silent woman.

Hurston's account using integral complementarity follows Milton's concept of unity of similar, differing parts emphasized in Book XII. Maggie Kilgour asserts that the impending fall of Adam and Eve—similar because they are both persons made in God's image, though different as man and woman—occasions the entrance of the unifying character of Jesus who "conglob'd/ Like things to like" (*PL*, 12. 382) and "who also as Abdiel tells Satan, brings the angels closer to God, and whose incarnation 'God with man unites' (*PL*, 12. 382)" ("Satan and the Wrath of Juno" 661). Central for Milton is the concept of necessary parts and their union (i.e. Adam and Eve), which he also expresses in *Aeropagitica* that: "It was from out of the rinde of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill" (728). Milton's utilizes this motif of the "twins cleaving together" in *Paradise Lost* to define Adam and Eve as man and woman only within the context of their dialogue—Adam

⁴ For more on the Edith Stein's discussion of the metaphysical account of man and woman, see Prudence Allen's *Edith Stein: Woman, Second Edition Revised*.

comes to know himself through Eve and Eve through Adam (cf. Book IV 411-486). Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve's relationship as the unification of two complementary, equal, and necessary parts reflects his own cultural history in which he joined the popular British push toward unification of divisive sectors after the English Civil War.

Hurston incorporates Milton's narrative approach of the necessary parts to form the whole through her pear tree metaphor. As Janie sits alone in her home after her fish meal with Tea Cake, thoughts of him flow as wave upon wave in her mind: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (*TEWWG* 261). Her childhood memories of the pear tree near her grandmother's home floods back into her mind, carrying with them her yearnings to "be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!" (183). As a girl seeking confirmation of her longings to receive the bee as a pear tree blossom, intrinsically tied to her identity as a woman,⁵ Janie searched for an answer but found a "personal answer for all other creations except herself" (183). As a middle-aged woman, she finds that personal answer for herself in the person of Tea Cake, through whom she comes to know her identity as a black woman with dreams of a relationship in which she is loved as an equal.

As her third marriage, Janie reflects Hurston who was herself married three times. Hurston also experienced the untamed mystery of the blooming of her own identity and literary voice, delivered in a remarkable written transcription of black oral folklore using mythical and Christian allusions as her literary predecessor and the Western giant, John Milton, before her. Amid her critics who decried her for avoiding the "race problem" by celebrating supposedly menial black life, she broke from Alain Locke to produce a fusion between autobiography and anthropology that is quickly becoming accepted into the Western literary canon as an invaluable embodiment of emerging black American female voice. Hurston declares through

⁵ Cf. Edith Stein.

her celebrated use of unpolished Post-Reconstruction black language that African Americans share in the same dramas chronicled by their European counterparts in the Western literary canon. But rather than simply reiterating Milton's account of Adam and Eve in the splendid divine light of their Heavenly Father, she encourages African Americans to look inward toward their own identities and through their own blackness as legitimate lenses through which to see their world. Hurston thus translates Milton's model to create a narrative in which the Western literary world quiets itself to gaze on as Hurston's Janie and Tea Cake stand before the approaching hurricane, "staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching GOD."

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WATCH OUR SPIRITS RISE:

THE STORY OF NEW ORLEANS AS IT
RELATES TO RACE AND HURRICANE
KATRINA

By Sarah Passick

“Here we are. We’re in New Orleans,” my dad says, and I’m seeing it, this place I been dreaming about. It’s all jam-packety, pretty old houses lined up one beside the other, each one a different color, with curlicues and flowers, and, man, streets just full of people. White people, black people, mixed-raced people, all jumbled up together and walking. Music right on the sidewalk, and I don’t mean like one nigger with a guitar, but a whole band and drum set and everything, like the whole city is a big party...Everybody knows my name, and aunts and uncles I never heard of are crying and whooping and handing us around like sacks of corn. Googlobs of kids, man. These kids, they’re all over me, like, “You in the Ninth Ward.” Like it was a privilege. Like I might not measure up”

--Baum 39

*The hospital lobby was as frantic as the ramp at Charity, full
of gurneys, people running, shouting. What the fuck? The
Storm was over. Tim grabbed a doctor in a white coat.
"I need to put a body in the morgue."
"One of ours?"
"No, Killed on the street."
"No way."
"What do you mean?"
"I'm not going to establish a precedent by taking the city's
trash"*
--Baum 229

Slavery and Hurricane Katrina. White Man's burden, one in the same. Don't mistake 2010 for a post-racial America. It's not. That filthy racism still lives in the dirty, mucky water. Americans have disgraced each other by their treatment of fellow Americans, fellow human beings, African Americans. The brutal history of slavery remains in the United States and was ever-present in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I cannot talk about New Orleans without talking about slavery, and I cannot talk about slavery without talking about Voodoo and the Mardi Gras Indians. I refuse to ignore the implications of Hurricane Katrina as it exposed discrimination and ethnic cleansing. Only when we have the courage to open our eyes do we see that in the harshest of lights: the issue of race dominates American culture.

"We know this place," says Sunni Patterson, a New Orleans spoken word poet whose intricate rhymes serve as living and breathing testaments to the historical and present day effects of race and discrimination in New Orleans. "We know this place," yes, we do, our people, our city. What makes New Orleans, New Orleans? I

have been grappling with this question from the moment I moved here in August 2007. I think that this question has always been lingering somewhere in my mind. There is certainly something different, something special about New Orleans. I want to tell you what it is; I want to show you how New Orleans came to be this way.

*And we know this place,
for we have seen more times than we'd like to imagine
bloated cadavers floating through waters of a city gone savage,
foraging the land for what can be salvaged.
But what can be saved when all is lost?
It happened in August, twenty-nine days in.
We are now five days out of the only place
we knew to call house and home (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

CAB DRIVER'S STORY:

I interviewed my cab driver last Saturday night on the way to Bourbon Street. The conversation was light at first, but I couldn't help but notice the intense aroma of a "new car." I asked him about it, and he said that this was his first new cab since Katrina. He had been driving trucks around the South and had finally moved back home. I asked him about his experience with Katrina. He had been working... two lovely ladies needed to go to the airport. He asked the women if he could stop home and get a few things... they agreed and so they went. But wait, a cab driver brought two women to his home and they got food for the road? What makes New Orleans, New Orleans I ask myself? Family, compassion, genuine selflessness. This is New Orleans. Yes it is true that in times of need people tend to have a certain air of compassion, but not like in New Orleans. He continued on about going from airport to airport as they shut down, and finally in Alabama they, not his family, but two strangers, were able to get on a flight home. He had a family – kids all over the place, a crazy ex-wife. He told me that New Orleans was a woman, a bitch, and you can't

help but both love and hate a bitch. He told me that this was a culture ingrained – a separate world, a state within a state. He told me that the people saved New Orleans, and the government failed them. This was a real man fighting back what seemed like years of tears talking about this place. This is why he came home. This is why they all came home.

*And we know this place.
Reclaim the crown.
Hold onto the prize,
never put it down.
Be firm in the stance,
no break, no bow,
got to forward on, Mama,
make your move now. Forward on, Papa,
make your move now.
Forward, dear children,
'cuz freedom is now (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

I cannot romanticize New Orleans or even discuss the current state of New Orleans without drawing from the past. I cannot ignore the work of Walter Johnson in *Soul by Soul*, where he shows that in the heart of the antebellum South, New Orleans was the largest slave market. I refuse to ignore the African American culture, which today still fights racism and distrust from the outside community. How do you watch the footage from the Convention Center and the Superdome and not think of slavery?

*Hell, it's hot wherever you be,
from the rooftop to the cell block,
step on up to the auction block,
and bend over,
touch your toes,*

show your teeth...

Yes, Sunni, American citizens smoldering on display, I thought we threw away those auction blocks. What the world witnessed was oppression at its height, and we watched. What if those were Tulane students lying dead in the water? Would the government have done something then? It's easy to get angry but that is not the point. I don't want to get angry. I want to understand, I want you to understand. I want to set the scene of a city that has never been just another American City. Ask Grace King who wrote "New Orleans: The Place and the People":

She [New Orleans] does not respond to the process. It seems to bore her. She is too impatient, indiscreet, too frank with her tongue, too free with her hand, and – this is confidential talk in New Orleans – The American millionaire is an impossible type to her. She certainly has been admonished enough by political economists: "Any one," say they, "who can forego a certain amount of pleasure can become rich," She retorts (retorts are quicker with her than reasons): "And anyone who can forego a certain amount of riches can have pleasure. (King xx)

Money, fear and time are secondary when you have the privilege of calling New Orleans

home. The impatience, the retorts, come from a city of people who refuse to succumb to the natural fears present in other cultures. The idea of pleasure and good times in the present are all that matter, because the prospect of tomorrow is never certain.

What is it that has really sustained New Orleans to continue to overcome her obstacles? To refuse to drown? There has never been a choice. The disgrace of her past is the art that paints her future. It is not just that the power of New Orleans lies in her ability to make beauty out of tragedy, art out of pain, and despair into humility. It is not just that spending the afternoon in the dense humidity of New

Orleans to feel the effect of her cool easy breeze or that New Orleans is a city rooted in her citizen's steadfast determination to carry the traditions of her family. We all know that in New Orleans family is the spice in the crawfish and the warm blanket for the cool nights once the sun has gone down, that family is buying the stranger next to you a beer after he has told you his troubles - when you only have five dollars left in your pocket. In New Orleans, we take pride in the stereotype that there exists the opportunity to forget greed, ignore the value of money, that time is always an afterthought. New Orleans reminds us to breathe baby, all we have is the here and the now.

New Orleans is home, a true and honest home. The people of New Orleans honor traditions the rest of the country is too preoccupied, too busy to observe. Only in New Orleans do three year olds beat to the sound of a second line, wave flags and scream as the Mardi Gras Indians go by. New Orleans culture is family. New Orleans is manifested by her culture, one that exists on the premise that the people could not imagine living anywhere other than New Orleans. In New Orleans, the African American culture is different because it is based around families living and sharing and staying together, united. The continuity of tradition is what makes them stay healthy and strong. How, you might ask, is it possible for a city of people to truly live like this? Because it is all of this, and not any of this that make New Orleans, New Orleans.

What truly distinguished New Orleans from the rest of the cities in America is that historically the people have faced death, and come back for more, for life. Every aspect of New Orleans culture reflects resilience. And so it remains a place that is so different from any other city because of one simple fact; the culture refuses to address fear, simply because there's no time for this indulgence. New Orleans would not be New Orleans if her people acknowledged fear. The culture of New Orleans, one based on the idea that nothing is final, nothing is guaranteed, instead relies on the temporary, the immediate, to drive their future. This is what

distinguishes her and her people from any other inhabitance. They understand the value in the performative aspect of life.

Authentic New Orleanians are not scared of what lies ahead, for they have already been there, done that, and it has undoubtedly shaped who they are; Eleven hurricanes that directly hit New Orleans, 135 years of slavery, with New Orleans being the largest domestic slave market in the country. The voodoo that illuminates the African American soul of New Orleans inspires them to be this way. The Voodoo I am talking about has nothing to do with dolls or music festivals, but instead the history of the Haitian slaves who freed themselves through the ignition of something far more powerful and spiritual than most modern New Orleanians could wrap their heads around. What I have learned is that in New Orleans, the fearlessness comes from the fact that what lies ahead could never be as horrible as what came before.

*...lift her titties,
examine his balls,
now, this damn near sounds like a hip-hop song,
but it's slavery at its peak,
it's a circus for all the freaks (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

SLAVERY:

Slavery is what shaped the South. And New Orleans was the center of the slave market. "These slaves, abandoned for their prices, were reminders to all of the inexorability of the chattel principal, of the willful incapacity of their owners to imagine a world in which enslaved people were anything other than the often fragile, sometimes resistant, but ultimately disposable vessels of slaveholders' desires" (Johnson 207). Because the owners could not imagine slavery, the enslaved Africans had to define their own autonomy and create their own performative identities. Body and soul became two separate entities. *My body is not my body* echoed as a reminder

that slavery was only of the body, but never of the soul. Their bodies were only mechanisms with which to stay alive. Their souls however, the social memory and freedom that their souls provided was what kept them alive. These spiritual bonds allowed them to remain hopeful for the future where both body and soul could unite in freedom. Johnson describes the nature of the slave community below:

As well as the bond that was articulated by the chain, slaves in the coffles shared a common culture. Many observers were struck by the fact that as slaves departed for the south they were often singing..."the Negroes, who have very little hope of seeing those again who are dearer to them than life, and who are weeping and wailing over the separation, often turn the song thus demanded into a farewell dirge." ...These songs, then, were memorials for the communities the trade had destroyed...slaves began to transform the coffle into a community. (Johnson 68-69)

The singing together was a method to escape their daily persecutions, knowing that one day, they would be free. What bellows from their mouths are triumphant melodies to bind each other together, the only way they could. There is no talk of fear. We see the same community building below, as Spike Lee is interviewed about his powerful and haunting documentary:

Tavis: There's a particular scene where at the height of despair, they've lost everything, their city is underwater, their lives have been if not destroyed, certainly challenged, for lack of a better word.

And these folk, these Black folk are in the Superdome, and they start a line where they start singing and marching inside the Dome, singing that great old gospel standard, 'This Little Light of Mine, I'm Gonna Let It Shine.' Tell me about that moment.

Lee: Well, we're a very religious people. And we turn to the good book, we turn to our gospel, we return to our spirituals, we return to our faith in the lord to lead us through many times. And we're just banking on the stuff that our ancestors did for 400 years. (Laugh) While they were enslaved. So it's really just calling on the ancestors to, like, lord, please get us through these hard times (Lee, *Travis Smiley on PBS*).

New Orleans is a city based on universal and natural performance. This is not by accident. The Chattel Principal echoes in the minds and hearts of those whose ancestors were enslaved. "Under the chattel principal, every advance into enslaved society – every reliance on another, every child, friend, or lover, every social relation – held within it the threat of its own dissolution" (Johnson 22). Just as mothers and children were ruthlessly torn away from each other during the slave trade, Katrina victims too were forced away from their loved ones without the ability to contact them. African American culture looked then and now to song, to performance, as a way to connect to a spirit which promised eventual peace. *The threat of the chattel principal should not echo in the narratives of Katrina evacuees*. Family is the most important aspect of New Orleans; Katrina cannot be the threat of its dissolution. The White Man's slave trade and the White Man's Burden during Katrina, *Don't you see they are one in the same?* Ripping African American families away from each other, with no regard, no regret. The all too familiar images of children being airlifted from rooftops, mothers, fathers screaming and crying for help with no idea what would happen to their babies. What would happen to them?

The city was cleaving along racial lines in a way he wouldn't have thought possible. It was as though integration had never happened... Richard Baker, a congressman from Baton Rouge, had introduced a bill to buy destroyed houses for their pre-storm value – a god-send – but he'd also let slip that "God" had cleaned out New Orleans Public

housing. Jimmy Reiss had told the *Wall Street Journal* that business leaders at the Dallas Meeting wanted the city to rebuild “demographically, geographically, and politically.” People heard “demographically” not as a suggestion of mixed-income housing but as a call to banish blacks... Yet the shrieking that accompanied those decisions: you’d have thought the city fathers were planning to reinstate slavery (Baum 293).

*But come, come, children, rally 'round,
and maybe together we can make a sound
that will shake the trees or rattle the ground,
make strong our knees,
we's-a freedom bound* (Patterson. *Democracy Now*)

The mistake we made was thinking power lay in the hands of the politicians, of Bush, of Nagin, of Landrieu. The mistake we made was thinking that the power of the people came from those who represented them politically. The real power in New Orleans comes from the forces that represent them spiritually. The power of the Voodoo spirit that enables a soul to take over its body and survive.

VOODOO:

Though it took place on a small island remote from the centers of power, the Haitian Revolution was the most radical revolution of a revolutionary era. It aimed squarely at destroying slavery – even if the goal of full abolition, never before achieved and barely imagined, may not have been entirely clear to all the people engaged in the struggle. A violent response to the slave-powered plantation system that dominated the New World economy, it was the beginning of the end of black slavery in the hemisphere. The fury it unleashed lingers still.

In Haiti today, voudouisants say that the spirits called up during that time were so powerful they haven't yet been able to get rid of them. (Sublette 148)

Voodoo ignited the Haitian revolution and the Haitian Revolution is what propelled New Orleans. Ned Sublette in his book *The World that made New Orleans: from Spanish Silver to Congo Square* says that "Vodou provided a method of organization and a sustaining faith for the rebellion..." (Sublette 152) The customs and traditions of Voodoo are also very important to understand. This is the opportunity that unfortunately some Louisianans' take to commercialize something that is fundamentally so powerful. This does not represent a racist attitude, however it does represent a lack of sensitivity to what should be regarded as a considerable religious movement.

During each of these invocations, the Vaudoux King collects himself; the Spirit agitates in him. Suddenly he takes the cage containing the snake, places it on the ground, and makes the Vaudoux Queen stand on it. Once the scared asylum is under her feet, having become a pythoness, she is penetrated by God, she shakes, her whole body goes into convulsions, and the oracle speaks through her mouth. (Sublette 183)

This is the moment of absolute authority compelled by secrecy. The Voodoo Queen is not speaking, God has begun to speak through her body. God is behind the force of this celebration. And thus, the dance begins.

What is very real and at the same time very remarkable in Vaudoux, is that kind of magnetic compulsion of the assembled group, to dance to the point of losing their senses. They are well protected in that respect, because Whites found spying on the mysteries of the sect... have sometimes themselves started to dance, and have consented to pay the Vaudoux Queen to put an end to this punishment. I cannot

fail to observe that never has any policeman who has sworn war on Vaudoux not felt the power that forces him to dance, and that has saved the dancers from the need to take flight (Sublette 184).

The Haitian Revolution was the most powerful and only successful slave uprising, ever. It wasn't the artillery; it wasn't a great strategy. It was the will power, the undying devotion to proclaim oneself free. The conflict in Saint-Domingue was anything but simple, involving the "big whites," "small whites," free people of color, and the slaves. "Beginning in 1788, on the eve of the French Revolution, the four social classes of Saint-Dominque fell into open rebellion against each other, one at a time, in a complex dance of death" (Sublette 149). The first two groups to revolt were the *grands blancs* and the *petit blancs*. "Whites began to use the term 'affranchi,' meaning 'ex-slave,' to refer to all free coloreds, even though a substantial number had been born to freedom" (Sublette 149). *Doesn't this sound familiar? Wasn't it the American newscasters in the days following Katrina who called African American citizens refugees? Wasn't it our government who was so quick to scapegoat "socioeconomic class" and "demographic" to separate blacks and whites? The same tactic of division-based on color exist hundreds of years later. Are you sure you didn't mean "affranchi?"*

"The French soldiers were mystified by the slaves' readiness to die" (Sublette 156). Readiness to die? Or readiness to free themselves from the most inhumane treatment institutionalized by European colonial governments. There must be something different; something embedded in the souls of those whose oppression was rooted so deep that the current still runs in the blood of their ancestors. The Haitian Revolution serves as a living historical testament to a higher power manifested in Voodoo and its ability to conquer the impossible. It singlehandedly ignited a revolution. And so the Voodoo is still ever present, just ask those who survived the hurricane.

*Few things are certain:
one, we have no food;*

*two, there are more bodies lying at the roadside
than hot plates being distributed
or first aid being administered
or recognition as a citizen.*

Fourteenth Amendment, X, refugee, check (Patterson. Democracy Now)

PRESIDENT BUSH LETTER:

President Bush,

Truthfully I never really cared for you but the atrocities that you have committed towards the working class of New Orleans are disgusting. You should be ashamed of yourself Mr. President. You called yourself the leader of the free world? Conversely, you are a leader of the most embarrassing travesty to ever occur in our lifetime. You allowed your OWN citizens to drown. You allowed the tax paying, responsible working class of New Orleans to call and scream for help, begging for food and water. You made it okay to turn your back. It is not okay. You didn't care. They weren't "important" enough. So tell me, who is important enough? What if the hurricane had wiped out the wealthy campus of Tulane and thousands of those students and wealthy uptown residents were begging for help... I bet the Red Cross would have moved a little faster. Why did fellow New Orleanians, civilians, only have each other to rely on? Where were you, where were we? This great city of New Orleans that you speak of, where do you think it comes from? Have you ever stopped to wonder why some people didn't leave? Important people, African American families who had spent their lives building families and honest livings' in New Orleans. This wasn't and continues to be a city that refuses to part with her people. This is a city that has bred its citizens. She has held them, nurtured them, challenged them. It has been the backbone to their existence. And maybe they should have heeded the warnings, and listened to what the news was saying, but don't you see? Don't you see their spirit as they dance in the parades? Can't you see

the spirit as they fought to stay alive? Why, how could YOU have left them - calling them refugees on the news? Did the water wash away their citizenship and pride as well? We go to the Middle East and spend billions on those who don't want our help, yet when our own citizens are crying, screaming, begging for our help, you turn your back in bigotry and ignorance. You should be ashamed of yourself Mr.

President. You watched your people die.

*It's kind of scary, ain't it?
to know that both the prophet and the priest practice deceit,
then come to the people and claim peace, peace,
they come to the people and they claim love, love.
But where is the peace, huh?
Where is the love? (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

I am embarrassed to be an American. But I am not even sure if I know what being an American means. Hurricane Katrina has rattled every bone in my body that told me that there is some justice, some government that warrants us as the richest nation in the country. I could drown myself in the geographical information that makes Hurricane Katrina the most devastating Hurricane our time has ever seen, but does that bring back mothers and grandmothers and great grandmothers we see floating dead in the water? It is easy to sit idly and talk about geography and weather reports and "mandatory evacuation," but that is simply gliding on a surface that people are too afraid to crack, because if you crack it that means the guilt will seep out and we will have to look at it in the face. Guilt. Where is the guilt? Why don't we stop talking about the hurricane and talk about what happened after. We watched our people die. We watched the Gulf coast of America become a third world country, and we hardly seemed to bat an eye. The American government turned its back on its citizens, and I am not afraid to tell you why. You thought you were taking out the trash? Shame on you. Shame on your inability to see that the entire Voodoo spirit that lives in New Orleans is only here because of those people who

you have tried to turn away. New Orleans is New Orleans because of those citizens you allowed to drown in their own homes. Those houses were their livelihood, years and generations of work and sweat and overcoming tragedy.

*It's either win or lose,
'cuz death don't come in vain,
not for us to remain enslaved
or our spirits to remain in cages.
It comes so we might be courageous
to fulfill our obligation to our God and all creation...*

MARY'S STORY:

She had stayed for Betsy. The water had come fast, real fast. She walked with her baby on her shoulders through the water, two years old hanging on for dear life as they walked. She lost everything. They lost everything. It was time to start again. And now it was 50 years later and Mary got the hell out. Sure the water would come, it always did. She had a nice home, she and her husband worked two jobs their whole lives to pay for that house. She had done good, she was ready to retire. Her husband had died two years before. He told her his wish was that she fix the house and retire. Rest, finally, your work is done. All your life you worked and raised your children too. It's time to breathe. But then the water came and it was time to start running again. The water always comes. So she packed up and went to Georgia with her daughter. The water flushed and poured and destroyed. They had put everything on the second floor, it would be safe there, right? The dog had stayed up there too, plenty of food and water for the two days they would be gone, let the storm pass, we'll be right back. But they weren't. The storm passed, and so did the humanity. They told her she couldn't come back. Why are you beating Mary down Governor? She had something; she had worked all her life. How dare you threaten Mary with the thought of not being able to come home.

Life in Georgia was miserable she said, it wasn't New Orleans. Why do you want to go back to that dirty city they asked? This is why. In Georgia there were no porches, no friends, no work. No people. Her people. She didn't know the city, her independence lost somewhere past the lone refrigerators and the body bags. Lost in the cracked levees and the failed government to save its people. She had never had to depend on anyone since she was fourteen years old, and she wasn't about to start now. When she entered that filthy city saturated in love and soul and memories of her life, her people, her friends, she felt free. Even among the dirt. Especially among the dirt. There was crying and praying and soon there would be healing.

What makes New Orleans, New Orleans? I asked Mary. When you walk on the street on Mother's day, everybody says "Happy Mother's Day!" your drug dealer, the alcoholic on the corner. And you say "Thank you baby!" and you feel a little better, they don't say Happy Mother's day in Georgia. When you walk into the store and see someone you knew in New Orleans, you laugh and cry together, give each other a hug. You know their pain, they know yours. It doesn't take more than a glance to understand what the other is going through. A single hug from a stranger who is your friend because they get it too. In New Orleans, everybody looks at everybody like they are somebody. Because they are. Money doesn't define you in New Orleans. Money doesn't circumstance your character. That's why she wanted to come back to New Orleans. Why should Mary give up her pride now? She saw the damage and she still felt peace. If she did it before, she could do it again. What was the alternative she asked me? To give up? Mary wasn't a beggar, Mary didn't need charity. She never should have felt that way. She has never asked for help a day in her life, she has never needed to beg for anything, who are you to make her feel like that now? Why misrepresent her and her neighbors because they live in a community that your ignorance refuses to let you understand. She was a working woman who was about to retire. She had paid for her house, her land. Most of the houses in the 9th ward were paid for. It was time to start cleaning, from the spoons to the pots and

the pans. But Mary wasn't helpless. Mary didn't ask for your sympathy baby, all she wanted was your support. From the demolition papers to the deadlines to the wrong permit then the right permit, why did it have to be so hard? Why not give all of the money at one time, so that people could start over, start again, resume their lives. Yes, their lives and their land in their neighborhoods. The places they grew up, the place that was home, the only home. Mary saved every dime she had, and piece by piece she has come back to life. It's not quite finished but she is almost there. The human spirit. The New Orleanian Human spirit. It is unlike any other in this universe. Tragedy into life. That is Mary's story.

*...stand in determination,
able to look death right in the face
and say we made it,
we made it,
we made it,
we made it (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

MARDI GRAS INDIANS:

"Oh, those plumbers and laborers and dishwashers in their thousand dollar finery, Ronald thought as he whirled and danced on up to Claiborne Avenue with half the Lower Nine falling in behind. We don't need any guns up under our clothes to be somebody on the streets of New Orleans! Men! Using money we earned by working to light up these streets — celebrating our community no matter how whipped, underpaid, or neglected! This is a day when no policeman is going to demand you turn out your pockets, no gangbanger is going to stick a gun in your face and take your wallet, no ten-year-old boy is going to be told, "Here, run up this street a ways and I'll give you five dollars." This is a day to remind the world that that man you usually look straight through — the sanitation man, the busboy,

that gardener, that truck driver, that man you never see – that that man is a king! That that man is somebody!” (Baum 125)

The Mardi Gras Indians are the primary example of the expression of soul, allowed by the living spirit of Voodoo in New Orleans. The Voodoo spirit and its revolutionary power is what allow for this type of cultural expression – a freedom for the soul – an outlet to the ancestors to proclaim *we are still here, we are still alive*. Voodoo gives the soul the ability to speak, to scream, to cry out in freedom. The Mardi Gras Indians are a form of political street theater, a community that refuses to render itself invisible. “Tootie taught us a new way to battle: with pretty. He said to the world, “I’m going to bust your ass with this suit!”” (Baum 137) This is the most important aspect of the Mardi Gras Indians as they relate to Hurricane Katrina; they refused to render themselves invisible as much as the government tried to drown them. “But pretty is about more than a masterful piece. It’s about escaping the sense that’s been bred into us that we’re ugly niggers” (Baum 137). As soon as the Indians dress in their suits, their entire state of humanity transforms into a body electrified by the spirits of the past.

The reason that New Orleans was able to come back to life after Hurricane Katrina was because of Mardi Gras Indians such as Tootie Montana. As the leader of the Yellow Pocahontas, the question of whether or not to suit up in the months following Katrina never occurred to him. *Of course he was*. The suits are more than a costume; they are a work of an entire year of self-incarceration, sewing and beading until the suit is finished. They are a masterpiece, a work of the soul, something only Voodoo spirits of the past could have ignited in tradition. “Somebody, though, had to keep these things. They were the heritage of the Lower Ninth Ward – well-nigh scared relics. And there was no end to them, because neither an Indian tribe nor a parading club could come out dressed in the previous year’s suits” (Baum 157).

What makes New Orleans, New Orleans is that the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians began in 1889 at the Bamboula Dance in Congo Square where the first

sight of African Americans wearing feathers is recorded (Tootie's Last Suit). The failure of some Americans to understand the intricacy of this tradition that bears such meaning and purpose, the ability it has to resurrect you from your darker past was not a concern of Tootie, because *you ain't betta than me, you ain't prettier*.

What separates the Mardi Gras Indians from the rest of the brutality in the south is that Tootie was able to transform what was once an encounter based around violence into a competition based on "pretty." The act of labor that goes into making a suit, the hours of manual labor and self-incarceration that it takes to sew a perfect suit worthy of wearing on Mardi Gras is the competitive aspect between the tribes. Who can be prettier? Who can out bead, out sparkle and out dazzle the other? No violence, no gangs and certainly no looting. From an outside perspective, it may be difficult to understand the magnitude of passion that goes into organizing such a masking, but for Tootie and his Indians, this is just a way of life. The only way of life. He knew that the *culture was gon bring us back*.

June 27, 2005. Tootie Montana went to City Hall to speak about police brutality against his Indians one day as they marched. Just as his speech was about to end, Tootie Montana collapsed and died right there in City Hall. Religious views aside, this is something you just believe in. The man stood fighting for his people, fighting for the spirits and his soul and the need to render himself and his community significant in a city whose government tried to turn its back. Tootie Montana dropped dead.

A voice called, "Mah-day two-de-fiyol!" and the crowd began, in a low moan, the most important of the Mardi Gras Indian Songs... The singing grew louder: "Here comes the Biiiig Chief, the Biiiig Chief, the Big Chief of the Nation, the whole wild creation." Joyce took two steps forward, someone grabbed her arms. "He won't bow down, not on that ground," the people sang, "You know I love you, hear you call, my Indian Red." (Baum 204)

He died on the battlefield. He fought for his people in such a real way that he had to leave his body. It was time to join his soul, for good. Death at that moment is nothing other than surreal. It was real, as real as the slave market, as real as the United States of American trying to fight against the spirits of a culture that will not bow down. *We won't bow down.* If that doesn't mean something to you, then I am not sure what will. *Watch our spirits rise.*

Stop Asking Me

Stop asking me what it's like to go to school in New Orleans

Stop asking me if there is "evidence" of Katrina.

Do I see the "remnants" of a hurricane?

I wonder, what kind of "remnants" are you referring too?

When you ask me about "remnants" and "violence," aren't you really asking me if there are black looters and drug addicts and thieves on my street at night?

Maybe I should ask you what it would feel like if your house were swept away by the hand of God, then bulldozed by your government, told that your "home" was no longer.

Where would *you* spend your time at night?

Stop asking.

Start doing.

"This is my museum," he said as Inskeep came up. He reached down and pulled a strip of beadwork from the muck, walked out to the chainlink fence, and hung it to dry. It could be rinsed off and saved. Inskeep watched him curiously, the microphone held at arm's length. Ronald inhaled and leaned into it. "I'm not leaving my home." (Baum 281).

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PLEASURE TO BURN:

VIOLENCE AS MADNESS IN *FAHRENHEIT 451*

BY SARAH PINKERTON

“Any man’s insane that thinks he can fool the
government.”

-Beatty, *Fahrenheit 451*

Critics, teachers, and students routinely idolize the main character of the 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451* as a hero who valiantly fights against the conformity of his dystopian society. The author, Ray Bradbury, wrote the book having seen Hitler come to power by destroying a nation and having witnessed McCarthyism crush the individuality of the American people. Bradbury’s book in fact both critiques societies that give individuals too much power and societies that refuse individuals any power. Though readers identify with Montag’s anger and frustration, Bradbury does not see Montag’s descent into violence and extreme individuality as a sane response to a deranged society; rather he sees Montag’s actions as indicative of further madness.

In this novel, Bradbury presents a society that expects and produces immediate gratification and instant pleasure, a notion that sounds ideal. People are so intent on being entertained that they don’t care if their entertainment is insubstantial. Montag’s boss, Firechief Beatty, claims that if people stay drugged-up and plugged-in and everything will then be fine. “Don’t give them any slippery stuff

like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with,” Beatty advises, and people will be “happier” (61). Beatty explains what most people in this society are trying to attain: “People want to be happy, isn’t that right? Haven’t you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren’t they? Don’t we keep them moving, don’t we give them fun? That’s all we live for, isn’t it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these” (59). More than offering a homogenized happiness, Montag’s society enforces utter equality; people are not born equal but made equal (58). Yet in a society centered on pleasure and equality, something is not right.

Beatty believes that people are looking to have fun, not looking to work or think: “If the film says nothing...I don’t care. I just like solid entertainment” (61). Montag’s wife Mildred echoes this insensible yet insatiable desire for pleasure; she has no notion of what the characters in her favorite television show yell about, but she does not care because the show entertains her (20, 44). In fact, Mildred is the character most inundated with distracting material. “No matter when [Montag] came in, the walls were always talking to [his wife] Mildred” (44). When not staring at her three-wall-large television, she listens to music through her bud-sized “Seashells,” which she keeps perpetually stuck in her ears in order to keep a constant stream of sing-song and chatter running through her head. “There was only the singing of the thimble-wasps in her tamped-shut ears, and her eyes all glass, and breath going in and out, softly, faintly, in and out, faintly, in and out of her nostrils, and her not caring whether in came or went, went or came” (13). Bradbury shows that he never turns off the mindless noise of the television or her Seashells; indeed, her entertainment has become so vital to her that she sleeps with Seashells in and learns to read lips so she never need remove them even if someone talks to her. Listening to music and radio or watching mindless television requires no action, thinking, or input on Mildred’s part; in fact, radio and television seem to distract Mildred from the nothingness that would otherwise consume her life.

Beatty talks about this distraction within a distraction when he says,

So bring on your clubs and parties, your acrobats and magicians, your daredevils, jet cars, motorcycle helicopters, your sex and heroin, more of everything to do with automatic reflex. If the drama is bad, if the film says nothing, if the play is hollow, sting me with the theremin...I'll think I'm responding to the play, when it's only a tactile reaction to vibration. But I don't care. I just like solid entertainment. (61)

The pursuits allowed in this society, however, cannot be considered as active as reading, writing, creating, or appreciating art. Reading, for instance, requires one to process words, ideas, and actions within the theater of the mind, whereas watching television keeps one much more passive. Passive pleasure does not require people to think actively.

Though a society centered on entertainment and pleasure sounds ideal, Bradbury shows that, though Montag's society offers entertainment, the entertainment is of no substance and merely acts as a distraction from people's repressed unhappiness. Though characters are unable to procure literature, they are able to find entertainment in the form of mass-produced television, radio, and music. The presented society, while feeding its citizens easy entertainment, denies creativity and self-expression, for the government outlaws literature in order to facilitate surface, easy pleasures and maintain control of their people. In denying its citizens creativity, the leaders of the society of *Fahrenheit 451* create a dystopian world—that is, “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible” (OED).

Authors' present dystopias as the opposite of utopias, such as Thomas More wrote about; he meant for utopia to be a kind of idea “nowhere place,” but the term has been appropriated to mean a totally just and fair society. The dystopia Bradbury presents in *Fahrenheit 451* consumes itself with a passionate hatred and fear of

literature so pervasive people routinely and casually burn books. Laws dictate that no one may own any piece of literature, and firemen like Montag—people who once protected others from fires—are now duty-bound to destroy and immolate. Firechief Beatty directs such destruction with forceful quips about the pointlessness of reading, indoctrinating firemen and trying to keep them tame.

A society, as well as the individuals it produces, can be deemed either healthy or unhealthy, and given what Montag's society has produced, it is fair to say it is insane. His society fixates so hard on control and forced equality that it actually subjugates and pathologizes the things that are most healthy, the most constructive: creativity and self-expression. Bradbury shows that people in *Fahrenheit 451* are not permitted to work creatively, and they cannot connect to one another because they are too distracted by entertainment that imparts nothing. Because the people of Montag's society are barred from doing so many things, their frustrations bubble below the surface until they impulsively act in destructive ways. Montag's world is inundated with suicides, with mental instability. Erich Fromm notes in *The Sane Society*, "I consider it a safe assumption that a high suicide rate in a given population is expressive of a lack of mental stability and mental health" (7). Yet citizens of this world are so blasé about suicide that no one but Montag, with the help of his new neighbor Clarisse, stops to consider why a person might even commit such an act. Throughout the book, he begins to notice people's tendencies to hurt themselves, most notably when his wife Mildred takes too many sleeping pills. Though she later claims she never tried to hurt herself, he calls the medics to revive her, and they employ a special machine to do so. When Montag asks why the incident is not treated as a medical emergency, he receives the following explanation: "Hell!...We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built" to clean the blood of sleeping drugs (15). Citizens so often try to kill themselves that saving people is a chore, something done easily and without much thought. The medic responds so casually to Mildred's near-death

experience that he never even puts out his cigarette (15). No one attempts to avoid suicide attempts before they happen; citizens simply respond passively to situations as they arise.

Readers can trace underwhelmed reaction to the news of people's suicides throughout the entire novel, which is indicative of the insanity in this society. Early on, one of Montag's coworkers tells him of a brutal hunting machine called a Mechanical Hound; he then adds that it's "a funny thing [that a] Fireman in Seattle purposely set [one] to his own chemical complex and let it loose. What kind of suicide would you call that?" (31). With these words, Bradbury shows that Montag's coworker isn't marveling that a fellow fireman committed suicide; rather, he is confused about the specific manner by which the fireman did so. Shortly after this exchange, Mildred and her friends blandly discuss various types of death and how common or rare they are: "I've never known any dead man killed in a war. Killed jumping off buildings, yes, like Gloria's husband last week, but from wars? No" (94). Even Montag's boss Beatty mentions the tendency toward self-harm, telling Montag, "The[y]...always try suicide; the pattern's familiar" (39). Characters routinely dismiss such deaths as inconsequential, just as Mildred's friend Mrs. Bowles does when she says, "I've always said poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness; all that mush" (101). Bradbury shows here that literature and suicide both get relegated to the trash-pile as soon as people dismiss them.

In addition to spotting the commonness of suicide, Montag also notes the sharpness of others' cruelty and random viciousness, likewise indicative of insanity:

A carful of children, all ages. God knew, from twelve to sixteen, out whistling, yelling, hurrahing, had seen a man, a very extraordinary sight, a man strolling, a rarity, and simply said 'Let's get him,' not knowing he was Mr. Montag, simply a number of children out for a long night of roaring five or six hundred miles in a few moonlit

hours, their faces icy with wind, and coming home or not coming home at dawn, alive or not alive, that made the adventure. They would have killed me, thought Montag...For no reason at all in the world they would have killed me. (128)

Later, when he hears the claim “People are having *fun*,” an exasperated Montag responds with “Committing suicide! Murdering!” (87). By expressing his exasperation, Montag has learned what Erich Fromm discusses in *The Sane Society*: “destructiveness is conducive to suffering, creativeness to happiness...Mental health is characterized by the ability to love and to create...by a sense of identity based on one’s experiences of self as the subject of one’s powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason” (68-69). With the help of Clarisse, even without wide access to literature besides the few books he can steal at work, Bradbury shows that Montag gains perspective on, if nothing else, at least what does *not* make him happy. He has learned to question and has developed the ability to reason, despite the fact that he has never learned to do so.

Montag notes others’ violence from a distance, trying to make sense of it. Through Clarisse, who teaches Montag to question the assumptions he had previously held, Montag can finally put a voice to his own misery: “He was not happy. He was not happy. He said the words to himself” (12). Montag slowly alters his perspective on violence, realizing it makes him miserable. For instance, when he talks about Mechanical Hounds, he notes that it is ““sad...[that] all we put into [them] is hunting and finding and killing. What a shame if that’s all they can ever know””(27). It is little wonder that he begins to question the violence and mundanity of his life when he notes the sharp contrast between Clarisse’s kindness and other’s cruelty. Her example helps him understand how he can transform, as the most violent thing she ever does is collect butterflies (23). By learning what the unhappy people around him are doing wrong, Montag can see the cause-and-effect pattern

that leads people to violence and suicide. He notes the pattern Fromm mentions, that “an unhealthy society is one which creates mutual hostility, distrust, which transforms man into an instrument of use and exploitation for others, which deprives him of a sense of self, inasmuch as he submits to others or becomes an automaton” (*The Sane Society*, 72). When exposed to other people’s protestations and faced with the realization that he is likewise unhappy, Montag does the sensible thing—he revolts against his upbringing. Rather than act violent and ignorant like his contemporaries, Montag turns to peace, individuality, and intellectualism, hoping to find stability while doing so.

Though he has spent most of his adult life distrusting literature and burning books, Montag marks his transformation by reconsidering this idea. ““There must be something in books, things we can’t imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don’t stay for nothing...She was as rational as you and I, more so perhaps, and we burnt her”” (51). Not only does this quote show his curiosity about books and their power, it also shows his willingness to dismiss the normal notions of sanity, logic, and pleasure. Throughout the narrative, Montag continues to separate himself from his contemporaries as he searches for meaning in his pleasure-driven culture. For instance, after a particularly destructive burning, Montag has the following exchange with Beatty:

“I—I’ve been thinking. About the fire last week. About the man whose library we fixed. What happened to him?”

“They took him screaming off to the asylum.”

“He wasn’t insane.”(33)

With this quote, Montag shows his progress into individual thought; he refuses to passively accept the ideas of others, marking a transformation. Montag before his transformation is the essence of destruction. He opens the narrative with the line, “It was a pleasure to burn,” setting the tone of built-up, eroticized violence that will recur throughout the rest of the story (3). Violence, by Bradbury’s characters, is

treated just as cavalierly as suicide, showing this society has pervasively insane. For instance, Mrs. Phelps, one of Mildred's friends, finds the violence of her own children funny: "They'd just as soon kick as kiss me. 'Thank God I can kick back!'" (96). With this comment, Mrs. Phelps dismisses child abuse as a joke, and her friends' silence expresses their complicity in this casual treatment of a truly brutal act. She feels so little for her own children that she would rather kick them than care for them; children in this society act with violence because their parents show them how, and their parents learned from those who came before. Thus the pattern continues.

Society and the actions committed in the name of duty can be summed up with the statement that Faber, a retired professor, makes: "Those who don't build must burn. It's as old as history and juvenile delinquents" (89). Violent children and self-destruction have become ubiquitous to the point they are barely worth discussing. With art and literature outlawed, Bradbury shows here that very little still needs to be built; based on this premise and on the fact that important thoughts no longer need to be thought, people have returned to their baser instincts. Instead of creating, they destroy. Given that cultural creation is at a minimum and that the population at large has never been socialized to think critically about anything, all they can do is passively take in the world—they have no way to express their frustrations and desires through art or literature, and they cannot understand themselves as distinct from others. The only way citizens are able to express themselves and *hope* people might take notice is through violence and suicide. People, being barred from dynamic mental activities, have begun acting out their frustrations physically because they are barred from working through them, both because they have not been taught how and because art is banned. Citizens distract themselves with constant television, with overdosing on drugs, with jumping off of buildings because they are denied the intellectual pursuits that, psychologists agree, lead to a fully-realized person.

This notion of self-actualization was presented in 1943 by Abraham Maslow, creator of Humanistic Psychology. He believed that each person had a desire to reach his or her utmost potential, and created a pyramid-shaped “hierarchy of needs” to describe how one would go about realizing that potential. In order to reach upwards toward self-actualization, a person’s basic needs must be met—that is, he or she must have food, water, sleep, and other physiological necessities (Maslow). Once these basics are met, a person can strive for safety (further defined as security of body, resources, morality, health), love and belonging (friendship, family, sexual intimacy), esteem (self-esteem, confidence, respect of others, respect for self), and finally self-actualization (Maslow). Given that people in Montag’s are constantly threatened with bodily violence, they are never able to gain reassurance of their own safety, never mind climb towards self-actualization. The hierarchy of human needs—*needs*, not desires—is cut in two in *Fahrenheit 451* and yet people are force-fed the idea that they are given everything required to make them happy; in theory, all they have to do is passively accept what is offered and everything will be perfect. When citizens experience sadness and anger—emotions they are not expected to feel, let alone taught to deal with—violence remains their only outlet, whether of the self or of others. When people are denied the chance to expressive their feelings, of course they will destroy themselves. Their violent acts—their mental disorders—become a kind of protest.

Self-actualization requires learning, and as Montag grows and changes over the course of the book, he becomes more self-actualized. Moreover, now that he has gone through this transformation, Montag states that he wants to continue to grow: “I don’t want to change sides and just be told what to do. There’s no reason to change if I do that” (92). This shows that he wants to continue to reason things out for himself, accepting the help of others, like Faber the retired professor, without being the mindless automaton he had been. Bradbury expresses this nicely when he writes of Montag, “This was all he wanted now. Some signs that the immense world

would accept him and give him the long time he needed to think all the things that must be thought” (143). Because Montag does go through this transformation, learning to appreciate literature and history, many academics, critics, teachers, and students identify with and admire him. Montag’s literature-driven transformation is one that readers—lovers of the written word—can sympathize with; his dynamism makes him an interesting character to follow, especially given that he goes on such an arduous journey. Teachers regularly include *Fahrenheit 451* in their curricula, as students can appreciate the protagonist’s transformation (Hamplen, Ellenbogen, Axiolitis). He is considered an idol by most (Gruber, Smolla, McGiveron). One critic calls him a “rebel-action hero” (Smolla). Another believes he is “frightened and unsure, but he resists the forces that have destroyed freedom and unhappiness. Students can identify with him” (Rodriguez).

Despite the widespread appeal both of the book and its main character, Bradbury does not simply intend for readers to look up to Montag. He presents Montag as a warning. Montag does, over the course of the book, become saner by his own standards. He changes his notion of what stability and health entails, becoming more like Clarisse and less like Beatty—yet that is not the whole story. He certainly does refuse to let his peers set his parameters for sanity in a society creates its insanity and then blames its people for being insane. By fabricating unhealthy notions of insanity and normality, governmental figures are better able to root out potential problematic people within the society—and better, they hope, at avoiding insurrection. They refuse people the right to fight for meaning, refuse the idea that life even *has* meaning outside of obtaining pleasure. People do not value life because the government maintains that life *has* no value.

This society’s view of insanity is in itself unhealthy; citizens within Bradbury’s society consider Clarisse loudly and overwhelmingly crazy merely because she has an imagination. Shortly after she introduces herself to Montag, she admits that her family forces her to see a psychiatrist, and readers later learn it is because she is an

“odd duck...timebomb...[and] a queer one” (60). After their second meeting, she bids him good-bye by saying, “I’ve got to go see my psychiatrist now. They *make* me go. I make up things to say...The psychiatrist wants to know why I go out and hike around in the forests and watch the birds and collect butterflies” (22-23). Indeed, Clarisse’s own family barely takes her seriously, considering her just as unstable as the rest of her society does. She explains, “I’m seventeen and I’m crazy. My uncle always says the two go together. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane” (7). Though Clarisse is the only person Montag respects, she is considered unequivocally crazy. Yet it is her influence that causes Montag to awaken, so he *cannot* consider her simply crazy. By widening his viewpoint, Montag slowly becomes saner.

This dystopia, then, engenders a view of morality and psychology that is not only atypical to modern readers but also deeply unhealthy, given that, to Montag’s contemporaries, burning houses down is a common nightly activity and persecuting neighbors is considered a scintillating hobby. To explain this notion, Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization* describes the typical external view that society often takes of madness: that it is subjective, “a combination of persuasion and mystification” (164). The government has convinced people that Clarisse is crazy; but objectively, she is actually quite stable. People who commit suicide are not spoken of as abnormal, and committing random acts of violence is totally socially acceptable. But the normality or abnormality of these acts does not make them sane or insane. A society as well as a person can be unhealthy. Many readers would posit that Montag is a paragon of health after his transformation, yet he actually proves, before the end of the novel, to be quite pathological.

Though Montag is pleased by his awakening, before the book is over, he reverts to his former violence; he ultimately betrays himself. Even after he teaches himself to be an intellectual who questions his society and the violence it recommends, Montag decides to *kill* his boss and coworkers by setting them aflame.

Despite the fact that Montag has grown weary and skeptical of Beatty's lessons and advice, despite the fact that he has grown very tired of violence from others, and despite the fact that he is *glad* he has changed, Montag at the end of the novel reverts to violence when venting his frustrations. His late actions are made worse by the fact that he no longer has someone like Beatty ordering him to do despicable things—he cannot simply say it is part of his job to murder people. Montag's reverted actions look all the more pathological because they not only have no excuse to stand on, but because he knows better than to be committing such actions. Though he is fed up of others treating one another cruelly, he acts precisely this way when annoyed by the trite conversation of his wife and her friends:

“Go home.” Montag fixed his eyes upon her, quietly. “Go home and think of your first husband divorced and your second husband killed in a jet and your third husband blowing his brains out, go home and think of the dozen abortions you’ve had, go home and think of that and your damn Caesarian sections, too, and your children who hate your guts! Go home and think how it all happened and what did you ever do to stop it? Go home, go home!” he yelled. “Before I knock you down and kick you out the door!” (101).

Perhaps Montag meant his words as a wake-up call or some kind of warning to those he believes are living in ignorance, yet by reacting this way, all he does is scare others and threaten them; his speech is one of a madman, not the peaceful revolutionary he would like to be. He cannot rally those around him because he is too extreme with his tactics and severe with his reactions. He cannot convince people to join his cause because instead of calmly talking about things, he rages and insults everyone around him.

Montag, even after he understands the healthy, sane thing to do, shows a strange inability to control his actions, often doing precisely the opposite of what is in his best interest. He sabotages his agreement to slowly spread literature through

society by word of mouth with Faber; instead of being subtle, Montag tosses books around in front of his neighbors and yells at them about poetry (98). Then he sets fire to his coworkers and boss when he cannot get them to see his point of view (120). Montag himself views his actions from a noted distance, as if he has no idea what he is doing at any given time: “My god, how did this happen?” said Montag. “It was only the other night everything was fine and the next thing I know I’m drowning” (131). Likewise, “it seemed so remote and no part of him; it was a play apart and separate, wondrous to watch, not without its strange pleasure” (134). As if these actions were not enough, he then tries weakly to rationalize them as soon as he commits them: “*Beatty wanted to die*” (122). He spends the book grasping at reason, crawling towards mental stability and creativity, only to return to insanity and violence by killing Beatty and the other firemen. Given that Montag’s society is insane, perhaps some would not blame him for his transgressions; some would not blame him for being insane. Yet I argue that he can. Montag is culpable.

Though readers sympathize with Montag and his transformation, his actions are truly pathological. He murders his boss without remorse, leaves his wife without caring that he will never see her again, and puts his allies Clarisse and Faber in danger because of his own carelessness. His harsh treatment of others is made worse by the fact that Montag knows that violence does not lead to happiness. He consistently and knowingly breaks the law, he acts impulsively and dangerously, and he disregards the safety and rights of others by placing them in danger or by directly and guiltlessly hurting them. His return to the unquestioning violence he so recently abandoned speaks both to him as a character and to the society that produced him. No doubt his society made him crazy initially, given that he comes from a society utterly hell-bent on destroying itself—it is no wonder he is pathological at the outset of the novel. If he did not go through a difficult transformation, readers would not appreciate how difficult it is to exist in a dystopian society. Montag initially bought into the tenets prescribed by his peers; his father and grandfather were firemen like

him. He paid for the ceiling-to-floor televisions that cover the walls of his house. He loves the smell of kerosene and initially loved burning books. For nearly thirty years, he got by without questioning anything. It makes sense that, at first, he was insane like everyone else born into a world irrevocably deranged.

But Bradbury shows that Montag does transform. He changes. He becomes more likeable and sympathetic. He appeals to the intellectual and the peace-keeper, only to burn his reformation to the ground. Montag did not need to kill his coworkers and boss before fleeing for the wilderness; a lookalike of Montag's was hunted and "killed" on television, so no one continues to look for him as a fugitive. Some might argue that destroying a destructive force is actually a good idea, in that it rids the world of further destruction, but in Montag's case it simply returns him to insanity. Killing Beatty implicates Montag in the killing; it makes him a killer, and killing makes him insane. Seemingly, Montag's newfound intellectual standpoint would keep him from killing others, given that he disapproves of violence. Montag's actions, however, can be placed upon a marked continuum. His society (and, at first, Montag) refuses to focus on the personal or individual aspects of citizens, and people are almost never alone: they are continuously babbling, pretending to listen to other people chatter, watching television, and encouraged not to venture anywhere alone. Firechief Beatty in fact addresses this enforced community atmosphere when he explains the origins of censorship, stating that enacting it was not an immediate decision, nor was it enacted from a dictator down; rather it was a slow movement put in place by the people out of a desire to protect themselves and to avoid being offended by others:

We must be alike. Not everyone born free and equal as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon.

Breach man's mind. Who knows what might be the target of the well-read man? (58)

Censorship arose to avoid infuriating minority groups who had problems with specific pieces of literature; once government officials realized people's fury, they helped facilitate the destruction of literature as a way of avoiding controversy. In an effort to make everyone equal, to actively force everyone to have the same status, minority groups within society argued for the removal of offensive reading material until eventually everything but rule books were essentially gone (58). This desire to expunge everything deemed even mildly suggestive or offensive moved society to an extreme, requiring that people be violent, obsessive watchguards—all in an effort to keep confrontational material from offending anyone. Protecting the masses from threatening material requires continuously threatening bodily harm, and so every person lives under the constant threat of violence, and each citizen keeps an eye on the neighbors to ward suspicion away from him- or herself.

This outward focus, this tendency to be other-obsessed as a method of maintaining order, characterizes Montag's society—everyone focuses on surface realities, on immediate pleasures gained while in the presence of others, and these deny any focus on the self. Focusing on the self leads to introspection, and introspection could lead to insurrection. When no one feels like a minority, people are not as focused on inequality or comparing themselves to one another and, ostensibly, people do not feel out of place; then society can function as the government wants it to. Focusing on every potential threat anyone else could pose involves denying any focus on the self, and inherent in such denial is an elimination of self-actualization. Implying that one doesn't have a self—and denying the expression of self that art, literature, and creativity require—pathologizes feelings, and especially pathologizes unhappiness. Feelings of unhappiness are going to persist even if someone denies their existence, as repression and suppression are ineffective at eliminating unhappiness. Unhappiness persists even if people pretend

it does not, and when citizens do not understand where their feelings of discontent are coming from, they may make misguided attempts to escape.

When escape either doesn't work (e.g., television, drugs, dangerous driving habits) or isn't allowed (reading, creativity, appreciation of nature), people in this dystopian society try a more effective and permanent kind of escape: suicide. The commonness of suicide can be readily explained in dystopia. Moreover, it makes sense that Montag would want to search for a different kind of escape once he realizes he has the option. He begins to move away from the overwhelming influence of pacifying everyone at the expense of his own actualization, and this journey marks his transformation into a sane human being. Montag goes too far, however—he throws himself too far across the continuum and lands in the other extreme. He no longer cares for any aspect of the other, and ignores the fact that people besides him have feelings. Montag is too focused on stumbling towards enlightenment to think of others' potential well-being. He is so focused on elevating himself that he loses sight of his sanity and compassion in the process. By altering his former traits and by trying to be someone he *doesn't* hate, yet still ultimately resorting to violence in the end, Montag betrays his cause and himself. He could absolutely teach people if he tried—after all, Clarisse taught him even though he was closed-minded. But he resorts to cruelty because he is frustrated and because cruelty is easy, even though he understands it is reprehensible and decidedly unhealthy.

Montag tries to symbolically destroy the person he was, to burn it away. Yet he is no longer willing to consider suicide as an outlet or escape, and so he resorts to killing a figure that represents his past: Beatty. Killing someone he once revered is indeed a betrayal of what Montag once was—but it is also a betrayal of what he had become. He becomes so focused on himself that he abandons caring for anyone else. Though he wants to improve society so that he and everyone else can be fully actualized human beings, he loses sight of others' betterment and instead focuses solely on his own. Montag willingly destroys people to suit his own needs; given that

he abhors violence and knows his actions are inappropriate, there is no excuse for his deeds. The reasoning behind his attitude—his desire to better *his* individual situation no matter the means—does not justify his pathological actions given that he knows that violence does not truly solve anything. Montag's journey to consciousness is dangerous in that, by the end of the book he realizes his own isolation and lashes out in frustration and a misguided attempt to alter his situation.

With this train of events, Bradbury does not advocate violence; he rather does the opposite. He warns against violence, stating in fact that violence is a symptom of mental instability. Moreover, he believes that there are multiple marks of an insane society—not only can equality be taken too far, but so can individuality, specifically when they result in suicide and murder. Bradbury offers an alternative at the conclusion of the book, as Montag flees the city and comes across a group of forest-dwelling outcasts and runaways who have taken to memorizing books. They believe that this will eventually allow them to reinstate literature even if every book is destroyed, as it allows *them* to become books. When Montag first stumbles upon them, they are huddled around a fire for warmth—and upon looking at them, Montag realizes that fire can be helpful as well as harmful. They tell Montag that memorizing books allows them to keep the knowledge safe in their heads, and no one can tell whether it exists or not (152). Importantly, they do not exert their power over others. “All we want to do is keep the knowledge we think we will need intact and safe. We’re not out to incite or anger anyone...for if we are destroyed, the knowledge is dead, perhaps for good” (152). They realize that people cannot be forced to listen or to agree, even when threatened. This small community is able to reconcile the two extremes Montag launched himself between; they understand that each person has a role to play and must alter the world in some way by living—and they also understand that they are not any more important than any other person (163). They maintain sanity walking the line between individuality and community, without destroying themselves or anyone else. Interacting with them gives Montag

models which can perhaps allow him to return to sanity, given his awareness and presence of mind. He has already become aware of the madness of others, and now he has to be made aware of his own madness by being confronted by a communal sanity. It is with this group that Montag sees his old society destroyed by an atom-bomb, and it is with them that he hopes to rebuild.

Bradbury created Montag as a way of working out his anger in a less violent manner than the character himself does. The author does precisely what Montag in his censored societal creation cannot: he vents his frustrations creatively in order to remain sane. He is advocating a rebuttal to censorship, certainly, but he does not seem to be advocating actual physical violence, neither through his novel nor in subsequent interviews on the subject. When asked his beliefs on countering government-enforced censorship, Bradbury had the following response:

Speak up and say whoever's doing it is wrong, very quietly. If you're a librarian and someone insists you take a book off the shelf, and maybe they come and take it off the shelf. When they leave you put it back. And when they come back a week later and they take it off the shelf. When they leave, you put it back. And when they come back a week later and they take it off again, you put it back. And you keep putting it back and finally they get tired and they leave. It's that simple. (Aggelis 148)

It seems, then, that Bradbury likewise sees that Montag's violent actions are unhealthy, even if readers typically sympathize with his anger and even his lashing out. In this way, Montag actually functions as a warning.

Bradbury had deeply rational reasons for writing such a warning. Bradbury treats Montag with sympathy, giving him the fortunate ending of finding like-minded individuals who can teach him how to stay sane after the destruction of their insane society. Clearly, Bradbury feels for his narrator and even reacted with the same sort of fury that Montag did when he saw censorship in *his* society:

“I wrote it in 1953. I was angry at (Senator Joseph) McCarthy and the people before him—Parnell Thomas and the House Un-American Activism Committee and Bobby Kennedy, who was part of that whole bunch. I was angry about the blacklisting and the Hollywood 10. I was a \$100-a-week screenwriter, but I wasn’t scared—I was angry” (Aggelis 146).

He was living in an unhealthy society and described a character as deeply flawed as the world he created. Like Fromm, Bradbury realized that “society can have [distinct] functions; it can further man’s healthy development, and it can hinder it; in fact most societies do both, and the question is only to what degree and in what directions their positive and negative influence is exercised” (*The Sane Society*, 72).

Bradbury’s message was important to his contemporary audience and is likewise poignant today. Not only is our society inundated with an abundance of technology, but illiteracy is still a problem; the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, for instance, has “administered tests which revealed that an estimated 14% of US residents would have extreme difficulty with reading and written comprehension. These people can legally be defined as illiterate” (caliteracy). Illiteracy currently keeps these adults from functioning in many wider social contexts, and though illiteracy currently has a stigma, Bradbury presents a world in which literacy has a poor reputation. Though his world is indeed fiction, there is a concern that it could someday be a reality.

Just as importantly, people worldwide experience censorship and tyranny, and pretending that such issues are nonexistent or not harmful will not lead to the creation of a healthy society. Awareness, Bradbury notes, is the best defense against violence and instability, especially when instability is a direct result of ignorance. He stated in an interview that the totalitarian mentality comes about “if your educational system fails and people can’t read or write, then they’re at the beck and call of everyone with a flimsy idea” (Aggelis 141). Bradbury promotes sanity and creativity

by showing circumstances in which those concepts are difficult to achieve. He depicts a society that can only produce destructiveness, which is a form of destruction itself. But he warns moreover that the destructive forces will eventually destroy themselves, and that committing violent acts due to frustration does not lead to the advent of sanity. In order to remain healthy, the sane cannot resort to the tactics of the unhealthy, even if they do so based on different ideals. Ultimately, Bradbury promotes non-violence and sanity, even though his book would seem at first glance to do the opposite.

Bradbury's book was timely and relevant when it was published, but it is likewise important now. Not only does our modern society place more emphasis on technology, it also relies on instant and constant entertainment. We expect the internet to remain readily available and for information to send instantaneously; we rely on the immediacy of cell phones and satellites to keep us connected to our friends and loved ones. Bradbury's fear of our over-reliance on technology is a very reasonable one, and in fact with *Fahrenheit 451* he was oddly prescient. Not only did he predict the concept of flat-screen televisions, he also predicted earbud headphones; in fact, Bradbury himself claims that the inventor of the Walkman was inspired by this novel (Aggelis 189). Technology, then, can affect *and* be affected by literature. Though concerns about the ill effects of superficial entertainment certainly still abound, the fact that high-school teachers continue to include this novel in their required reading means Bradbury's lessons remain relevant.

Montag, the protagonist of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, is routinely valorized as a hero who refuses to submit to the tyranny of his dystopian society. By viewing Montag's violence as mental instability, readers of this book can better take in Bradbury's intended meaning—and his desire to warn others about the dangers of narrow-mindedness and destruction. One must balance individuality and interest in others in order to remain sane, and a sane society must foster these aspects, as well.

Elimination of either autonomy or compassion, whether by banning creativity or threatening violence, creates an insane society and a likewise unstable populace.

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ANOTHER PART OF THE STORY:

THE READER PLAYS AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE
PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM OF TED
CONVOVER'S *NEWJACK*

By Ilyssa Sheinbein

For a long time, journalism has utilized an objective style of writing. In the introduction to his book titled *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*, David T. Z. Mindich states that "objectivity" as a news strategy has dominated the mainstream press for the better part of this century" (9). However, new forms of journalism have recently emerged and are gaining momentum. The authors that use these new forms leave many of the tenets of objective journalism behind in favor of the use of subjectivity in their writing. This new use of subjective reporting has created a conflict within the world of journalism. Mindich writes that "lately, objectivity has come under fire, a casualty of a bitter battle over the future of journalism" (1). There are two main, opposing sides of the debate: objectivity vs. subjectivity and dialogue (Soffer 473). In his article titled "The Competing Ideals of Objectivity and Dialogue in American Journalism," Oren Soffer writes that "the basic characteristics of journalistic trends identified with objectivity and those identified with dialogue are

contradictory, relating to two distinctive world perceptions” (474). Newer journalists are questioning whether complete objectivity can actually be achieved.

Soffer describes objectivity as “a distancing of the reporter from the phenomenon being reported on and [an] absence of any deep dialogical relationship” (Soffer 478). In other words, the reporter must not be in dialogue with the subject of his or her writing, as this would invoke emotion or bias; the reporter must remain simply an outsider looking in. Soffer writes that “objectivity assumes that journalists can avoid bringing their personality, values, and inner world into their works...the reporter is expected to remain distanced from the social and political phenomena and actors observed and reported on” (477). His use of the words “assumes” and expect[s]” show that the intentions of objectivity are not always present or possible to achieve. Mindich writes that “journalists often reveal a skepticism that there is an objective ‘is,’ unfiltered by our personal lenses” (5). Because journalists cannot always achieve complete objectivity, “personal lenses” have become a part of reporting, and the use of subjectivity has emerged as a new strategy for journalism.

Subjectivity in journalism includes dialogue, emotions and opinions. The reporter is personally invested in the subject he or she is reporting, and this shows throughout the story. In his article titled “In Search of Subjectivity—One’s Own,” Alan Peshkin writes that “subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (18). A subjective news story of course includes the facts, the background information and the sequence of events that took place; the “data.” But the story is something original and is different than any other news story concerning the same topic because it contains the “personal qualities,” or personal investment and involvement, of the writer; it is, as Peshkin says, a “distinctive contribution.”

Despite all of the progress that subjective journalism has made, there are critics who think that objectivity remains the better news strategy and that

subjectivity is a negative addition to news reporting. In the introduction to his book *Objectivity and the News*, Dan Schiller lays out some of the criticisms of subjectivity. One claim in favor of objectivity that he discusses is that “news is a map, a veridical representation, a report on reality, and hence not really a story at all, but merely the facts” (2). In other words, news reports should consist only of the straightforward facts, and have no subjective elements whatsoever. In his book, Mindich discusses the *CBS Evening News* reporter Dan Rather several times. Rather is someone who negatively criticizes subjectivity as a news strategy. Mindich explains that “Dan Rather’s claim [one evening on-air] that his [news] program was ‘real’ implied that his show was ‘objective’ and others were not” (138). Rather believes that news reports that contain any sort of subjectivity are not real. Mindich, however, acknowledges the fact that this claim is unfounded because Rather cannot seem to give a clear definition of “objectivity,” and that “whenever the hegemony of elite news brokers is threatened, intense debates over the nature of news occurs” (138). This threatening force is the growing use of subjectivity in journalism.

One form of subjective journalism that has emerged from this new movement is known as Participatory Journalism. Participatory journalists “penetrate their subjects’ minds...they immerse themselves in their subjects’ daily lives” (Weinberg 19). When researching a topic, participatory journalists insert themselves into the situation and live the story as it unfolds. The use of subjectivity combined with the firsthand look at the subject allows the reader to get up close and personal with the events and the story, and gives them a point of view that is not just the outside looking in; they see everything from the inside, in action. But while they read the story and develop a connection to it, they are also getting the facts. The readers are exposed to the story in a way that objective journalism cannot provide. Steve Weinberg writes that participatory journalism “[uses] big picture thinking to entertain while educating; even when [it] approaches serious topics, [the] words and ideas sparkle” (19). Participatory and subjective journalism convey the story in a more

effective manner than objective, traditional journalism does in that they give the reader the complete picture and a more in depth experience of the story.

Critics have called Ted Conover “one of the finest participatory journalists of his generation” (Boynton 3). In their review of some of his work, Kenneth A. Prober and John J. Gibbs state that “Conover has become quite a master of this genre” (“Sing Sing Tightrope” 289). Conover is known for his use of what he calls the “participant-observer method,” in which he not only observes the situation and events, but participates in them as well (Boynton 5). As participatory journalists do, he lives the story as it unfolds. He then writes a narrative in which he includes all of the facts, but develops it in such a way that it reads more like a story than a news report, because it is written subjectively, with his own emotions and points of view. Pertaining to his own work, Conover states, “I write nonfiction narratives” (Boynton 7).

Conover’s participatory journalism work has covered a large variety of topics. His first project is titled *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes*, in which he tells of his travels on trains across the country with the hoboes that ride them. He then wrote *Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America’s Illegal Migrants*, for which he lived, worked and crossed the United States-Mexican border with illegal Mexican immigrants for about a year. Conover’s next work focused on a different class of the American population, and it is titled *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen*. For this project, Conover moved to Aspen, Colorado, got a job and followed the lives of the wealthy people who lived there. He has studied and written about the two opposite ends of social classes in the United States.

From there, Conover became a corrections officer in a prison and wrote *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*. He applied for, trained to be and worked as a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York for almost a year. In his review of *Newjack*, Todd Jermstad explains that “[When] Conover [noted] that there [was] very little material examining prisons from the vantage point of those employed to

confine a growing and increasingly dangerous population of inmates, he decided that this approach would be the freshest means of shedding new light on America's prisons" (60). Conover's first attempt to embed himself in the prison system failed when the New York Department of Correctional Services would not allow him to observe and study prison life. He then applied for a job as a corrections officer and, to his surprise, was accepted for the job, despite the fact that his request to observe the prison had been denied a few years earlier. His original plan was to only go through the seven weeks of training at the Academy. However, as his training came to an end, he decided that he wanted to keep going and work as a full time officer in a prison. During the chapter of *Newjack* in which Conover describes the corrections officer training process at the Academy, he discusses the realization he has that he wants to continue his investigation. He says,

More and more, the thought of leaving now was unimaginable. Everything so far had been prelude: from what we'd been told, you could be a star at the Academy and then fall flat on your face inside a real prison. There was no true preparation for the main act—you just had to do it. I wanted to see if I could; I wanted to see what would happen to all of us [him and his fellow officers]. The group had momentum, and a probable trajectory—Sing Sing. Down that road lay fear, but the deal was that we went anyway, together (48).

As readers, we know that we are going to get a view of the story that is intertwined with Conover's emotions, thoughts and personal involvement in the events. Soffer explains that "the postmodern perception is that we always view the world subjectively" (483). We see the story unfold through Conover's eyes. This subjective viewpoint cannot be avoided because Conover's personal involvement is part of what shapes the story.

Throughout the rest of the book, Conover describes all of the events and emotions he experienced while working as a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison. He explains the different parts of the prison, the types of people that work there and their jobs, the variety of posts at which he worked, the processes and procedures at the prison and the events as he saw them. But with all of this, he also includes his own emotional states throughout his work, his perspective of the events as they happened, his personal feelings towards the inmates, other officers and the way the prison functioned, as well as explanations of how everything he experienced affected him personally. Glen Peterson states in his review of *Nenjack* for the magazine "Corrections Today" that "[Conover's] experiences shape the book... perhaps the most important element of *Nenjack* is how Conover conveys the emotional impact of the prison culture on the correctional officers who live with it" (11). These elements of personal involvement on the part of the writer are what differentiate participatory journalism and Conover's style of writing and reporting from that of traditional journalism.

Comparisons between passages from Ted Conover's *Nenjack* and passages from traditional news stories about events at Sing Sing prison give a closer look at the personal involvement of the reporter in his or her writing. They also show, however, exactly what participatory journalism brings to a news story that traditional journalism does not. As we see through Ted Conover's *Nenjack*, it is not only the writer who participates in and is an active part of the story he is reporting, but the reader as well. Participatory journalism is written in such a way that the reader becomes an active participant in the story, as it calls for the reader to show emotions, to question and to actually see the events that transpire. In his article titled "Texts, Readers---and Real Readers," Geoff Hall states that "without a reader there is no text, [and] without a text no reader" (331). In other words, readers make up a part of the text that they are reading. Similarly, Patricia Harkin writes that "readers make meaning: readers—and not only authors—engage in an active process of production-

in-use in which texts of all kinds...are received by their audiences not as a repository of stable meaning, but as an invitation to make it" (413). Readers take an active role in the text in that they provide meaning to and are affected by the story that is being told.

We can draw the first comparison between a section of Conover's work and an article titled "Going up the River, for a Visit" from the *New York Times*, written by Scott Christianson. Christianson and Conover both discuss the fact that Sing Sing was built in 1826 by the very prisoners that were going to be transferred there to finish out their sentences. As might be expected, however, they discuss this point in different ways. Christianson gives the straightforward facts, nothing more. He writes that, "the prison wasn't even built when the first prisoners arrived—they had to do the job themselves. Under the command of an autocratic warden, Elam Lynds, they transformed the local granite into what at the time was the world's largest cellblock. Today, only traces of this original structure still exist" (Christianson). There is absolutely no subjectivity in Christianson's statements about the construction of Sing Sing; everything he mentions is a fact, and there is no emotion or personal perspective in the writing. Furthermore, the reader is not involved in any way. The report is written in such a way that there is nothing to draw the reader into the story. On the same topic, Conover writes:

I spot the treeless gap in the ridgeline where, an officer has told me, inmates quarried marble for the first cell block. Nobody could believe it back in 1826: a work crew of convicts, camping on the riverbank, actually induced to build their own prison. They had been sent down from Auburn, New York State's famous second prison, to construct Sing Sing, its third. How would that feel, building your own prison? (3).

The first thing that Conover does is include himself and his own perspective in his description of the construction of Sing Sing. He shares with the reader what he sees

and what he has been told, and instantly introduces subjectivity. His description is much less straightforward than that of Christianson in that he words it in a way that evokes some sort of emotion in the reader: “Nobody could believe it... [convicts] induced to build their own prison.” Not only does this statement call for an emotional response in the reader, but it also shows Conover’s personal emotions. When he asks the question, “How would that feel, building your own prison?,” we as readers are forced to think about how we would feel. Conover is clearly wondering this, and hopes that the reader will wonder, too.

Soffer writes that “‘traditional’ objective journalism is based on the perceptions that journalism is a product of the observations of a professional and objective journalist and that the readers of the newspapers are passive consumers” (486). This is exactly what we see in Christianson’s work. He states the details matter-of-factly, and does not relate to the reader in any way. His intentions are for the reader to get the facts and nothing more. Conover, on the other hand, does the exact opposite. Through his question, he is urging the reader to be an active participant in the story. He wants the readers to wonder, to put themselves in the prisoners’ shoes, and by doing so, to become part of the story. The rhetorical question is meant to evoke an emotional response in the reader, which is something that a traditional news story does not, will not, and cannot do. As we see here, “the monologic professional voice is replaced by a polyphony of voices: the journalist’s is blended with the comments of the corresponding readers” (Soffer 486). Conover reaches out to his readers, asking to hear their voices, too. The voices of the reader combined with that of the journalist create a dialogical atmosphere in the text, which is not present in traditional objective journalism. Soffer explains that “the undermining of the objective position...creates an atmosphere in which dialogue can flourish: the loss of the sense of objectivity leads us to valorize a dialogical perception that provides an alternative sense and purpose for the communication

process” (474). Conover “undermines” the objective technique in order to set up communication with his readers.

We can also see the differences between traditional and participatory journalism in an example as simple as a physical description of Sing Sing prison. In “Going Up the River, for a Visit,” Christianson writes that Sing Sing is “an H-shaped complex of gray concrete walls, glistening razor wire and multicolored brick and stone [that] looms above one of the Hudson’s widest... points.” On the other hand, Conover describes the same aspects of Sing Sing in the following ways: “The blocks are loud because they are hard. There is nothing inside them to absorb sound except the inmates’ thin mattresses and their bodies. Every other surface is of metal or concrete” (9); and “[It’s] six-twenty A.M and the sun rises over a dark place. Across the Hudson River from Sing Sing prison, on the opposite bank, the hills turn pink. I spot the treeless gap in the ridgeline where, another officer has told me, inmates quarried marble for the first cell block,” (3). Both Christianson and Conover are describing the same exact aspects of Sing Sing: the concrete and metal that make up the physical structure of the prison, and the location of the prison on the Hudson River. Christianson’s descriptions are straightforward and basic in that he explains little more than simply the colors and materials of Sing Sing’s structure: H-shaped, gray, concrete, razor wire, brick and stone. Conover not only describes the materials that make up the prison, metal and concrete, but also the effects that these materials have on the prison. He writes that the sound is “an encompassing, overwhelming cacophony of radios, of heavy gates slamming, of shouts and whistles and running footsteps” (8). The way that he portrays the items inside the blocks, or lack thereof, makes the reader see the sadness and desolation that overwhelm the prison: “the inmates’ thin mattresses and their bodies” are the only objects that do anything to help buffer the sound. Through Conover’s detailed descriptions, the reader feels like he or she is standing inside one of the prison blocks, looking around. In this way,

the reader becomes an active participant; the readers are actively looking around the prison blocks.

Christianson depicts Sing Sing's location on the river simply and minimally in that he briefly mentions that it is located on one of the widest points of the Hudson River. Conover illustrates the location in such a way that he turns it into a setting, as we would expect to see in a novel or narrative fiction. He describes the time of day, the lighting and the colors of the scenery. His description not only forms a setting, but does so in a way that the reader is able to picture it, as if he or she is looking at it alongside Conover. In his article, Soffer explains that when writing subjectively, "[the] reporters should observe, gathering and presenting all the relevant facts. The journalist's testimony is a substitute for the observation of the [readers] themselves: therefore, the reporter's observation should reflect the world as if the reader was seeing it" (479). Conover follows these rules perfectly. The readers get the full, in-depth look at the story that only participatory journalism can provide; they can actively picture the setting as if they were seeing it alongside the writer.

While those few short sentences are Christianson's only representations of the physical aspects of Sing Sing, Conover devotes pages to the task. His descriptions include the following statements: "[A-block and B-block] are massive human warehouses, two of the largest prison housing units in the world, containing over a thousand inmates between them" (6); "A-block and B-block are the most impressive buildings in Sing Sing, and in a totally negative sense. A large cathedral will inspire awe; a large cellblock, in my experience, will mainly horrify" (9); and "A series of tall, barred windows runs down either side of the shell. They would let in twice as much light if they were washed" (9). Conover represents Sing Sing in a way that puts together a setting for the book. He takes the reader on a walk through the prison at the beginning of the book in order to develop the setting of the story. His descriptions also convey the characteristics of the prison blocks: dismal and depressing.

As Conover shows throughout the book, group fights among inmates are fairly common. Some inmate group fights lead to lock-downs of entire prison blocks so that any conflicts can be settled and the aftereffects of the fight can pass. These fights are an expected part of Conover's *Nenjack*, as he works closely with the inmates and observes what happens among them. They are sometimes discussed in news stories, such as an article titled "Sing Sing Inmates Kept in Cells after Brawl," from the *New York Times*. The author of the article describes the fight and the proceeding lockdown by writing that "a third of the inmates at Sing Sing prison were confined to their cells earlier this week after a fight in the recreation yard, officials said" ("Sing Sing"). The author gives only the basic facts of what happened during and after the fight. The description is completely objective, neutral and detached from the situation. Conover, on the other hand, tells of a particular inmate fight in a way that includes his personal opinions and investment in the fight, and is anything but neutral. He writes,

It had been a long, hot summer in B-block—a long, low wave of attacks and reprisals, and then lockdowns to let everything cool off... I remembered the day I'd been standing outside the commissary... [when] some kind of fight had broken out in the block. Frustrated that I missed it, I paced the floor, locked my inmates behind another gate, and waited for some news... Apparently, three or four inmates had chased and beaten two others as they were leaving the gym (275-276).

The most notable difference between the *New York Times* article and Conover's description of an inmate fight is the complete lack of subjectivity in the first work and its strong presence in the second. Conover sets the scene with his description of the summer and how it affected the prisoners and their behavior. He brings his first person perspective in with a personal memory: "I remembered the day..." He then explains his own emotional reaction to and his personal investment in the fight. He

is very emotionally involved in the goings on in the prison, and seems almost unable to detach himself from them in that they so deeply affect his mood and behavior: “Frustrated that I’d missed it, I paced the floor...” Conover does not fail to include the objective elements of the story as well, such as the location and the people involved. He gets the facts across to the reader, but he turns them into a story, one that captures the reader and appeals to his or her own emotions and investment in the story.

The *New York Times* article goes on to describe the officers’ search for weapons intended for or used in the fight: “Anthony Sportiello, an official of the prison guards union, said, ‘We’ve found more than thirty weapons already; homemade knives, single-edge razor blades’” (“Sing Sing”). The readers are provided with a simple, short quote from an official that conveys only a small piece of information. When Conover describes his and his fellow officers’ search for weapons, he says,

Following almost every series of incidents, officers would search the yard, gym, and other places inmates congregated and prepared for battle, looking for weapons. Usually, we would find scores of them—in trash cans, under rocks, on ledges, or just beneath the dirt. Sometimes our efforts seemed to forestall the next wave, sometimes not (275).

Conover covers the objective elements in his description, such as the process of the search for weapons. Within that, however, he adds his own participatory journalism elements. First of all, he makes the reader active by causing him or her to wonder. Instead of giving the straightforward number of weapons they found after the fight, he describes the amount found as “scores of [weapons],” leaving the reader to wonder just how many weapons the prisoners were able to make and hide without any authority figure noticing. Secondly, Conover uses his personal experiences to

explain the search process by reflecting back on searches he had been a part of.

Soffer explains that

objectivity assumes that journalists can avoid bringing their personality, values, and inner world into their works...the reporter is expected to remain distanced from the social and political phenomena and actors observed and reported on. The journalist is supposed to be an expert, and this expertise reflects the reduction of the 'I' into the professional sphere, detached from other personal sphere of existence (477).

The author of the *New York Times* article follows all of these rules and tenets of objective journalism. He does not show any of his personality, or any personal involvement in the story; he is completely detached. But if this is the case, one has to wonder: how can he be an expert? An expert is someone who is completely engaged in and knows every detail of the subject he or she is studying. If anything, Conover is the expert as it pertains to this story. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes an expert as "one whose special knowledge or skill causes him to be regarded as an authority; a specialist," and that someone who is an expert was "trained by experience or practice" ("Expert"). Conover's special knowledge and skill come from his experiences and practice as being a corrections officer in Sing Sing for almost a year. He learns and gains the skills necessary to be an officer, which in turn qualifies him as an authority, or expert. Furthermore, he is an expert because he is *not* distanced or detached, but instead is living the story and is extremely close to the "phenomena" on which he is reporting. Conover does the exact opposite of what is expected of an objective journalist, and does include his personality, values and inner world. He is in both the professional sphere in that he provides the reader with the facts, and the personal sphere, as he shows how the events and stories affect him.

Objective, traditional journalism expects that journalists will leave all personal involvement at the door while investigating, and that they will remain unbiased and write a neutral story. Mark Allen Peterson says that, “journalistic objectivity seeks to establish representations of the world of objects independent of individual consciousness or wills” (208). In other words, the story should not contain any personal interests or opinions from the writer. Ken Macrorie, however, completely disagrees with this goal of objectivity. He says that “the human animal just can’t detach himself from the world he lives in and come up with reports about it that reflect no interest, preconception, or opinion on his part” (“Objective Reporter” 385). He goes on to say that it is impossible for the writer to completely exclude all personal interest or values in the story he is reporting because self-investment in the world is part of being a human being. “For [the journalist], like all human beings, of necessity perceives events...through what he believes—his value system” (Macrorie 390). Throughout his entire book, Conover continually shows his personal interest, preconceptions, opinions, values and beliefs, just as Macrorie says that a journalist will and should do. The most intriguing way he does this is through his expressions of empathy towards the prisoners, which come from his personal values and beliefs as a human being. Conover describes that “it was easier to stay incurious as an officer. Under the inmates’ surface bluster, their cruelty and selfishness, was almost always something ineffably sad” (293). Despite the front that the prisoners put up and the way that they treat him, he feels empathy for them. During Christmas time, many of the inmates receive packages from their families or friends. Conover writes, “I thought of the inmates I knew whom nobody was likely to remember at Christmas. There were lots of them. My heart went out to the most pathetic” (295). Despite what he knows about the inmates and the struggles he has to go through with them on a daily basis, he still feels for them.

Macrorie writes that “whatever a good newsman’s values or assumptions...may be, he will have them, and they will affect his perceptions. He

cannot escape his humanity” (390). Conover certainly cannot escape his humanity. He cannot hold back his feelings, despite his negative experiences with the inmates. At one point in the book, Conover discusses a time when he is at home reading the newspaper and comes across a story about several young men who had committed murders. He writes, “I felt I’d never heard sadder stories in my life. And as a CO, I knew something the newspapers didn’t: the next step, the kinds of lives these boys would lead from here on in. I felt sad for them, sad for me, sad for the world” (245). The readers can relate to this show of humanity and compassion. His emotions are most likely those that the reader would experience if they were witnessing first hand all of the events that Conover sees. This show of emotion on Conover’s part demands empathy from the readers for the prisoners, which in turn makes the readers active in the story. The reader, as a human being, naturally shows empathy towards another human being in a situation such as that of the prisoners’, despite knowing who they are, what they have done and even how they have treated Conover as a guard. It is impossible for Conover to suppress his emotions, and it is impossible for the readers to suppress theirs.

Not only do the readers feel empathy for the prisoners, but they feel it for Conover as well. They can understand why he feels the way he does towards the prisoners after seeing the way many of them have treated him. They feel bad for him because of everything he deals with and witnesses on a daily basis. Even though Conover entered this world by choice, it is natural that the readers would have compassion for him. They watch him deal with the extremely difficult tasks and abuses of being a guard, and witness the disheartening situations of the prisoners. The elements of participatory journalism that Conover employs here, such as his emotions and feelings, provoke the readers’ own emotions and cause them to become personally invested and active in the story.

In his article titled “The Objectivity-Subjectivity Trap,” Ken Macrorie writes that “in art, the ‘I’ and ‘It’ must be balanced, but if the scales are not swinging wildly

up and down at times, chances are slight for either originality or communication” (486). In Conover’s *Newjack*, and participatory journalism in general, the scale leans more towards the subjective side, which allows for the personal involvement of the writer in his or her work. As we see through the comparisons between passages from *Newjack* and traditional news articles, the subjectivity and the writer’s involvement in participatory journalism create an originality that cannot be achieved through objectivity. This lean towards subjectivity not only creates originality, but establishes communication as well. Communication between the writer and the readers is set up through participatory journalism because the reader becomes an active participant in the story alongside the writer. The writer calls for the reader to ask questions, to wonder, to “walk” through the story, and to show their own emotions. In this way, the reader becomes an active participant in the participatory journalism of Ted Conover’s *Newjack*.

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“HERE WE ARE AGAIN, ALL MESSED UP AND NO PLACE TO GO”:

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF *BRIGHT
LIGHTS, BIG CITY*

By Emily Siegel

Bright Lights, Big City . . . succeed[s] in
capturing, in fewer than 200 pages, an entire
decade. -*Salon Magazine*

The critics hailed *Bright Lights, Big City* as the novel and its author Jay McInerney as the spokesman for the eighties generation. Darryl Pickney looked to *Bright Lights, Big City* to “have the atmosphere of period pieces. McInerney writes of the early Eighties, when the clubs he names were out of fashion to the partygoers who made them. That they seem of their

periods demonstrates how time has accelerated, or how changes in style can make for distances” (8). Although *Bright Lights, Big City* has certainly defined the eighties, with the exception of certain cultural references it could take place during any time period. Time has accelerated but changes in morals and societal ideas have plateaued since McInerney’s novel came out in 1984. The novel is not representative of a time period, but rather a group of people that possess distinct characteristics and who are still a part of society today.

The generation of the eighties whom the novel represents consisted of the upper middle class early twenties intellectuals. They were not necessarily yuppies, but those who had received a solid education and had some degree of means. They were the hopes for the future, not the rich but rather the privileged, the lucky, the affluent. This group hasn’t gone extinct; if anything it has only grown more prominent. *Bright Lights, Big City* speaks to this specific niche of people and as long as this niche exists, which it clearly still does, the novel will continue to be relevant and have a feeling of timelessness. Today’s young intellectuals can relate to the novel’s main character who says, “You are the stuff of which consumer profiles – American Dream: Educated Middle-Class Model – are made” (151). McInerney addresses something for this young up and coming group that not many have done; he wrote a novel about them that, contrary to what many critics think, wasn’t tacky, trite, or soapoperaesque but rather confronts their very real psychological turmoil. The novel examines issues of identity, performance of identity, acceptance of failure, coming to terms with the death of a family member, but also the search for love – which deep down is the underlying reason for all of his characters’ actions. McInerney understood what this group was going through, so he wrote a novel about a romantic and innocent character living in an age where romance is dead and dreams are left unattained. McInerney leaves his main character nameless and the novel is told in the second person perspective, so I will follow the tradition of most reviewers and refer to him as “You”.

During the time that *Bright Lights, Big City* was published, there were some people who simply didn't understand it. They felt it was a yuppie novel with a whiney main character. Yuppies flocked to *Bright Lights, Big City*; a novel that was in fact making fun of them. They took it as a guidebook for the nightlife in New York City. They wanted to be McInerney's "You"; they wanted to do cocaine all over the city and bring their sunglasses out at night because they knew they'd be walking home from the club in the daylight. But if these intellectuals are so intellectual why don't they get it? Why don't they see that this book is making them look like utter morons and disproving the worth of an Ivy League education? Because the eighties generation, much like today, was defined by lying to oneself in order to avoid admitting failure. All the characters of *Bright Lights, Big City* are guilty of this, and apparently its readers were as well. They didn't want to read into the true meanings of the text. They wanted to party! They wanted to hang out with McInerney at the Odeon, the trendiest restaurant at the moment in New York City. "You" felt, "Your presence here is only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits, reminding yourself of what you aren't"(4). They saw "You" as one of them when in fact he wasn't at all, he had just somehow gained a pass to their world and was able to observe and comment. They only cared to see the book on its most superficial level, because reading in too deep would have caused them to reconsider their lifestyle, and who would want to do that?

The problem with understanding the novel at the time of its origin was the hype that was associated with it. Jay McInerney became a household name. He was hip and good looking and the media took advantage of that. Very rarely do authors succeed with their first novel and he was the exception to the rule. Unfortunately people associate creativity with suffering, hardship, and rejection, and since he did not seem to have endured much of anything, critics looked toward him with disdain. He came to be called "the most resented character in American literature today" (Beachy 28). He became a feature in the gossip columns and eventually he received

more fame for his personal life than his literary achievements. Poor McInerney published a book that was misunderstood; or rather people turned a blind eye toward its deeper meaning. He says in an interview with Sanford Pinsker in 1986:

I was very shocked when magazines talked about the book as a wacky, fun-filled romp through the fast lane. Again, I thought I was doing something else . . . advancing a modest critique of an age in which an actor is the President, in which fashion models are asked for their opinions, in which getting into a nightclub is seen as a significant human achievement. Apparently, the book hasn't been read that way (108).

Displaying the book in this fashion was more marketable. Many people were attracted to the way "You" was able to glide swimmingly into the glamour of the rich and powerful; they were jealous and mesmerized by it all at once. If they addressed how "You" was despairing in the world of the elite it would have crushed their idealized notion of the upper crust.

What McInerney grasps about this group is the feeling of being lost and alone. "You" voices the interior insecurities of the promising youth. When a person has so many options and so many advantages sometimes it is easy to wonder what it will all lead to. The novel hones in on "You", a character who speaks for those who dream big, who want to push through the difficulties because they hope that their affluent normalcy can give them the jump they need, but in the back of their heads they know it might not be enough. So they spiral. They change focus and look toward the attainable good time. "You" doesn't enjoy the nightlife in New York but he is attached to the fact that while he's there he doesn't have to think about real life. While out one night he thinks, "It's somewhere past midnight. Anything that starts now is not going to end at a reasonable hour. You think about slipping out and heading home. All sorts of beneficial effects are rumored to accrue from a good night's sleep. On the other hand, you wouldn't mind a taste of that toot. Just enough

to boost your morale” (48). Deep down staying out at the club is not what he wants but leaving means the end of the escape. He wants to extend it as long as possible.

For people like “You”, when rejection comes at them they use their means to dance with disaster. They choose ruin because they can. It is not something they can slip into; they look it in the eye and say, “Let’s see what all the fuss is about.” Darryl Pinckney writes about the youth at the time that, “It is almost a rite of passage, this wandering into the underside of life, replacing the campus as discovery and initiation. The young no longer have their lost weekend in the city. The city, as the theater of experience, the refuge, the hiding place, has in turn been replaced by an abstraction, the fast lane.” New York City is not only a place of opportunity but also a place of degradation. When opportunity has reached its limit, degradation is always available. This group graduates with a fine education and enters into menial jobs but there is room for upward mobility and they will get there. But what if they don’t? *Bright Lights, Big City* shows us that they probably won’t and that it’s okay.

The journey of “You” to this acceptance is filled with drugs, uncertainty, and laziness. It is also filled with lies because one must lie to themselves and others about what they cannot achieve. “You” thinks to himself while out at a club, “Without getting too specific you imply that your job is extremely demanding and important. In the past you could often convince yourself as well as others of this, but your heart is no longer in it” (46). “You” is not alone in putting on a successful persona in order to dissuade the pity of others; those of the young intellectual group who haven’t lived up to their own expectations do the same. It is not until one comes to terms with the fact that they may not achieve their dreams that they finally reach the point where they can accept it, move on, and start leading a life that is going somewhere.

What is striking about *Bright Lights, Big City* is that it is still applicable today. It is usually viewed as a novel that is incredibly representative of the 1980’s. The reason it still resonates is because many of the morals and social aspects of today began to appear around the time of the novel’s debut. Humanity as a whole is still narcissistic.

People still choose to live in the moment and only care about their own wellbeing. The upper middle class intellectuals are the same, if not more prominent. The group of underemployed young people has only gotten larger due to the emphasis on a college education in order to succeed. We can look to *Bright Lights, Big City* as a voice for our insecurities and quarter life crises. Currently Josh Schwartz (the creator of hit television shows such as *The O.C.* and *Gossip Girl*) is turning the novel into a movie. *Bright Lights, Big City* is a critique of a different decade but what no one could have predicted was that McInerney's observations would continue to resonate in 2010. McInerney writes in a recent article for New York Magazine entitled "Yuppies in Eden" that, "...yuppie culture has become the culture, if not in reality, then aspirationally. The pods have pretty much taken over the world. The ideal of connoisseurship, the worship of brand names and designer labels, the pursuit of physical perfection through exercise and surgery – do these sound like the quaint habits of an extinct clan?" What McInerney is pointing out is that we haven't changed all that much. With the exception of technological advances, human beings as a whole haven't really improved morally. Thirty years ago people were focusing on the present and that hasn't done us any good. *Bright Lights, Big City* has some heavy lessons in it that would be beneficial for young people of today to inspect more closely.

McInerney's talent, intelligence, and young writer exuberance is perceptible throughout the novel. He didn't know his book would be a bestseller, he says in the Sanford Pinsker interview, "Nobody was more surprised that *Bright Lights, Big City* hit something of a chord than I was" (114). He is smart and imbues every word with meaning so the prose exudes literary wit. This fast-paced novel is told from the second person perspective. He is talking to you. He is confronting all of you who were reading this book at the time and he is saying that this main character is you and if you don't like it you are going to have to change it. "You" is unnamed because he is everyone. He is every middle class twenty-something walking the streets of

New York City wondering what they want to do with their life and if everything they've done up to this point is meaningless. Well, let's be honest, it probably is, but there's a learning curve. Throughout the narrator's self-absorbed babble there is a greater meaning that he doesn't verbalize until the end of the book: that you are young, and it is not too late. The novel starts out with the famous words, "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of morning" (1). At this point in the book, we believe him. We don't know him yet and it could just be a mistake, a wild journey of a night that doesn't happen very often. But then we read on and we realize he is lying through his teeth.

Before going forward I think it is necessary to define the term Yuppie. *The Yuppie Handbook* defines it as:

(hot new name for Young Urban Professional): A person of either sex who meets the following criteria: (1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money, or any and all combinations of the above; (4) anyone who brunches on the weekends or works out after work (12).

I'm sure many people are familiar with this type of person and have faced a similar beast at one point or another in their lives. Maybe the yuppie is toned down now and not referred to in the same way but it exists. Also many people brunch and everyone exercises so those concepts, which were once new and typified by a certain group, are now more universal. But I think the major way someone is a Yuppie is their desire to be part of the elite in every single way.

"You" was in no way a Yuppie; he just seemed like one on the surface. His desires stemmed from a longing for happiness. The only times he refers to money are in passing and are always for necessities such as food or cab fare. It is never more than a fleeting thought for him; it's just a way to get through life. Money doesn't concern him because his desires are deeper than material. He truly is just sensitive

and innocent. He has a child's desires: to be a famous writer and to love someone so much that it saves him. So he doesn't as much appeal to the Yuppie as to those on the outskirts, those who are accused of being Yuppies when they actually are not. Maybe they dress well and make a good living but they don't have the same mentality. There are plenty of people who fit this description not just for the Yuppie group, but also for any type of social stigma. What the novel is doing is commenting on the instability of surfaces at showing a person's depth. What a person seems to be does not necessarily show who they are, and when it comes down to it even if someone seems to fit the criteria of a negative social group, that doesn't mean their true desires aren't founded in something as simple as love. And love, much like the act of writing, is timeless, which is the essence of *Bright Lights, Big City*.

In contrast, his friend Tad Allagash fits the criteria of a Yuppie perfectly. He is purely a partying friend for "You" and together they foray into the underworld. When describing Tad, "You" says, "Tad is the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. He is either your best self or your worst self, you're not sure which . . . You are awed by his strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. You want to be like that. You also think he is shallow and dangerous" (2-3). Unlike "You" Tad has the mentality. He is selfish, shallow, and puts more effort into his appearance than his relationships. He is the perfect partner for "You" at this point in his life because he can go out with Tad without talking about his problems: Tad doesn't care about them and will never ask. He is the fun friend, the one you never spend time with sober. His friendship with Tad goes as deep as the surface, which is also as far as he's willing to go without admitting his failures, and his insecurities. Tad is his best self because he brings him out into society and is his partner in navigating what was considered to be the trendiest places with the trendiest people. He is his worst self because he distracts him from the life he truly wants to lead with a wife and a writing career. He helps him with his exterior persona and makes him look good but this has an indirect

relationship with his interior, and with each superficial interaction he falls deeper into a pit of misery.

Throughout the book “You” surrounds himself with the New York elite. To be part of this elite one needed to have a job that impressed other people. “You” works in the *Department of Factual Verification* for an unnamed prestigious magazine, which is implied to be *The New Yorker*. His job consists of making sure everything is true to avoid tarnishing the reputation of the magazine, which is another reference to the importance of appearances and the distinction between truth and lies. With regard to his job he says, “You find it touching, almost heartbreaking, this ethic of appearances” (81). He started his position there with the hope of moving up and becoming a writer in the fiction department. Instead of spending his days making sure facts were accurate and true, he longed to write stories that were rooted in imagination and provided an escape for himself and his readers. He came into the job with ambition and motivation but after years of having his writing politely rejected and staying in the job position he initially viewed as a stepping stone, he loses the faith that he will ever succeed. The bright side of his situation is that he is still associated with a magazine that evokes awe in the eyes of others. He is still able to wow perfect strangers with his place of employment by subtly glossing over the mundane intricacies of his job.

“You” wasn’t alone in trying desperately to hold on to a job title that seemed worthy of esteem. The financial moguls of the time were resorting to criminal means in order to maintain their lifestyles and keep their companies afloat. In *Revisiting the Eighties* by Gilbert T. Sewall, Sewall points out

It looked as though Trump might go bankrupt. Boesky went to jail for insider trading, as did Kidder Peabody’s former superstar, Martin Siegel; after a massive Securities and Exchange Commission investigation, so did Drexel Burnham Lambert’s engineer of junk-bond-castles-in-the-air, Michael Milken. In 1990, Drexel, the most

feared pirate company of the eighties, went out of business. Debt – government, corporate, and consumer – greased the free-for-all.
(Sewall, XVI)

Debt exemplifies the lying of the period; people lived for their present needs as opposed to their future. Although “You” does not go to criminal means in order to keep his job, he is not dissimilar to those who created intricate lies in order to keep up with appearances. Insider trading is in the same vein as lying. These financiers were privy to illegal information which could lead to financial success so they lied to everyone who could be hurt in the process and who would want to expose such financial corruption.

What is apparent at the time is the blatant narcissism that plagued the minds of everyone in the eighties. The motto for the eighties was *carpe diem* and this “seize the day” attitude displays itself in *Bright Lights, Big City*. “You” is spontaneous and enjoys a rebellious lifestyle that includes ever-changing scenery, people, and mind-altering substances. His sole concern is his search for happiness and he tries to lose himself in destructive behavior in order to create the temporary joy that comes from cocaine, alcohol, casual sex, and superficial friendships. He is trapped in this cycle, “The music pumps you up, makes you want to do something, not necessarily dance. The drugs make you feel the music and music makes you want to do more drugs” (49). Acknowledging his true feelings and his true desires in the harsh light of sobriety would cause him to come to the miserable realization that he is not living the life that he always dreamed of. “You” is not a narcissist: he chooses to be one to avoid acknowledging his problems. Since narcissism was so common during the eighties he was able to fit in seamlessly.

In *The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals* by Irving Kristol, the author sums up this rampant self-absorption, “though only a few are capable of pursuing excellence, everyone is capable of recognizing and pursuing his own self-interest” (13). People were not working toward a greater good for the world but rather a greater good for

themselves because that is always much simpler. Like “You”, the intellectuals of the eighties preferred to take the easy way out and use their abilities to fulfill their own desires and needs. There was a lack of interest in posterity and instead a focus on the here and now. No one wanted to think about how and if they were affecting the future because all of their focus was on living in the moment and trying to be as socially and mentally satisfied as possible.

We can still see this attitude today. There is a creeping feeling in the back of everyone’s minds that what we are doing today could end up ruining the world. Putting *Bright Lights, Big City* back in the spotlight might help shed some light on our self-absorption and make people realize that they need to be better in every way. McInerney alludes to the moral degradation during the eighties in a specific unsettling scene at the beginning of the book. “You” is on the subway headed to work when one of the many homeless people in New York City approaches him. He jadedly ignores their plea for help. The homeless man then walks over to an old woman on the train and sits on her, and what commences is symbolic of the complete self-absorption of the majority of New York City.

Almost everyone in the car is watching and pretending they’re not.
The man folds his arms across his chest and leans farther back.
“Sir, Please get off of me.”

You can’t even believe it. Half a dozen healthy men are within
spitting distance. You would have jumped up yourself but you
assumed someone closer to the action would act. The woman is
quietly sobbing. As each moment passes it becomes harder and
harder to do anything without calling attention to the fact that you
hadn’t done anything earlier. (12-13)

What is apparent in this passage is the lack of care for other human beings. Everyone in the scene has displaced the responsibility of helping the old woman onto someone else. The shame is spread so thin over everyone that the guilt barely penetrates the

surface of each individual. All it would have taken was the courage for one person to stand up and the rest would have followed. This ties into my previous quote regarding pursuing excellence and pursuing self-interest. These men took the easy way out and stayed in their seats rather than taking the energy to stand. They didn't care enough to do it first and hoped that someone else would. This scene ends without further contemplation from the narrator. One can assume that the others who witnessed the scene went on with their days without another thought about it. When reading this scene can one honestly say that this exemplifies the eighties? No. Of we read this without having any background information, we can easily assume that it took place yesterday.

Throughout the book, "You" finds ways to distract himself from his obvious sadness. In addition to drugs and sex he finds pleasure in reading *The New York Post*. For those who are not from New York and may not know about what it means to read the *Post*, I will say that there is a definite social stigma attached to it. In one corner stands the *New York Times*, which is a sign of intellectuality, liberalism, and real journalism and is known as superior reading. While in comparison people consider *The Post* to be trash. It is a sensationalist newspaper with ludicrous headlines that reports on the filth, the morbid, and the rich and famous. "You" says, "The *Post* is the most shameful of your several addictions. You hate to support this kind of trash with your thirty cents, but you are a secret fan of Killer Bees, Hero Cops, Sex Fiends, Lottery Winners, Teenage Terrorists, Liz Taylor, Tough Tots, Sicko Creeps, Living Nightmares, Life on Other Planets, Spontaneous Human Combustion, Miracle Diets and Coma Babies" (11).

His obsession with the extravagant, exceptional, and gruesome ties into his desire to hide in lies. "You" does not like to acknowledge the problems in his own life so why would he want to acknowledge them in the rest of the world? He is focused on the immediate, the here and now, and the problems that have solutions, not the ones that are complex. Twenty-five years later, *The Post* is still in existence.

With its long list of controversies over falsifications and eventual retractions one would assume that the reading public might cease to continue purchasing this newspaper. Apparently that is not the case since according to thepaperboy.com, it is the fourteenth most circulated newspaper in the country.

In the Yuppie area of New York City there was very little thought towards the greater problems of the world. This was the Upper East Side, the *nouveau riche*. These were the trendy intellectuals who made money quickly and spent it frivolously. It was the era that celebrated excess (Taylor) and elitism. These were the people with whom “You” surrounded himself. He rubbed shoulders with models, actors, and investment bankers. Susan Gutfreund, the wife of the famous and powerful trader of the eighties John Gutfreund, summed it up best, “It’s so expensive to be rich!” (166). This mantra may speak for Yuppies, but it most definitely did not speak for “You”. “You” never quite felt right around these people. He roamed among them as if he belonged but his constant mutterings about not being “the kind of guy...” usually happened when he was around them. “You” says, “You succeeded in faking everyone out, and never quite lost the fear that you would eventually be discovered a fraud, an imposter in the social circle. Which is just about how you feel these days” (47). The upper echelon of society wasn’t where he belonged but he faked it as best he could. Susan Gutfreund’s statement doesn’t just speak of the eighties but rather the upper class in general, and could most definitely still be the mantra of the Upper East Side today. Sending your children to the best private school, spending the summer in the Hamptons, and doing cocaine are still high society requirements and there are those who aren’t able to check those things off their list, so they sharpen their masquerading skills and quietly deceive this group that they so desperately want to be a part of.

“You” isn’t the only character in the novel that is internally miserable and externally self-destructive. His boss at the *Department of Factual Verification*, Clara Tillinghast, otherwise known as “The Clinger”, displays her sadness by being harsh

and unfriendly. “You” says of Clara, “Sometimes you have wanted to tell her: *Hey, I know what it’s like*. You have seen her at that little piano bar off Columbus, clutching her drink and waiting for somebody to come up and say hello. When she’s bitching you out, you have wanted to say: *Why don’t you just admit you hurt?* But by the time you understood this it was too late. She wanted your hide” (21). “You” paints a sad picture of a lonely woman. He empathizes with her because he understands loneliness. What is interesting about Clara’s character is that she feels the common feeling of longing. She is clearly successful. We do not know enough about her hopes and dreams but one can assume that it is not her job that depresses her. It is hard to find success in all categories of your life: love, work, and health. There is usually one that is not up to par. For Clara it is her love life. This is something that every emotional and empathetic person can relate to because no matter whom you are or what you do, if you are able to feel any sort of love then you long for someone to love with your entire being. Whether it’s 1984 or 2010, being powerful in your job and alone in your personal life is something that many people deal with.

“You” always dreamed of being a great writer. He cites the classics and wants to live a life of literary success. He wants to be a legend. The problem is that his misery becomes too distracting. The bright hope he once had has diminished. In the eighties, partly due to Reaganism, there was this feeling that success was so close you could almost touch it. Trickle down caused everyone to believe that the wealth was being distributed and everyone was getting a small share. Those with a good education felt that being part of the financial and intellectual elite was something they could achieve. New York City was a place of dreams and accomplishments. McInerney writes of New York during the time period: “They imagine that they’ll go to the ‘perfect place – wherever that is – and meet the ideal people and the ideal mate, and that their life will look like a *New Yorker* ad in the morning. What’s invalid about this is that people thought these were reasonable expectations, or even a good set of expectations, in the first place” (110). “You” does this continuously; he hopes

that somehow, in the darkest of bars at the earliest of hours, he'll meet the perfect woman. He feels the hope that seems to be contagious in New York and even at his most pessimistic times he is still able to imagine that it will somehow lead him to his desired life. There is still that feeling about being in New York, or any great city for that matter. The belief is that you will get to this great place, be it New York, Los Angeles, or Paris, and great things will happen. There is so much commotion, creativity, and intelligence going on in these places that one hopes just being there gives them the head start they need. Unfortunately success doesn't happen by osmosis.

What "You" does to deal with his failure of becoming a great writer is he stops putting in any effort. He tries to find other things to distract himself from the actual activity of writing. He can then delude himself with the idea that he is capable of writing a great work of literature and he just hasn't had the time yet. "You" says, "You wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation. After a hard day of work on other people's manuscripts – knowing in your heart that you could do better – the last thing you wanted to do was to go home and write. You wanted to go out . . . Of course, mentally, you were always taking notes. Saving it all up. Waiting for the day when you would sit down and write your masterpiece" (41). "You" truly believes he is capable of a masterpiece. Young people truly believe their dreams will come true. The problem is when you say it out loud, when you admit what you want and what you believe you can do, all anyone has to say to you is "prove it", and whether or not you can is the ultimate test. "You" has been told that he is a good writer, and the continual affirmation of this belief throughout high school and college has raised his expectations. His chances of writing the next classic novel are extremely thin. But what drives him forward is his faith in his intelligence and capabilities. There is a danger in being too confident because it can lead to expectations that are never met. Positive reinforcement can be taken too far and the youth of today is experiencing that. The amount of young unemployed people is on the rise and our worst

nightmares could be around the corner. This could be that we spent the majority of our lives working incredibly hard and learning so much but in the end there is nothing to show for it. The lesson of *Bright Lights, Big City* is that we shouldn't set our sights on only the highest of goals but also not fall to the lowest ranks of society when things don't work out. McInerney's "You" is emblematic of how failed dreams can lead to something better and this is a story, which the high achievers of society should read as a cautionary tale.

It isn't until the chapter "Les Jeux Sont Faits" ("The Games Are Made") on page sixty-nine that the reader finally hears the truth about Amanda, the ex-wife of "You". The pages before that are filled with subtle insults toward her and one can only insinuate that she really hurt him. The truth comes out in the story of their first meeting and how their relationship progressed. She was a country girl, so his college education and his parents from Connecticut awed her. She used him as access to New York City and a life of fame, the life everyone wanted at the time. She became a model and eventually left him with little explanation, leaving our narrator distraught which probably was the catalyst of his more deviant behavior.

We get the sense that he wanted their relationship to work but didn't have absolute faith in it because he knew he wasn't feeling true love. He says, "You did not feel that you could open quite all of your depths to her, or fathom hers, and sometimes you feared she didn't have any depths. But you finally attributed this to an unrealistic, youthful idealism. Growing up meant admitting you couldn't have everything" (73). This seems to be his mantra at this point in his life, although he has a lot of trouble accepting it. His relationship with Amanda wasn't real, like most of his relationships at the time. They wanted things from each other: he would give her the Yuppie life she dreamed of while in the trailer park as a child and she would give him love, which is what he always wanted. But wanting love is not the same as experiencing it. His sensitivity is his greatest weakness and strength. He feels everything so deeply and he wanted the true and utter happiness that comes from

love, because he of all people was capable of feeling it to his core, and he wanted it to penetrate his sadness and make it go away. To the outsider, a shallow super model is clearly not the right match for him. Yet he preferred to go along with their seemingly great relationship in hopes that the inside would eventually match the outside. Until then they were the writer and the model, and at least it looked like it was great.

It is not until this point that the reader finds out that “You” has been lying to everyone about Amanda leaving him. His co-workers, acquaintances, and family do not know. Along with his plateauing career, his relationship did not go anywhere either. He still doesn’t want to admit that Amanda wasn’t right for him. He deludes himself with the hope that she will return even though six months have already gone by. When “You” refers to not telling his father about Amanda he says, “He would never be able to forgive Amanda. As long as there is a chance she might still return, you don’t want him to know about her treachery. You want to tough it out on your own” (77). Any reader who has had any failing or failed relationship can understand what he’s going through. Admitting it’s over, saying the words out loud, has finality to it. If we don’t say it then it isn’t real.

This denial furthers the idea that we can still read the book today and relate to it. It touches on the more embarrassing of human emotions, the emotions that we think we are too old for but we still experience anyway. This novel is far from the critic’s descriptions as superficial because it delves into the depths of a character, it goes into his internal monologue, and the reader is able to go through his constant fluctuation of emotions. McInerney isn’t presenting the outside of a person, but rather their insides, which are uncensored, unadulterated, and not always the nicest. That’s deeper than most writers are willing to go and most readers are willing to read. On occasion “You” is childlike but in a way he isn’t because McInerney is showing that we never really grow up as much as we think we do. The novel isn’t promoting denial as a healthy means of living – we should try to grow up and admit our

mistakes – but he is saying that it's normal. The term “act your age” starts to lose its meaning when you think about things that way.

Then there is the character Vicky Hollins who is Amanda's polar opposite. She is Tad's cousin and “You” agrees to go on a blind date with her at the last minute. She is the first sign of hope in the novel, the light at the end of the tunnel. In every way that Amanda was wrong for “You”, Vicky seems right. She brings out a side of the narrator that we have not seen yet. He says, “Eventually you ascend the stairs to the street. You think of Plato's pilgrims climbing out of the cave, from the shadow world of appearances toward things as they really are, and you wonder if it is possible to change in this life” (93). According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* Plato's allegory of the cave is,

Plato likened the ordinary person to a man sitting in a cave looking at a wall on which he sees nothing but the shadows of real things behind his back, and he likened the philosopher to a man who has gotten out into the open and seen the real world of the Forms. Coming back, he may be less able to distinguish the shades because he has been blinded by the light outside; but he is the only one who knows reality, and he conducts his life accordingly.

He sees Vicky as an escape from the world of Yuppies, drugs, and the dregs of New York City nightlife. They leave the bar and walk up the stairs, up from the hell they are in, the darkness, and towards life and people. Like in Plato's allegory, the bar is a place of appearances and it is not until “You” ascends the stairs and goes outside is he able to see reality and depth. He doesn't stay with her in a place that is too dark to see the other person or too loud to hear what they are saying; instead, for the first time, he goes somewhere with another person that isn't part of the underworld. He is able to leave superficiality with her and take off his armor and just be a real person. They have a seemingly perfect first date and for the first time in the novel “You” admits that he is happy. The narrator's only long interaction with Vicky is in one

chapter. It seems to spark something in him though and the rest of the book is filled with various moments of destruction, closure, and eventual rehabilitation. In the next chapter he is fired from his job for not perfectly fact checking an article. This, combined with his happiness from his date with Vicky, sets off a chain of events that lead to his rising from the darkness. You have to hit rock bottom in order to work back up and that is exactly what he does. He makes such a mess out of everything that the only thing left to do is start cleaning.

The key to understanding the narrator's motivations is not Amanda, Vicky, or his career but is in fact the death of his mother, something we do not find out about until three quarters of the way through the novel. We are introduced to his brother Michael, who has been trying to get in touch with him throughout the book. "You" is so scared of facing reality that he literally runs away when he sees Michael. The direction he runs toward is a night of drug abuse and casual sex just to avoid an honest conversation. What it takes for "You" to finally start being honest with himself is Michael punching him in the face. It's as if the blow to his head set his thoughts straight and obliterated all the lies he was planning on telling. He comes to and starts confessing. It is cathartic. He makes his two confessions simultaneously,

"Amanda isn't shopping," you say. "She left me."

"What?"

"She called up from France one day and said she wasn't coming home." . . .

"Are you alright?"

"I miss Mom," you say." (159)

It's not easy to lie to the ones you care about. "You" avoids his family because he knows he will have to tell them the truth. He spent the past couple of months with people who didn't care enough about him to ask if he was okay.

"You" gives a detailed description of his last encounter with his mother. It seems as if it was the last time he was able to be honest. It also seems like many of

his less respectable endeavors stemmed from this last conversation. She talks about the doctors giving her cocaine to help deal with her cancer and about her curiosity about casual sex. It's as if "You" took these things to be okay since she brought them up and so he then made them part of his lifestyle. He opens up to her and tells her his insecurities, "You tried to tell her, as well as you could, what it was like being you. You described the feeling you'd always had of being misplaced, of always standing to one side of yourself, of watching yourself in the world even as you were being in the world, and wondering if this was how everyone felt. That you always believed that other people had a clearer idea of what they were doing, and didn't worry quite so much about why" (167). His mother never responds to his confession. It is hard to tell whether it is intentional or not. Either way, "You" never really finds out if he is alone in feeling the way he does. It remains an unresolved issue and he is left to wonder if he disappointed her in his admission, which may have closed him off to admissions of any kind in the future.

In the last chapter of the novel "You" is high, not just on cocaine but on honesty and on coming to terms with who he is. He doesn't hold back at laughing in Amanda's face when she asks him "How's it going?" and he calls up Vicky to tell her his mother died because he wants to be truthful with her from the start. He is on a spree and even when he comes down from the drugs he still wants to continue on this path. In the sober morning he comes across a bakery truck filled with fresh bread and he realizes he hasn't eaten in two days. He trades his Ray Bans for some bread and the last thing he says is, "You get down on your knees and tear open the bag. The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again" (182). "You" is done with avoiding his problems. Instead of seeing himself as "not the kind of guy" or "the kind of guy" he will just be, without trying to fulfill some goal or avoid some defeat.

The end of *Bright Lights, Big City* does not give any clear resolutions but it does give a sense of hope. It is like life in that way; there is no nice bow tied around the problems of the characters, it just shows “You” pointing himself in a new and healthier direction. It is open ended for the reader. We can hope that it all works out well for him but we just don’t know. He could easily fall off the wagon, his relationship with Vicky could dissolve, and he could end up in rehab but that is the pessimistic interpretation. The inflated optimism of the generation in the book and the current generation is not healthy, but the novel shows that a moderate amount of optimism is necessary to get through the hard times and move on. So we end the novel with this moderate optimism, not expecting “You” to be the next Salinger, but rather hope that he finds the love that he so desperately wants and needs. And that is not too much to expect for him, or for anyone.

We can look to the time before the stock market crash in 1987 as a similar time to before the stock market crash in 2008. The critiques made in *Bright Lights, Big City* still ring true, especially for those of us in the New York City area. Seeing the relationship between the not so different New York City generations, it is easy to understand why *Bright Lights, Big City* is currently being made into a movie by the über-hip screenwriter Josh Schwartz. He plans on setting the movie in 2007 as opposed to the eighties. When asked to comment on this, McInerney said, “Sometimes it frustrates me that people think it’s a book about the eighties. Nobody used the term ‘the eighties’ back in 1983 when I wrote the damn thing I mean, it’s just a book about a guy coming to New York and getting his heart broken and losing his job. It’s universal stuff. I didn’t write it to self-destruct in 1989” (Vilensky). At the time of its heyday it was thought to be too hip to last, yet twenty-five years later, people are still reading and talking about this book. This is contrary to what most critics like Richard Sisk believed who said, “if indeed with the passage of time McInerney ever merits that much study” (99). *Bright Lights, Big City* has a magnetic quality. The critics were wrong, this novel does deserve attention.

We can only hope that the movie does the novel justice. The 1988 movie version of *Bright Lights, Big City* was a flop. The movie must stay true to “You” and not lose the gritty, self-deprecating, darkly romantic world that McInerney verbalized for us so eloquently. The novel is not about the cocaine and the nightclubs; it is about honest human emotion – which has the ability to transcend fads and decades. This movie has the potential to reinvigorate *Bright Lights, Big City* and McInerney by shedding light on its literary worth.

In the beginning of the novel, while “You” is still out at a club he says, “You know for a fact that if you go out into the morning alone, without even your sunglasses – which you have neglected to bring, because who, after all, plans on these travesties? – the harsh, angling light will turn you to flesh and bone” (6). Flesh and bone is the raw human emotion he wishes to avoid and the sunglasses are symbolic of the appearances that protect him from honesty. At the end of the novel he gets rid of his sunglasses, ready to face his darkness. So let us all take a cue from “You”. Let’s discard our sunglasses and face reality, because they are only temporary protection. The people of today don’t want to be like our eighties counterparts. We want to grow and change. So why don’t we take the message from *Bright Lights, Big City* to heart and walk out into the harsh light, shed our armor of denial, and embrace what we all essentially are, flesh and bone.

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SHROUDED SHELLS:

THE DEAD WOMEN AND SURPRISING FEMINISM OF *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

By Anne Smazal

William Faulkner mentions clothing over 120 times in *Absalom, Absalom!* He carefully crafts descriptions of women's clothing, but they are more often than not "faded and shapeless" (157). Rosa, Judith, and other unnamed female characters function in the story as bodiless, rag-draped shells, never fulfilling their natural womanhood. By creating flat, disembodied female characters, Faulkner shows the denied role of women in Southern society. It's arguable whether this denied role is a display of Faulkner's incapability to create female identity, a *reflection* of the truly confined role of Southern women at the time, or a projection of his hatred to women. He accuses and rebukes the Southern men for entrapping women, yet through his failure to create a fully embodied female character, demonstrates his inability to resist the power of patriarchal opinion.

Numerous critics have discussed Faulkner's view of women; most agree that he "feared and distrusted women" and that his writing displays blunt misogyny and near-complete denial of female autonomy (Clarke 6). "Rather than being fully rounded, his female characters are often stereotypes, incarnations of such qualities as fecundity, serenity, sexual desire, death, or evil" (Mortimer 1). Mortimer's claim holds true in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Rosa, the first and most prominent female character, is immediately characterized as an embittered old crone, a role she cannot escape for

the duration of the novel. Ellen's stereotype is one of pure frivolity and ineffectiveness: she is "gracious and assured and talking the most complete nonsense, voluble, speaking the bright meaningless phrases of her part" (54). Upon her death, Faulkner tells of her "substanceless shell...no body to be buried" (100) in a cold acknowledgement of her worthlessness. Judith's stereotype bounces between sister, fiancé, and daughter; she never stands alone as an independent entity. As Rebecca Mark pointed out, a talented writer like Faulkner should be able to imagine a fully shaped female character, but regardless of the narrator, he consistently portrays women as shells of humans, draped in ragged clothing. Contrary to most feminist Faulkner critics, I believe he consciously chose to depict women in this way to show them as victims of the South's decomposition, ultimately arguing for the necessity of female power for a society's success.

As an occasional cross-dresser, Faulkner understood the power of clothing to display the self and capitalized upon this opportunity to construct victimized women. Sartorial theorists declare "Fashion is used by individuals in the ongoing effort to establish their own identity, delineate their own distinctiveness, and enhance the meaning of their lives (Lauer 4). Indeed, individuals have a singular opportunity in clothing to modulate outward presentations of their bodies and identities. Think of fashion magazines, laying out outfits for work, for weekend, for dates—each meant to convey a certain, easily changeable performance of the self. In literature, authors similarly can manipulate depictions of characters' clothing to further communicate the identity of the character.

However, in discussing the easy manipulation of clothing to represent self or literary characters, we must not forget the myriad limitations on fashion: economics, fashion trends, and function. One cannot dress solely to express the self without influence from these societal constructions. These restrictions are fully at play in *Absalom, Absalom!*, more specifically, the limitations that Southern men imposed on women.

Clothing in the American South, as in any culture, functioned as a nonverbal communication of power and wealth.

The climate can emphasize sacrifices made by the body to maintain such distinctions in hierarchy and entitlement: the body encased in hoopskirts, crinolines, bustles, corsets, tight pantaloons, high cravats, and gloves in a semitropical environment—and this without perspiring—becomes distinctly different from the body of the laboring slave in loose-fitting, unadorned, rough, work-and sweat-stained clothing...Clothing, therefore, becomes one site where social order seeks to stabilize authority and prestige.” (Stewart 162)

Set between 1833 and 1909, the main plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* explores the chaos of post-Civil War life in the South and the struggles of Reconstruction. Undeniably, the “distinctions in hierarchy and entitlement” became more difficult to establish in the feeble economy of Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner realized the implications of dressing white women in “shapeless calico and faded sunbonnet[s]” (163) so akin to the slaves’ “loose-fitting, unadorned” garments (Stewart 162). By dressing the white, middle-class women in clothing similar to that of a slave laborer, Faulkner clearly demarcates the degraded and base position of women in society. This mirrors the truly ill-fitting feminine role in the South, as uncomfortable as “hoopskirts, bustles, and...gloves in a semitropical environment” (Stewart 162).

The question now becomes why Faulkner chose to portray middle-class white women in this way. One might assume this was a reflection of the ruined Reconstruction-era economy, but the story of *Absalom, Absalom!*, first published in 1933, actually spans eight decades, many of which were quite prosperous in the Southern states. There is strong evidence that Faulkner, by depicting ragged and ill-fitting dresses, was actually relieving his female characters from oppressively uncomfortable fashion trends. From the Victorian-era sloped shoulder, to the full skirt of the 1850s, to the flounces of the 1880s, to the strong shoulder of the early

1900s, “the only feature of the bodice which remained constant was the universally tight waist” (Norris 147). Fashion sloped the shoulders, padded the hips with bustles and crinolines, and squeezed ribs with iron or whalebone corsetry to mold the female body into a tiny-waisted form. Male designers controlled fashion until the late twentieth century, when a sudden explosion of female designers revolutionized the industry. Therefore, it is male designers who enforced the entrapped waist, just as Southern men entrapped the female characters of *Absalom, Absalom!*.

The waist is, physiologically speaking, a quite dangerous place to constrict; too-tight corsets inhibited breathing and digestion by pressing the diaphragm and compressing the smooth muscles of the stomach. Furthermore, this compression directly contrasts with a main function of female bodies: pregnancy. Constant compression of the ribcage led to a condition called “the chicken breast.” “The woman with a chicken breast suffered from insufficient respiration, fractured ribs...in adults, the lacing was sometimes so that physicians reported the impression of the ribs on the liver of an autopsied woman... One of the most terrifying consequences was prolapsus uteri, the falling of the womb down the vagina until it could even project out of the body” (Lauer 213). By physically and visually limiting the expansion of the uterus, fashion subverted the presentation of the true female body.

Likewise, women who wore another major trend between 1820 and 1900, the hoopskirt, risked their health in the name of fashion. The width of the skirt presented other dangers “when working in kitchens with open fireplaces. Burning was cited as a cause of death among southern women in the nineteenth century in numerous oral testimonies” (Stewart 181). Women sacrificed health and comfort by donning the heavy corset. Fashion scholar Herbert Norris detailed the complexity of the full skirt as follows:

In 1863, a special variety of crinoline was recommended to achieve the fullness of the skirt which fashion demanded. It was called the

'cage americain'... It consists of five bands inserted with steel, attached at distances apart by criss-cross tapes. From the bottom band is hung a coarse network of horsehair about eight or nine inches in depth, also having a band of steel at its lower edge...The crinoline opens all the way up the front; it fastens by buttons or hooks fixed to a canvas panel. (Herbert 160)

This skirt, literally the “American cage,” perfectly fits the trapped role of women in Southern society, while the corset mirrors the discomfort of forming one’s body to please men. Faulkner’s refusal to dress his female characters in such clothing could show an important view of women. His women are freed from the weighty garments, symbolizing an independence from fashion controlled by male designers. But inversely, his women seem not to have bodies to be shaped. By refusing to further the tradition of oppressively constricted, potentially dangerous clothing, Faulkner recognizes the horror of Southern women’s fashion. But in his refusal to re-dress his female characters in anything besides worn-out, over-used rags scavenged from flour sacks, Faulkner never constructs a fully dressed woman. He recognizes the problem, but does not create an alternative solution, leaving his non-women as disembodied and disempowered as dead Ellen’s “substanceless shell” (100). By completely stripping female characters of all control, Faulkner shows the dominance of the male characters. As Jefferson spirals into ruin, Faulkner reveals the men as misguided tyrants, freeing the female characters from blame. Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* is not a novel about alternate solutions; it is a presentation of complete, devastating, diseased necrosis. If women are the “signifier for fertility in our society,” their regenerative symbolism simply does not belong in Yoknapatawpha County (Mark 110).

The character Clytie, born out of Thomas Sutpen’s affair with a slave and servant to Judith and Henry, is described twice as a “shapeless little clean bundle of

ragged”, inanimate and disembodied. This image is so opposite to that of Scarlett O’Hara, protagonist of *Gone with the Wind*, published nearly on top of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. Scarlett, flat broke and struggling, rips down a set of curtains to display her famously tiny waist, declaring her independence and quick thinking. One cannot fathom the weakened and exhausted women of Faulkner mustering the strength to rip curtains, much less the body to fit a pretty dress. Yet Scarlett serves an entirely contrasting function in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, which paints the South so romantically that the movie adaptation called the region the “land of Cavaliers and Cotton fields...where Gallantry took its last Bow” (Fleming 1939). In this portrayal of the South as a bastion of chivalry and honor, women have a decorative, high-spirited, and sometimes matriarchal role. In contrast, in Faulkner’s tainted, ruined South, riddled by miscegenation and racism, the women are ineffective and bodiless victims.

The women of Sutpen’s Hundred, middle-class at best after the economic devastation of the Civil War, would still have made every effort to imitate the trends from Paris using any material available. The women of *Absalom, Absalom!* were extremely limited in their sartorial choices as a direct consequence of total male economic control in the South. Women’s clothing would be approved of and paid for by the male head of the household, restricting the wearer in expense and taste. However, critic Patricia Gantt similarly studied clothing in Faulkner’s work and concluded that “the language of their clothes speaks subtly but undeniably of his female characters’ struggle for autonomy, as novel after novel shows us women wearing their protest on their backs” (Gantt 1). But when Mr. Compson explains the process of acquiring wedding clothes for Judith, Faulkner shows that Judith was actually powerless to choose what she wore. Compson describes how Miss Rosa had to visit her father’s store to “get the material to make those intimate young girl garments which were to be for her own vicarious bridal...He [Rosa’s father] didn’t give it to her. He would have felt it incumbent on him to supply his granddaughter

with clothes if she were indecently clad or ragged or cold, but not to marry in” (77). This statement implies that though Judith’s grandfather had the resources and good fabric to outfit her appropriately to her station in society, he felt that this was unnecessary beyond basic survival. In showing the grandfather’s unnecessary tightfistedness, Faulkner subtly rebukes him for undervaluing Judith and displays Judith’s lack of autonomy over her own clothing. This lack of self-sufficiency shows a lost opportunity in rehabilitating the South. In not creating an independent female character, Faulkner allows the reader to imagine the many ways Judith *could* have taken control of the household, and in a larger sense, how a balance of masculine and feminine power *could* have helped Southern society.

Furthermore, Gantt claims that Judith “rejects all clothing except a shapeless, faded calico dress” and questions “why else would the author mention Judith Sutpen’s clothing over two dozen times...when he gives her only one speech in the entire novel?” (Gantt 2). I refuse to believe that Judith Sutpen had the resources at her disposal to choose to reject all clothing besides a hideous dress. While Gantt does point to her buying tombstones as a marker of financial stability, Judith lacked the self-value to consider buying clothing for herself after the death of her almost-husband Charles Bon. Though her father, Sutpen, has died and has no direct control over her actions anymore, he oppressed her mercilessly throughout her childhood. Rosa says Judith was “created by a hundred years of...tradition in which Thomas Sutpen’s ruthless will had carved a niche. [She was] handicapped by...ten generations of iron prohibition” (125). His death did not represent a complete freedom for Judith; his attitudes still scarred her. She certainly would not dare to splurge on good clothing for herself. If she were to choose to display her autonomy in clothing, one of the military-inspired, strong-shouldered fashions popular from 1870 to 1890 would surely have better conveyed power than tattered gingham.

To address Gantt’s question “Do her clothes not speak for her?” (Gantt 2), Judith’s clothes no more express her autonomy than a burial shroud speaks for the

corpse. By describing her clothing “over two dozen times” and giving “her only one speech in the entire novel” Faulkner reveals the Southern status quo that women should be seen and not heard. He has created a caricature of the helpless, directionless Southern female. But in demonizing Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner shows the reader how a father’s cruel actions ruined his daughter. Judith is not to blame for her struggle for autonomy, but rather pitied as a victim; she serves as a warning against oppressive patriarchal control.

In contrast, Faulkner did create one female character whom he valued and gave some measure of control over her own clothing: “I, who never had a sister and was fated to lose my [first] daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl” (Meriwether 7). This little girl is Caddy Compson of *The Sound and the Fury*. In the story, Caddy is buffeted about by her brother’s emotions and makes few decisions for herself. Faulkner describes her as a loving mother figure to her brothers. In contrast to Judith, who is essentially discarded by her family members, (brother Henry only really notices her when he becomes jealous of her love for Bon), Caddy is treasured in the family, especially by her brother. Her power over her brothers argues for the “slipperiness” of Caddy as a truly feminine character. She “reveals herself as an extraordinarily eloquent performer of gender possibilities, probably the most varied and certainly the most disruptive in the novel” (Kartiganer ix). In the following excerpt from *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner clearly shows his ability to create a character in charge of her clothing and her choices.

She [Caddy] stood up in the water and looked at her dress. “I’ll take it off,” she said. “Then it’ll dry.”

“I bet you won’t.” Quentin said.

“I bet I will.” Caddy said.

“I bet you better not.” Quentin said.

Caddy came to Versh and turned her back.

“Unbutton it, Versh,” she said.

“Don’t you do it, Versh,” Quentin said.

“Taint none of my dress.” Versh said.

“You unbutton it, Versh,” Caddy said. “Or I’ll tell Dilsey what you did yesterday.” So Versh unbuttoned it.

“You just take your dress off,” Quentin said. Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn’t have on anything but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin slapped her and she slipped and fell down in the water. (The Sound and the Fury 18)

The back-and-forth of the argument builds anticipation for the eventual removal of the dress, anticipation that suddenly flops once the dress is off: Faulkner refuses to describe Caddy’s body. Readers wonder if Caddy is a truly female character, as powerless and subdued as the women of Sutpen’s Hundred, or a character that Faulkner imagined with the positive qualities of a man and simply named female. He never describes her body whatsoever. He understands the need for women’s power to restore the South, but never delineates exactly how that power would manifest. I see two possible explanations for this: Faulkner, as a product of the South, a confused cross-dresser, and an unfaithful husband, may be actually unable to depict an honorable woman. Yet given his close relationship with his mother and relationships with various successful women (actresses, etc.), I see this emptiness as a blank canvas to be filled by the reader. Faulkner hesitates to recycle the tired stereotypes: the woman as the angel in the house, the sweetly stubborn Southern belle (a la Scarlett O’Hara), or the kindly wizened crone. By making such deadened and hopeless women as Judith and Rosa, Faulkner forces the reader to decry their entrapment, ultimately arguing for the absolute necessity of female empowerment. Furthermore, an embodied woman has *no space* in the story of Jefferson; the dominating males have crowded them out, leaving room only for an insubstantial ghost.

Faulkner uses blatantly misogynistic narrators throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* to give the reader insight into the common male viewpoint. For example, Mr. Compson relates the bleak story of Judith's non-wedding. According to Compson, Ellen never mentions love between Judith and Bon in the weeks leading up to the non-wedding. Bon will never be a companion or lover for her daughter but rather an accessory, "a garment which Judith might wear as she would a riding habit or a ball gown" (59). The simile subverts the standard gender roles of southern society. Men dress the women; women dress to attract and please men; men pay for their wife's or daughter's clothing. Yet here, the man is casually worn, draping a woman's body. Faulkner subtly shows his understanding of the importance of clothing by casting a man, the symbol of Southern power, as an item of clothing. Furthermore, the image of a man slung across his wife's shoulders parallels the concept of patriarchal control over women. It seems that Judith's only opportunity to gain power in society would be to put on her husband as a costume, adapting a male self and hiding her female body.

In Compson's eyes, Judith lacks the capacity for love, an idea he furthers in his heartbreaking story of Judith's trousseau. Miss Rosa sews Judith's wedding clothes, a rather sweet gesture that Compson obliterates by detailing a biased and bitter view of the project. Though Compson admits that "Nobody knows how she managed to get that material from her father's store" he declares "I believe she stole it...with that amoral boldness, that affinity for brigandage of women" (61), showing his distrust and contempt for women. Without evidence, Compson simply decides that Rosa robbed her father for her niece. Rosa sews "tedious and clumsy stitches on a garment which she [Judith] would never wear and never remove for a man whom she was not even to see alive" (62). In the triplet repeat of "never, never, not" Faulkner powerfully denies the possibility of a happy future for Judith. Upon engagement, the non-bride "began at once to fashion a wedding dress and veil out of rags and scraps" (81). Wedding dresses are traditionally clean and white to represent

the bride's pure virginity. A ragged and stained wedding dress reflects sullied and destroyed womanhood. Judith's stolen, clumsily sewn, and unused wedding garments show a misogynistic view of women: amoral, awkward and unfulfilled. Assuming that Judith's fiancé, Bon, is only a "riding habit or ball gown" as previously discussed, Rosa seems to imply that Southern men are as ragged as their women's clothing, so subtly that even Compson doesn't notice her distaste when relating her comments (59). Later in the story, Judith's clothing is "both faded and shapeless" (157). The non-description of her clothing reflects Compson's view of Judith as a person: unimportant and diluted when not serving as Henry's sister or Bon's future wife.

Though Compson accounts for the boldest misogynistic statements, Faulkner reveals Southern society's contemptuous view of women through Rosa's tale of waiting for the men to return to Sutpen's Hundred in blankly monotonous dysfunction: "So we waited for him. We led the busy eventless lives of three nuns in a barren and poverty-stricken convent" (124). Through Rosa, Faulkner claims that in this society, women without men are neither independent nor liberated, but imprisoned by helplessness. Just as Judith could not act freely following her father's death, the women have been so entrapped by their husband/brother/nephew that they cannot function in their absence. Although the idea of "Stockholm Syndrome" appeared forty years after the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the theme of a victim becoming emotionally attached to her captor seems pertinent to the women's feelings of hopeless confusion. Rosa describes clothing as another mundane and hopeless daily task, sighing "It was as though we were one being, interchangeable and indiscriminate, which...spun thread and wove the cloth we wore," and admitting she, Clytie, and Judith lived "not even as three women, but merely as three creatures who still possessed the need to eat but took no pleasure in it" (125).

Rosa's commentary is so blatantly pitiful that the reader must examine Faulkner's intent in forcing a primary female character to renounce her own self-worth. Having witnessed the cruelty of Sutpen, the sadness of her niece's non-

marriage, and her own “embattled virginity”, Rosa represents the anti-male viewpoint in the story (4). Yet rather than using her as a clear mouthpiece for these sentiments, Faulkner muddies her narrations with bitterness and constantly envisions her as a corpse. These descriptions, though seeming to contrast with Faulkner’s condemnation of Southern patriarchy, rather reveal the extent of its stain. In repeatedly negative descriptions of the “Deep South, dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” Faulkner has created a reverse Utopia—a world of bitter ruin (4). Rosa certainly fulfills the role of an “outraged ghost.” In creating a ruined, dead, dystopic world, Faulkner’s characters function as warnings against the patriarchal actions that led to such damage.

In characterizing Rosa Coldfield, Faulkner blames her father for the death of her autonomy. Specifically, Rosa’s clothing, described as shroud-like “black which did not even rustle, the wan triangle of lace at the wrists and throat” (6) firmly ensconces her in the tomb of her father’s dim, airless house. The choice of “throat” rather than “neckline” or “collar” calls attention to Rosa’s body, or lack thereof. The throat, like the waist, represents another extremely vulnerable body part. The fragment of lace at the throat calls to mind images of nooses, of hanging or strangulation. Faulkner leaves no doubt as to Rosa’s deathly appearance, but stumbles slightly from his usual refusal to describe a body. Rosa had the “rank smell of old female flesh long embattled with virginity” and “resembled a crucified child” (6). Faulkner has officially mentioned a female body- or at least, a corpse, draped in a cheap black dress that her father paid for.

The black dress would rustle if its wearer moved, but Rosa is essentially deadened after years of entrapment. In this sense, Faulkner firmly blames Rosa’s father for her death as a person, and in a larger sense, blames white Southern patriarchy. Like Faulkner’s beloved Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, “Rosa insists on the possibility of female desire and female symbolization within...a patriarchal culture which turns on the male fear of deprivation of power” (Gwin

153). This fear of “deprivation of power” seems to be exactly why Faulkner refrains from creating an autonomous, embodied female character. The men of Jefferson lost the Civil War and lost the legal ability to own slaves. In a post-Civil War society, one can understand the increased restriction on women, almost as a creation of surrogate slaves, so that the men would not lose that control too. As I argued earlier, women must be either disembodied or dead so as not to detract authority from men.

Further illumination of William Faulkner’s personal life reveals interesting clues about his view of women. He married Estelle Oldham, a childhood sweetheart whose first marriage ended ten weeks prior to her wedding to Faulkner. He struggled to remain faithful in his marriage, developed an intense drinking problem, and frequently experimented in cross-dressing. Cross-dressing reveals Faulkner’s comfort with exploring the roles of men and women in society, and as Faulkner critic Deborah Clarke notes, “Cross-dressing exposes the ideals for which the South is fighting—stable racial and gender hierarchies—as a sham” (Clarke 16). When pointing out the misogyny of his characters, especially in descriptions of women’s dress, Faulkner plays the part of the enlightened man, seeing the South from a challenging perspective. Yet when describing Rosa’s life as hopeless without male companionship, Faulkner steps back into the patriarchal opinion. In an essay on Faulknerian gender dizziness, critic Robert Dale Parker remarked “Faulkner oscillates between...seeing the binary of feminine and masculine genders as stable and seeing it as unstable” (Parker 2). Furthering this sentiment, Faulkner fluctuates between two opposing characterizations of feminine and masculine characters within *Absalom, Absalom!*. The utilization of several different narrators in the story accounts for these complications; Rosa and Compson function as the voice of the victim and the voice of the oppressor, respectively.

An example of this subtly appears in Faulkner’s word choices, which undercut Mr. Compson as he prefaces a story to Quentin with a bemused “They lead beautiful lives—women. Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably

excommunicated from, all reality” (156). By stating that women are “divorced” and “irrevocably excommunicated” from the realism of the world, Faulkner allows that women must have once been married to realism and upstanding members of the Church of Truth. The word “excommunicated” especially proves that women are not to blame for this shift, and by characterizing Compson as an intensely misogynistic, unlikeable narrator, Faulkner highlights the true cause: white men like Compson. Excommunication is not a choice, but rather a punishment proclaimed by a priest or bishop (Incidentally, the only male Catholic officials allowed to determine excommunication; female nuns do not have the authority). What could have led the female population as a whole away from logic, but Southern society, headed by the patriarchal white male? Compson accuses women of delusion, but as a white male in the South, must unconsciously contribute to the shackles that inhibited female power.

Indeed, Compson blames the war, a convenient scapegoat, for ruining Southern women: “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?” (7). What did Southern women lose in the Civil War? Perhaps the livelihood to afford expensive, formal clothing and frilly dresses that crushed their lungs with whalebone stays is the only identity of femininity that Compson can comprehend, but the scarring defeat killed the confidence of their men—for better or for worse, the backbone of Southern civilization. In retaliation to this loss, men sought surrogate slaves and projected this role onto women. This enslavement continued or worsened pre-War attitudes, further entrapping female power in society.

As Minrose Gwin pointed out, “Mr. Compson is more accurate than he knows when he constructs Rosa (her younger self) as ‘not only a living and walking reproach to her father, but a breathing indictment ubiquitous and even transferable of the entire male population’(46)” (Gwin 154). Her pitiful role exemplifies the result

of cruel male authority. As previously discussed, Rosa's "living and walking" or "breathing" capacity was destroyed after years of living under her father's tyranny (46). Compson's pure misogyny taints the reliability of his storytelling until the reader distrusts his opinions. By making an untrustworthy character blame the war for ruining Southern women, Faulkner seems to beg the reader to consider the real culprit behind their downfall: white patriarchal leaders like Mr. Compson himself.

Again, it cannot be overstated that Compson's views do not mirror that of William Faulkner. When interviewed at the University of Virginia in 1957 regarding *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner remarked, "Every time any character gets into a book, he's actually telling his biography—that's all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, he's talking about himself in a thousand different terms" (F. Gwynn 8). Compson tries to illustrate and ridicule feminine logic, but Faulkner carefully counters his claims through the clothing in his stories.

Having condemned the entire female population, blissfully oblivious to his own role in their so-called downfall, Compson continues telling Quentin about his aunt. Faced with a life-threatening operation and convinced that a kinswoman will deliberately choose a hated brown dress as her burial garb, the aunt insists the brown dress be burned as she watches. The incineration of the dress gives her such peace that "as soon as the dress was consumed she began to mend" (156). Many years later, the aunt dies peacefully and is buried in her wedding dress. Her intense fear that her kinswoman will bury her in the brown dress, sealing her eternal appearance to that of an African, proves that racism has terrorized her life, and on a broader scale, has terrorized Southern white women.

Compson describes her recovery "as soon as the dress was consumed." The dress was not burnt, nor destroyed, but *consumed*, a word implying the metabolic cycle of destroying one substance to provide fuel for another. In a racist society, white supremacy cannot function without a fuel, that is, the degradation of non-whites. The consumption of the dress mirrors the consumption of women by men through

the story. In keeping with this projection of all trouble onto the brown female body, represented by the hated brown dress, the aunt dies in peace and is buried in her wedding dress, which must be as white as her own skin. Neither dress ever drapes a healthy, whole female body: the first represents the shell of a black woman, and its tortured destruction in the backyard summons the image of a brutal lynching. The second dress shrouds the aunt's corpse in her casket, and Mr. Compson continues his storytelling as he and Quentin roam the graveyard, stopping to examine Charles Bon's grave, once "watered by tears" of an octoroon (157).

Although I have stated several times that "embodied" white women cannot or do not appear in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner does include an alternate, faintly sexual female role in a non-white woman: Charles Bon's octoroon mistress. An octoroon refers to a person of one-eighth African ancestry. Often pale enough to pass for white, the "one drop rule" of society dictated that even a tiny amount of "black blood" is enough to be legally and socially black. However, the term "octoroon" refers to a sickening tradition of young octoroons girls raised for the express purpose of becoming a concubine or mistress to a successful white man.

Faulkner devotes great attention to her physical exterior and dress, again using Mr. Compson as a narrator. The description opens with an interesting contrast between the woman's appearance and her purpose. She is "magnolia-faced," showing that time has bleached her one-eighth African ancestry to a delicate shade of pale, yet she is still "created of by and for darkness" (157). Though "darkness" outwardly refers to her distant African ancestry, Compson reveals his misogyny with the second meaning, saying women are created of evil, by evil, and for evil. Again, her description reflects the strong fear of miscegenation that permeated white Southern families; despite her magnolia-pale skin, the woman's defining feature is her distant dark roots.

Faulkner describes her appearance not in terms of physical description, but rather of the desperately convoluted emotion she invokes, even specifying that she

might have been dressed by Beardsley. Beardsley was an English cartoonist famous for his erotically themed cartoons in the late nineteenth century. Compson, telling this story in 1909, would have been quite familiar with the shocking and quietly sad nature of Beardsley's drawings. Rather than the expected mood, of "bereavement or widowhood," the octoroon's garb conveys her "slumberous and fatal insatiation," an eerily empty, shadowy, and doomed sense of eternal dissatisfaction (157). The initial description of a "soft, flowing gown" invokes a naturally sensual, fulfilled image of womanhood, but in the desperate "passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh" Compson denies feminine sexuality.

In referencing the work of Audrey Beardsley, Faulkner sidesteps the responsibility to fully illustrate female sexuality and embodiment in the actual text of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Beardsley's subjects, in their loose-fitted, draping gowns, could not be more opposite from the rigidly corseted fashions of nineteenth-century Southern women or the rag-wrapped women of Sutpen's Hundred. Furthermore, Beardsley's subjects are frequently bare-chested, allowing Faulkner to minimally include symbols of female fertility without having to commit the words to paper himself. He tries to allow the possibility of feminine sexuality and in his words of bondage and veils, even going so far as to describe the parasol's fabric: lace. Delicate, transparent, and feminine, lace evokes images of lingerie—fitting for the octoroon, a character who has led a life fully committed to sexually serving a powerful white man. Her body was consumed by her white lover, leaving nothing but a shell under the lace.

When her provider/lover/employer dies, Faulkner loads the description of her clothing with words of necrosis, of rotting and foul death. She stays a week "in bed, in the new lace and silk and satin negligees subdued to the mauve... of mourning—that room, airless and shuttered... with the heavy fainting odor of her flesh, her days, her hours, her garments" (158). The images of suffocation reinforce that her spiritual death was due to a lack of essential nutrition; in this case, the

necessary fuel was the sexual objectification and monetary support of her white lover. Through the octoroon, simultaneously erotic and denied, Faulkner reveals the contrast between natural feminine physiology and the twisted role of women in Southern society.

The octoroon has a young son, a boy dressed to the nines in “expensive, esoteric Fauntleroy clothing” (158). Born of the union with his octoroon mother and her white lover, he is one-sixteenth black. Fifteen-sixteenths white makes him still black, but his impeccable clothing is miles ahead of Judith and Rosa’s ragged and shapeless garments. The “Fauntleroy” adjective refers to an immensely popular children’s novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, published in 1887 and entitled “Little Lord Fauntleroy,” in which the eponymous main character wears ornate cut-away velvet jackets, tailored knee-pants, and a lace blouse.

Importantly, this octoroon’s son, in his lacy blouses and fancy pants, wears the most feminine clothing in the book. By subverting the stereotype of women striving to dress well (because of course the men have better things to do), Faulkner aligns this young boy with Southern white women. Despite their totally opposite physical descriptions, they share the subjugated identity of living as an “other” in the South, where the “other” is non-white or non-male. Their commonality in being downtrodden by the white patriarchy intensifies with the swap of expected clothing—it is the white lady who “should” be in lacy embroidery, and the black boy in ragged clothing.

The most important aspect of the little boy’s identity, in New Orleans, is his maleness. The male child of an octoroon would have a fairly good place in New Orleans society—better, certainly, than the male child of “full” black or of a black female (Braddon). However, when he becomes orphaned and must leave New Orleans, with its fancy Rampart Street houses paid for by white men and inhabited by octoroons, his societal position falls dramatically. In Mississippi, a black boy is a black boy, regardless of how rich his mother’s suitor may be. Faulkner shows this

drop when Clytie forces him to change his clothing: “The delicate garments of his pagehood already half-concealed by that harsh and shapeless denim cut to an iron pattern and sold by the millions—that burlesque uniform and regalia of the tragic burlesque of the sons of Ham” (160). When Clytie forces the boy to swap jackets, the reader sees how clothing functions as an important, outward display of social status.

Sadly, it seems the treasured young boy has become one of many—the “millions” of others wearing his identical, roughly made denim coat. He becomes one of the most pitiable characters in the sad cast of *Absalom, Absalom!*; even Compson notes that “Beardsley might not only have dressed but drawn” (157) the little boy (his mother was only dressed by the artist). The boy’s complete lack of control over his fate is revealed through the swap of clothing. When entering Sutpen’s household with Clytie, he was “driven and herded...into that gaunt and barren household where his very silken remaining clothes, his delicate shirt and stockings and shoes...vanished, fled from arms and body and legs as if they had been woven of chimaeras or of smoke” (159). The support of his mother’s white lover is compared to a mythical creature or an insubstantial wisp of mist. The reference to smoke implies the burning of one substance to create another; here, the mother’s life has been devoured to provide for her son’s physical needs, represented by clothing.

In comparison to the women’s tattered dresses, the older white men in the story wear well-made, highly structured clothing. In contrast to Ellen’s “made over dress that all Southern women wore” (125), her fiancé Thomas Sutpen “wore a new hat now, and a new broadcloth coat” (35). The coat, well-structured and well-made, is mentioned no fewer than nine times throughout the novel. A coat’s primary function is to protect the wearer from weather, but Sutpen’s coat seems to function dually as emotional armor and an outward display of his new money in the town.

Furthermore, Faulkner actually describes Sutpen's body and face, and honor never bestowed upon a female character in the story.

A man with a big frame but gaunt now almost to emaciation, with a short reddish beard which resembled a disguise and above which his pale eyes had a quality at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed in a face whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven's fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay (24).

Thomas Sutpen seems to have once had the potential to become a good man, but this "glaze" over his face has halted that. The glaze from the "oven's fever" seems to represent the sickness of the South, the sickness of racism and panicked fear of miscegenation, of a slow death of a wronged society. His body has been reduced by hunger in the shambles of the Reconstruction-era economy. But lest the reader pity Sutpen, a plantation owner, for his plight, Faulkner inserts predatory images in the description of Sutpen's eyes. "Alert" and "ruthless" are fine qualities for a rapacious animal, and certainly Sutpen preys upon his wife, Ellen, and his daughter, Judith (24). He consumes Ellen's good family reputation in an attempt to fuel his own societal advancement.

In describing Sutpen's arrival and progress in Jefferson, Faulkner introduces the notion of clothes as societal construct, an idea that further delineates the limitations of Southern women. In driving his savage slaves to construct the plantation, Sutpen sheds his clothing, working "stark naked underneath the croaching and pervading mud" (28). Rosa narrates how fully excluded Sutpen lived from the society of Jefferson. She explains "he was saving his clothes, since decorum even if not elegance of appearance would be the only weapon...with which he could conduct the last assault upon...respectability" (28). The warlike language in this

statement reinforces the savagery in which Sutpen attacked the community of Jefferson. Meanwhile, the French architect, “resembling a human creature because of the French clothes which he wore constantly with a sort of invincible fatality” (29), is described as conscientious, good at his job, and more than a little judgmental of Sutpen’s antics.

In the contrast between the maniacal labor of Sutpen, nude except for the muck of the swamp, and the careful work of the architect, Faulkner blatantly states the importance of clothes in society. The architect carefully keeps his fancy French clothes on, both as a physical protection from the muck and emotional protection from Sutpen’s fervor. In this dichotomy, the female characters have no clear landing. While clothed, they wear the leftovers of household items like flour sacks, or the made-over dresses handed down from older relatives. In better times, the fabric that drapes their bodies would be used to scrub the dirty floors or simply thrown out. Therefore, Faulkner presents women as the leftovers or trash of Southern civilization.

By stating the importance of clothing in society, Faulkner shows the complete ruin of Southern civilization, damned to brutal lawlessness. Just as Faulkner can deconstruct women’s clothing, yet fail to imagine good clothing or a healthy body, so he can point out the problems of the South without presenting any clear solution. By thoroughly detailing the women’s ruined rags, Faulkner makes readers well aware of the worthlessness of the female in Southern society. Yet he concurrently presents the men as brutal, unkind, stingy, or unloving—yet extremely powerful, and therefore to blame for the destruction of female identity. Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* essentially details the death of the South and the decay of moral values as racism eats away at society. If it is the women who lack power in this corrupted community, I argue that Faulkner is by no means a misogynist, but rather wholly respectful of the female potential to contribute positively to Southern life. He simply shows the *reverse* of autonomous women throughout the novel to illustrate

and caution against the removal of women from societal power. In refusing to redress the women in finery or create a fully embodied and independent character, Faulkner shows the total absence of space or potential for women in a society that devalues feminine identity. By presenting the South as a dystopia, Faulkner strongly warns against oppressive patriarchal control, ultimately arguing for the necessity of female power in a successful society.

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COLORBLIND VS. TECHNICOLOR:

INTERROGATING THE KITCHEN SPACE IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S *THE HELP*

By Tracy Sweetbaum

Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* has been criticized for its petty attempt to portray the truth of white and black women in Jackson, Mississippi in 1960. Critics attack Stockett's choice to write in black dialect without also incorporating the "twang" of white southerners.

In a review titled "The Road More Traveled" by Erin Aubrey Kaplan, she addresses this criticism with some provoking rhetorical questions, "Why must blacks speak dialect to be authentic? Why are Stockett's white characters free of the linguistic quirks that white Southerners certainly have?" While Stockett's decision of controversial dialect may gloss over the bigger racial questions and issues within 1960's Jackson, the inclusion of food and the conversations enabled around food allows readers to experience the complexities within Southern racism. On the surface level, the informality and colloquialism that Stockett uses to discuss food may seem to reaffirm some critics' beliefs that *The Help* is just a light read, perfect for a book club but not for the larger critical conversation on race. I will argue against this seemingly lighthearted gloss as I prove that the food scenes and dialogue delve deep

into the cultural history of the South, both perpetuating racism and allowing for an at times romanticized and at times real space of equality.

Critics throughout Southern history have idealized the preparation and eating of food as a space of equality between African Americans and Anglo Saxon peoples in the South. They argue that this constructed space of equality has roots in the diverse origin and heritage of what Americans now consider to be Southern food. In John Shelton Reed's essay "Southern Eats" he states, "The South's political history, like those of most peoples, has been largely a sorry chronicle of division, conflict, oppression and exploitation, but the regions cultural history has been more a matter of borrowing, sharing swapping, and mutual influence- across racial lines" (*Dixie Emporium*, 206). The food of many cultures is the product of mixing and Southern food is especially mixed. In John Egerton's book *Southern Food: At Home, On the Road, In History* he states, "the food is not just Southern; in a historical sense, at least, it is also Indian, British, African, Hispanic, Creole, Acadian, French, German, Italian, even Asian" (5). This mixing began as early as 1607 when the Powhatan peoples introduced the first European settlers of Jamestown to what we now know as corn.

In addition to the indigenous ingredients of the Americas, a large portion of what is now considered Southern food is a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the introduction of African ingredients and cooking techniques. Europeans quickly learned that Africans fared better on the Middle Passage when they ate native food from Africa. Since their health was vital to their ability to work, provisions were made to include corn, yam, malagueta pepper, and palm oil. Once the Africans arrived in America they continued to eat and cook with African ingredients and techniques as "the choice of particular foods and particular means of preparation involved issues of crucial importance to the slaves sense of identity" (Hall 31). The mixing involved in the creation of the genre of Southern food gives food a power. Southerners accept, embrace, and celebrate the combining of unlikely ingredients.

Southern food would not exist without its strong diverse roots, adding to the food of the South's ability to leave us temporarily "colorblind".

The current accepted definition of the term colorblind, referring to its figurative meaning with reference to race or ethnicity has been in existence since 1866. The OED's definition states, "taking no note of differences in racial color, in sex, etc" ("Colorblind" def. b). One of the examples in the OED is, "Neither in the Dutch republics nor in the English colonies is the law absolutely colorblind as between Black and White" ("Colorblind" def. b). While the word colorblind has an understood and accepted meaning of people's ability to ignore racial implications, the practice and implementation of colorblindness in society never actually occurs. One can grasp the concept, and maybe superficially aim to achieve it, but in a world where race defines almost every facet of our everyday lives, it is almost impossible to take no note of differences in racial color.

The realm of cooking and food production is where critics such as Edgerton believe food has the ability to render people temporarily colorblind. Edgerton states, "...The kitchen was one of the few places where their (slave cooks) imagination and skill could have free rein and full expression and there they often excelled" (14). Yet this is not entirely true. The preparation and cooking enabled blacks to use their imagination and create a sense of identity but the space in which they actually cook and create is not colorblind. The kitchen, which Edgerton is referring to, belonged to the white masters, where everything from available ingredients to provided utensils were controlled by the dominant whites. In Anne Tentsch's article *"Excavating the South's African American Food History"* she highlights the importance of thinking of food in terms of space. "The overall space immediately surrounding the big house was one of heightened awareness. Here the master of a well-run plantation fully governed what was allowed and what was not" (Tentsch 64). The control and power generated from the racial dynamics of slave and master within the white kitchen evolved over time. But the white kitchen remains a space where colorblind like

practices can occur but in which no one can ever fully escape the overarching unfair racial power differences.

Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help*, tells the stories of three different women living in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960's. Stockett weaves the lives of black domestic workers, their white employers, and one white woman searching for justice and equality together. A main character in the novel is Aibileen, an older black maid who is kind and nurturing. She is currently raising Mae Mobley Leefolt, her seventeenth white child and also mourning the loss of her own son, Treelore. Mae Mobley's mother is Elizabeth Leefolt, a societal Jackson lady more concerned with her social life than anything to do with raising her child. Aibileen is Mae Mobley's main maternal figure and most of their relationship portrayed in the novel revolves around Aibileen and Mae Mobley in the kitchen.

Aibileen describes how the kitchen acts as a safe-ground for herself and Mae Mobley. "We go in the kitchen and I fix her baloney sandwich. In the driveway, the workmen is setting in they truck, eating their own lunches. I'm glad for the peace. I smile over at Baby Girl, give her a strawberry, so grateful I was here during the trouble with her mama. I hate to think what would a happen if I wasn't. She stuff the strawberry in her mouth, smile back. I think she feel it too" (Stockett 19). In this scene, Aibileen is still "serving" the white child, but there is an act of love and nurturing that separate titles of "black help" and "white baby", and readers are left with adult caregiver and innocent child. Food has the ability to enable situations that temporarily foster a naïve and childlike innocence. It may be only for a moment but it still occurs.

The relationship between Aibileen and Mae Mobley is genuine and throughout the novel readers can see how much Mae Mobley truly respects and loves Aibileen. However, this relationship is only allowed to exist because of the innocence of children, before they grow up and learn the established correct social constructions of race and class in Jackson Stockett writes, "Aibileen, she moves on

to another job when the babies get too old and stop being color-blind” (Stockett 128). Eventually, compounded with the reality of societal norms, food is not enough to keep us colorblind. Yet, its ability to do so, even for a brief moment has enough power to trick our minds into wanting to believe in the romanticized notions of equality.

In contrast to Aibileen, Stockett constructs a different main character in the novel named Minny, a loud-mouthed and hearty black woman known as the best cook in Jackson, but who is constantly fired for talking back to her white employers. Minny finds herself working for Miss Celia, a “white trash” woman who has married into an old Jackson family. Miss Celia cannot cook and what she wants mostly from Minny is to learn and simultaneously be able to pass off Minny’s cooking as her own to impress her husband. The relationship between Minny and Miss Celia superficially supports Edgerton’s notion that the food of the South belongs to everyone and can break down the barriers of race.

Minny begins teaching Miss Celia how to transforming from “the help” into a knowledgeable teacher. Traditionally, African American slaves cooked and prepared the food for their white masters, but then were not allowed to eat this food. “A basic division (with some overlap) existed during slavery between food that the cook, usually an African American slave, prepared for the white master’s family and that she or he prepared for the African American field worker” (Whit 51). Rendering a space in which both women enjoy the same food together is especially important. The women can concurrently enjoy the simplicity of good food and forget the reality of their true place in the outside world. Minny says, “Real careful, I lay the dark meat in the pan. It bubbles up like a song and we watch the thighs and legs turn brown. I look over and Miss Celia’s smiling at me” (Stockett 44). Stockett uses the pronoun “we” and unites these women, allowing them to celebrate Minny’s delicious cooking equally.

While this relationship seems to support the claim that the food of the South belongs to all of its residents, Stockett does not permit this idea to develop fully. The novel characterizes Miss Celia constantly as naïve and childlike, creating an almost parallel relationship to that of Aibileen and Mae Mobley. The black women are supportive and caregivers and the white child and white woman welcome and embrace their support, however, once the white character steps out of the kitchen these equal relationships fall back into the categories of black help and white employer. Minny again states, “Or at least I cook and Miss Celia fidgets, looking more like a five-year-old than the rich lady paying my rent” (Stockett 48). Only when the outside economic and power differences are not fully developed and understood can food enable this simplistic world of pure joy, no matter what race is consuming it.

Miss Celia’s kitchen does act, as neutral ground for both races yet, it still remains a strictly segregated space. Minny discusses the rules of being a maid, rules she learned from her mother and rules she will probably pass down to her daughter. Her mother says, “Rule Number Three: when you’re cooking white people’s food, you taste it with a different spoon. You put that spoon to your mouth, think nobody’s looking, put it back in the pot, might as well throw it out. Rule Number Four: you use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. Keep it in a separate cupboard and tell that white woman that’s the one you’ll use from here on out. Rule Number Five: you eat in the kitchen” (39). Even though the actual food has its roots and history in a blended construction of cultures the problematic racist notions of the South live within the traditions and consumption of the food. The kitchen proposes a conundrum: in one sense it is a place where the mixing of race and culture is applauded and accepted yet in another it is just another space that has clearly marked signs of “separate but equal.”

The control white families held over their black domestic employees allowed slavery like practices to continue within the South. These rooted slavery practices

and creation of the blended and mixed genre of Southern food took place before the Civil War. Yet, during the time of reconstruction, and when the terms such as “lost cause” and “new south” were born, is when the south’s struggle to maintain some sense of identity initiated the many traditions and ways of life that were certainly prominent during the 1960’s and even linger throughout Southern homes to the present day. In Grace Elizabeth Hale’s book, *Making Whiteness*, she states,

White southern men and women of the rising middle class, however, insisted on conflating the plantation household and post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power- which by the late nineteenth century had grown to mythical proportions- of the plantation-based planter class. And images of integrated domesticity were central to this fiction of continuity as African American servants, symbolized and idealized most frequently as mammy, replaced slaves (Hale 87).

White Southern men kept the racial codes strictly enforced through violence and law. The women, black and white, were put in a position where they had to negotiate and perform these complicated plantation roles. The interactions that took place within the home and especially within the kitchen, were crucial in defining both black and white women’s sense of identity and how they came to terms with both identifying what race meant for themselves and in relation to others.

Stockett manipulates the different power dynamics between that of a white woman employer and her black domestic help. The relationship that progresses the most is of the one between Minny and Miss Celia. Stockett fosters a sense of power switching between the two women when Miss Celia wants to learn from Minny and enables Minny to be her teacher within her own kitchen. Yet, Stockett freezes this power play by asserting that Miss Celia’s economic power far outweighs Minny’s talents in the kitchen. For if anything was to go wrong, Miss Celia is the one who controls Minny’s most valuable resource, her paycheck.

Minny does not like Miss Celia's attempt to create this colorblind world within her home. Minny states, "Go shopping then. Go get you some new clothes. Go do whatever white women do when the maid's home" (Stockett 51). In this relationship, Minny embraces her mammy/servant role. Not necessarily because it is her life passion, but because it is what she knows and it is safer. She gets time to herself and can be herself without Celia looking over her shoulder. The uncomfortable emotion Minny elicits magnifies the complexities within the different distributions of power. In one sense, Minny is a strong, loud-mouthed back talking woman, unafraid of the consequences her harsh words will cause. Stockett epitomizes this fearless brashness when Minny in reference to the iconic *Gone With the Wind* dress scene states, "If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress" (Stockett 50). Yet this quotation is only one page before Minny wants Miss Celia to leave the house so she can quietly perform her domestic duties.

The role of the black mammy/black domestic worker is one of the main reasons racist segregated practices within Southern households were allowed to exist. Minny understands the ultimate power she will never obtain and utter subservience she has to comply with if she remains in the Mammy role. With Miss Celia gone, she can simply do her job and receive pay without the constant reminders of slavery like power hierarchies that still linger in her modern day life. Miss Celia thinks she is acting as a progressive woman who does not let the racial differences influence how she treats Minny. Although Miss Celia does not consciously try to highlight her dominant role over Minny it will always exist. Minny does not want Miss Celia to make a Mammy out of her, she simply wants to work and not have any personal relationship. Including this resistance from Minny in contrast to Miss Celia's desires to ignore race, prove that breaking down these rigid roles and practices is not so simple and idealistic.

Interestingly, Minny's verbal resistance to the Mammy role seems contradictory to how Stockett has physically construed her in the novel. "Minny short and big, got shiny black curls. She setting with her legs splayed, her thick arms crossed" (Stockett 13). Minny is the quintessential stereotypical black Mammy through her appearance. In spite of this, Stockett is not trying to reaffirm black and white women in their stereotypical confined spaces. She is playing with performance and challenging her readers to dig deeper than what she provides on the surface. Yes, Minny is "this figure, with large breasts, muscular arms, and wide hips, an idealized representation of an autonomous black woman..." (Bower 4), but she is also smart, brash, and much more complicated than previously constructed Mammy figures whose only purpose was to serve whites.

Minny and Miss Celia represent Stockett's imagination, her play of what if's within the confines of Miss Celia's "colorblind" home. Miss Celia's home is physically isolated from the other white women's homes in the novel and this aims to further separate the possible colorblind world from that of the reality of what many relationships between white women and black domestic help were really like. Minny's plea for Miss Celia to go and do something outside of the home, while the black domestic maid works inside of the home, is based on every other maid/employer relationship she previously had. White women were used to being confined in a subservient role to their husbands. Having a place outside of the home, whether it is socializing with friends or getting involved in charity organizations was a main source of empowerment and freedom. However, this freedom often led to the white women continuing racist practices because they wanted to keep the power they maintained over black domestic workers.

Wealthy and middle class white women had freedom to go to meetings, play bridge and other activities outside of the home. Stockett exemplifies this freedom in the many scenes when the white women get together for their Junior League meetings. At the meetings, led by Miss Hilly, an extremely racist and manipulative

woman, the women discuss planning for a big Junior League event as well as other initiatives they would like to see take place, all the while drinking tea and eating caramel cake prepared by the help. Grace Elizabeth Hale exemplifies the emphasis on Southern culture that emerged because of the ability white women had to have a life outside of the home, due to the work black domestics did inside the home. She states,

Leaving their households, women developed new social relations and values in associations that they later used in constructing the child-centered, middle-class home. And women constructed these new domestic spaces as refuges from the frenzied pace of male market life. What economic activity remained within the middle-class household and clothing preparation and the cleaning of furnishes and clothing- disappeared from the view through a process the historian Jeanne Boydston has called “the pastoralization of housework” (Hale 92).

Now white women were able to leave the home and build substantial meaning for themselves, enabling themselves to become their male dominant husbands to their black maids. The maids were then trapped inside of the home and left to perform all aspects of the “Southern lady”. Even though these white women strived for the ability to become more equal to the dominant males they did not want to let go of the notion that the lady runs the home. In this instance, the black maids in the kitchen enabled white women to do it all; compete with men in the sphere outside of the home and still look as if they themselves maintained the home, cooked the food and cared for the children.

One of the central initiatives Miss Hilly is trying to enforce is her bathroom initiative. She believes the black help have germs and diseases that will spread to the white families if they share the same toilet. Stockett juxtaposes this initiative, about sanitation and bathroom activities with constant images of delicious food. The

women seem to have no problem ingesting the food prepared by the black help, but when it comes to releasing all of a sudden they are worried about cross contamination. The bathroom initiative is also the first time the central white woman character, Miss Skeeter, becomes aware of just how unjust life in Jackson, Mississippi can be. Miss Skeeter describes an epiphany she felt when asked to write about the bathroom initiative for the Junior League newspaper.

The metaphor Stockett uses compares Skeeter to none other than food. “When I started typing out the bathroom initiative for the newsletter, typing words like disease and protect yourself and you’re welcome!, it was like something cracked open inside of me, not unlike a watermelon, cool and soothing and sweet. I always thought insanity would be a dark, bitter feeling, but it is drenching and delicious if you really roll around in it” (Stockett 345). Writing is Skeeter’s passion and through this medium she is getting excited and awakened, however the feeling of insanity she is describing is not sheer passion for writing. It is the first time she has had the chance to remove herself from the situation, breath, and realize the deep and twisted racist society she is a part of.

Stockett then compares Skeeter’s feeling of liberation to a watermelon, a delicious Southern treat often found at family barbeques of all races. Watermelon, also not coincidentally is one of the foods brought to America from Africa. It is uncertain of precisely how and when African-domesticated watermelon was cultivated in North America but geographers and botanists agree that the watermelon was originally domesticated in West Africa. Shortly after Africans introduced watermelon to North American, people of both white and black races cherished the watermelon. Anne Ritson loved the watermelon so much she dedicated one of her poems just to the African fruit.

The watermelon most they love,
I never could the fruit approve;
It was so very light and sweet,

It did not seem as fit to eat,
Melting so quickly in the mouth,
Like syllabub and trifle froth;
Yet during autumn's sultry air,
Its coolness was delicious fare. (Hall 31)

Skeeter's metaphor may seem insignificant at first, and just a way for Stockett to utilize literary devices to make the plot seem more interesting. However, Skeeter's metaphor, like the larger symbolism within the novel uses Southern food imagery, imagery that seems inherently to belong to white southerners but in actuality is tied to a more nuanced heritage, one that began as African and then was transformed to be a product of the American South.

Hilly's bathroom initiative aims to protect white Southerners from the black others. This initiative is important to Hilly because it outwardly establishes a boundary within the white home and again is an assertion of white dominance and power over the black domestic workers. However, Hilly is so adamant about this initiative because it is a tangible action stating that the white home is not a place where racial mixing takes place. This strong attitude is really just a reaction to how large of a role the white home actually did play with racial mixing and therefore creating racial identity. Hale states, "Thus even as segregation became policy in the late nineteenth-century South, the white home continued as a site of racial mixing through the employment of African American domestic labor. The white home became a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world" (Hale 94). The action going on inside the kitchen was extremely intimate and mixed, as evident by the relationships such as between Aibileen and Mae Mobley. However, all the unspoken rules and fears of contamination remained because of the realities of segregation in 1960's Jackson. White women such as Hilly were spending so much

energy fighting this mixing yet at the same time the main force responsible for it was within their own homes.

While food writers and historians like Edgerton and Reed outwardly accept that the product of Southern food is a combination of many cultures and heavily influenced by African cultures, other American inhabitants of the South do not like to admit these facts openly. In Robert L. Hall's essay, *Food Crops and the Slave Trade* he states, "How 'African' all Americans are is conventionally hidden by the assumption that, under conditions of oppression, acculturation is a one-way street (*African American Foodways* 18). Characters such as Hilly fight so hard to keep the boundaries between blacks and whites clear and concrete. Yet, while Hilly is preaching to her peers about the importance of separate bathrooms and protecting "clean" whites from the "dirty" blacks her children are tucked away in the other room, in a confined intimate space playing, laughing and learning from their most maternal figure, the maid. Stockett juxtaposes Hilly, a contradictory white character who is comfortable with the previous social constructions of race to Miss Skeeter.

Skeeter grew up in the same environment with Hilly and they even went to the same college but Skeeter is rejecting the dominant patriarchal white society and sensing a greater connection and celebration of the African influences in her life. Like the many white children in *The Help*, Skeeter's relationship with her own maid was her main source of encouragement and genuine love. Skeeter may be Stockett's answer to Aibileen's fears of children losing their ability to be colorblind as well as a somewhat autobiographical figure.

The sweet darkness and insanity that Skeeter verbalized after writing about the bathroom initiative may have been a personal epiphany, but Skeeter has actually been living and dealing with this "insanity" her entire life. Stockett dedicates many pages to describing the beautiful and loving relationship Skeeter had with her own maid, Constantine. Skeeter says, "I woke up nearly every day to her standing in the kitchen, Preacher Green playing on the radio that sat on the kitchen table. The

minute she saw me, she smiled. "Good morning, beautiful girl!" I'd sit at the kitchen table and tell her what I'd dreamed. She claimed dreams told the future" (Stockett 63). Skeeter, born Eugenia Phelan, always felt like an outsider, as she was both physically and verbally ostracized from her family. She describes how she received her nickname stating, "When I was born, my older brother, Carlton, looked at me and declared to the hospital room, "It's not a baby, it's a skeeter!" and from there the name stuck. I was long and leggy and mosquito-thin, a record-breaking twenty-five inches at Baptist Hospital. The name grew even more accurate with my pointy, beak-like nose when I was a child. Mother's spent my entire life trying to convince people to call me by my given name, Eugenia" (Stockett 57).

Stockett's choice to nickname Eugenia, Skeeter is extremely important. Firstly, her own family declared her as an insect, a lowly creature that depends on others to survive. Skeeter, while she certainly loves her family, never feels a true connection to them and Constantine is the constant source of a nurturing adult figure that teaches Skeeter it is okay to be different. Secondly, not only does a mosquito depend on other living organisms to survive, but it most importantly depends on the blood of other organisms to mix with its own to sustain life. The mixing of food was celebrated, but the mixing of blood or miscegenation is at the root of most racist fears. And while whites despised the notion of mixing blood, creating actual laws such as the 1/16th law, to blacks miscegenation was an assertion of power and regaining of the control whites fight so hard to keep for themselves. Hale states, "And one of the most crucial forms of this cultural freedom was the right to draw from both sides of the color line whites had erected, to stake out the muddled middle and claim a "miscegenated" style" (Hale 38). Creating Skeeter as a creature that thrives on miscegenation proves that this mixing is positive.

The kitchen in the Phelan household asserts something different than both the Leefolt kitchen and Miss Celia's kitchen. The Phelan's kitchen remains a white kitchen with the same unspoken rules and control distinctions already established.

Constantine is still serving the subservient black domestic worker role, yet her wisdom and advice are Skeeter's main source of sanity. Skeeter does grow up to learn the social constructions and rules of Jackson, Mississippi, but what resonates with her the most is what happens inside the kitchen, regardless of her friends, family and other members of Jackson society. For once, Stockett enables the genuine and somewhat equal relationship between white and black women to grow. Just because Skeeter is growing up, does not mean she too stops being colorblind. Skeeter states, "I learned that socks are stealthier transportation than shoes. I learned to use the back door. I learned to wear hats, cover my face with my hands when I passed by. But mostly, I learned to just stay in the kitchen" (Stockett 64). Skeeter is referring to the acts of being a civilized lady that she learned to live amicably in the same household as her mother. But the comfort and ability to act as her true self within the kitchen is not merely an escape from her controlling hegemonic mother, she is delving into the world of possibilities created within the kitchen. Possibilities that stem from the mixing not only literally of the food Constantine creates, but from the loving relationship that focus more on internal qualities, then anything to do with race.

Skeeter experienced harsh name-calling and verbal torture, not because of her race but still because of her appearance. Stockett is not claiming that Skeeter went through the same hurt and pain that blacks in 1960's Jackson went through, but because she was constantly considered an outsider she has the ability to empathize with blacks that other white characters in the novel lack. Also, ironically the only way Skeeter was able to get past the harsh words of her peers was through Constantine, and the advice she learned in the kitchen. Skeeter is reflecting on the first time she remembers someone calling her ugly and she states,

Constantine sat down next to me, at the kitchen table. I heard the cracks of her swollen joints. She pressed her thumb hard into the palm of my hand, something we both knew meant *Listen. Listen to me.*

“Ever morning, until you dead in the ground, you gone have to make this decision.” Constantine was so close, I could see the blackness of her gums. “*You have to ask yourself, Am I gone believe what them fools say about me today?*” (Stockett 63)

Every time, Constantine’s immeasurable wisdom is conveyed, Stockett includes some reference to the kitchen. Stockett, in the Phelan kitchen is exploring even more the notion that black women actually held the power within the kitchen. Yet, again this development is halted; Mrs. Phelan fires Constantine while Skeeter is away at school and she refuses to tell her why. Now, when Skeeter returns home from college she no longer has the love and support from Constantine in the kitchen. Skeeter now has to go to another space, Aibileen’s kitchen.

In conjunction with Skeeter realizing the inequities through Hilly’s bathroom initiative she is also forming a relationship with Aibileen. Skeeter gets a job writing for a local Jackson paper where she has to write a column about household work, providing readers with answers to problems as well as providing tips. Since, Skeeter has no experience with domestic work she turns to Aibileen for advice and the tools to perform domestic work, subsequently the tools to perform as the black domestic workers in the novel.

Stockett understands the complexities within the power distribution between white and blacks as well as the importance the white home and kitchen had within all the above relationships. The white kitchen was a place of racial mixing and where white children at first fostered pure loving relationships and then quickly learned the meaning of whiteness and blackness. The white kitchen was a place of power where even though the white woman was not in the physical space of the kitchen, the action going on in the white kitchen granted them power. They both controlled what the black women did inside of their own kitchens and were granted a life outside of the kitchen. The white kitchen was also a place where slavery practices continued and the plantation lifestyle was maintained. Stockett creates relationships within

these white kitchens that both perform equality and segregation. However, the actions within the black kitchen are where Stockett truly begins to manipulate the dynamics of white and black women. Inside Aibileen's kitchen readers are privy to a world where the food and kitchen act as contested space.

In addition to the relationships between Aibileen and Mae Mobley, Minny and Miss Celia, Hilly's bathroom initiative and the relationship between Skeeter and Constantine, a central part of the plot is when Skeeter, Aibileen, Minny and other black domestic workers join together to write a book exposing the truths of what life was really like for the black help. The writing of this novel, takes place in secret meetings for a long period of time, all within Aibileen's kitchen. Skeeter tries to begin writing the novel in an insignificant room in Aibileen's house. Even though the women are on the same page, there is awkward tension, and nothing actually gets accomplished. When they meet again, Skeeter makes a plea to work in her most comfortable environment, the kitchen. "Could we...sit in the kitchen this time? I ask. Would you mind" (Stockett 149)? In Marcia Blumberg's article, "Domestic Place as Contestatory Space: the Kitchen as Catalyst and Crucible" she explores the roles of white and black women within the kitchen and the importance of authors transforming the kitchen from a place of ideal domesticity to a place of progression and change. In reference to Bobby Baker's *Kitchen Show* and Jeanne Goosen's *Kitchen Blues* she exposes how these women manipulate kitchen norms and "expose and resist stereotypical representations of domesticity and the normative positioning of a woman in the kitchen" (Bobby Baker and Jeanne Goosen qtd. in Blumberg 195). Stockett is doing the same thing within Aibileen's kitchen. There is never any mention of domestic chores, housework or even cooking aside from making tea within Aibileen's kitchen. Aibileen's kitchen is not for food, slavery like practices or rules, it is for unlikely women joining together to challenge the dominant society.

While Aibileen's kitchen lacks food, Stockett incorporates actions and products normally found in a kitchen in other ways. For example, Skeeter wants to

interview another black woman, Eula, but Aibileen knows getting Eula to sufficiently tell her story will be difficult. Aibileen says to Skeeter, “Now, Eula, she gone be like prying a dead clam open” (Stockett 255). Stockett also mentions Skeeter fiercely using her hands, yet instead of chopping or peeling she is typing. Blumberg finds the same instances of the author marking actions with utensils or objects associated with the kitchen and says, “such markings defamiliarize the ordinary and everyday to provoke new perhaps disturbing insight” (197). The kitchen, which has previously been such an immanent aspect of proving gendered, stereotyped and racist like practices still occur, is now transformed into this progressive and forward thinking space. Taking actions and objects from the kitchen, objects and actions that in chapters before reiterate a rigid social construction is Stockett’s way of slowly challenging readers to let go of these previous notions. However, Stockett still grounds this space within reality. Aibileen’s kitchen is not just a fantasy vision aimed to, “operate to re-s/cite a domestic place as multivalent space and to revision kitchen practices and product” (198). Stockett still includes the disturbing but extremely apparent fears these women shared by risking their lives to simply record the truth. She also acknowledges the resistance many of the black help expressed, some because they doubted a white woman, accurately telling their story as well as not having an ulterior motive and that these black women didn’t necessarily want to be activists fighting for equal rights.

Even though Minny is supportive of the book writing throughout the entire process she is the character who expresses the most opposition, not opposition with telling her story but confusion as to what the book was actually aiming to accomplish. Minny states, “I don’t care about eating at a counter with white people. What I care about is, if ten years a white lady will call my girls dirty and accuse them of stealing the silver” (Stockett 218). This statement leads readers to question the point of the book. Is it to gain rights and equality or simply stating how life is? The point, however, is not really important because Stockett is still proving that the black

kitchen fosters an environment where black and white women can finally express themselves, not necessarily to enact changes.

Life inside Aibileen's kitchen, even with the fears and resistance is not exactly a colorblind space, but a space in which color does not govern every day actions. It is a space that readers and the characters in the book cherish but a space that still does not really work within reality. Skeeter says, "I guess I got to go, I say, even though I'd rather spend the rest of my life right here in Aibileen's cozy little kitchen" (313). The messages within the novel may seem confusing as not one relationship stands to trump all. Readers root for the relationships between Aibileen and Mae Mobley and Skeeter and Constantine, readers shun from the pages describing Hilly and the Junior League and readers are left questioning what roles they believe Minny and Miss Celia should obtain. Yet within all the fantasy like romanticized claims, Stockett continually interjects aspects of reality and confusion. Minny states, "See, I think if God had intended for white people and colored people to be this close together for so much of the day, he would've made us colorblind" (215). *The Help*, similarly to the book written inside the novel, is not aimed to be a plea for civil rights activism. Stockett, aware of the criticism and disdain for her choice to write in black dialect states, "I was scared a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature. *The Help* is important when discussing the larger discussion on race in the American South, not because of what it aims to be pretend to be or because of the accuracy of historical events but because of its ability to intimately portray the many complicated relationships, hardships, and realities that both black and white women underwent in the South.

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