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Surviving Scandal: Contemporary French Women Writers and the Perils and Powers of Life Writing

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I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you, our SAMLA members and conference guests. Although the online venue of this year's annual conference departs from our traditional forum, I hope that you will find time to connect with each other over our online platform. Despite the challenges we have faced in these pandemic times, I applaud the efforts of everyone in our association who has contributed to the success of our annual meeting. Indeed, our conference this year might not have taken place were it not for the hard work and impeccable planning of so many. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our ever-resourceful Associate Director, Dr. Dan Abitz, who had the foresight to propose, and in fact made possible, our move to a virtual venue for our conference, a decision that I think we all agree was the safest and sagest. I am also incredibly grateful for the support and guidance of our Executive Committee, including our new Executive Director, Dr. LeeAnne M. Richardson; Conference Manager, Esther Stuart; Production and Design Manager, Donna Pennington; and all of our conference support staff including Shannon Lee, Shari L. Arnold, Mike Saye, and graduate students from Georgia State University.

I would also like to recognize my colleagues, mentors, and friends from the organization Women in French, and especially Cathy Leung and E. Nicole Meyer, who generously offered their insight to help me select our conference theme. As you might imagine, this opportunity presented the exciting challenge of making links between my research interests and the diverse academic fields and backgrounds of our organization's members. While I considered the many thematic possibilities that arose during brainstorming sessions, the topic of scandal seemed an especially fruitful terrain to explore. The multifold questions spurred by our engagement with this topic invite us to think

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through the optics of scandal, provocation, transgression, and rebellion: what defines scandal? In what ways do texts (literary, theoretical, and linguistic) break with canonical codes and traditions to challenge societal norms and to offer alternate readings of experience? In what ways and to what ends have scandals served as the springboard for creation? How do scandals elevate the visibility of individuals and communities? To what degree does creation depend on getting out of one's comfort zone?

In fact, my very first SAMLA presentation focused on the controversial French filmmaker Catherine Breillat whose films such as *A Real Young Girl* [*Une vraie jeune fille*] (1976), *Romance* (1999), and *Anatomy of Hell* [*Anatomie de l'enfer*] (2004) were subject to censorship and media outrage. At the time that Breillat was rediscovered by mainstream audiences and film scholars in the mid-1990s, several other women filmmakers and writers, such as Catherine Cusset (*Jouir*, 1997), Virginie Despentes (*Baise-moi*, 1994), and Catherine Millet (*La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, 2001), to name only a few, were also breaking ground in French culture for their shocking artistic productions in which they explored several provocative aspects of women's identity—"shocking" and "provocative" if only because women writers were entering uncharted territory in their frank discussions and graphic representations of women's agency and sexuality, as Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye note in their introduction to *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*, "in much more provocative and pornographic terms that contrast with the safer, affirmative spaces of female desire evoked [by writers of previous generations]" (11).

I am buoyed that our conference theme, "Scandal! Literature and Provocation: Breaking Rules, Making Texts," resonates with so many of you. Your panels and papers demonstrate the wide range of media, literary texts, historical periods, cultural experiences, and social concerns that are steeped in and shaped by controversy. I am intrigued by your contributions on this topic as we reflect throughout this conference on transgression, celebrity scandals, scandalous adaptations, resistance, parody, rage, trauma, confrontation, rebellion, plagiarism, fraud and imposters, crime and criminality, and censorship and subversion in relation to identity, language, bodies, gender, and race.

In their article "The Scandal as Test," ["Le Scandale comme épreuve"] sociologists Damien de Blic and Cyril Lemieux remind us of the moral dimension implied in the etymology of "scandal" from the Greek "*skandalon*," defined as an obstacle or a stumbling block (14).¹ As such, they note, it is "a contradiction to social norms which becomes public," or "a public, troubling, and contradictory fact, which sets an obstacle

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before collective beliefs and sows dissent” (14). Blic and Lemieux also observe that:

scandal . . . never leaves things as they were. It leads to repositionings, to a redistribution of institutional cards, and to a radical challenge to established relationships . . . It often leads to organizational reforms, to a creation of new legal systems, and to the collective validation of unprecedented practices.
(11-12)

The authors draw on the work of John B. Thompson, who, in *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, underlines the importance of visibility and public disapproval that goes hand-in-hand with controversy. Scandals, Thompson asserts, are based on speech acts: “a scandal can arise only if the tacit agreement which keeps gossip and rumor at the level of a private communication among friends or acquaintances is broken and the revelations [. . .] are articulated in public” (20-21). Blic and Lemieux, again referring to Thompson’s work, also note that:

Scandal necessarily implies, like its reverse, a secret or concealing dimension. By definition, there is no scandal as long as the transgression remains secret. In short, a scandal arises as a ‘drama of concealment and exposure,’ and as a consequence requires that we know to interpret it as a process of ‘making visible.’ (21)

As we examine nuanced aspects of such “dramas of concealment and exposure,” it becomes clear that scandals reveal the structures and regimes of power that silence vulnerable individuals and communities. In this regard, breaking rules can be seen as an action necessary to challenge societal norms, to dismantle monolithic mores, to depart from canonical codes, and to offer alternative accounts of experience. Whether intentionally provocative or interpreted as disruptive, controversy ignites debate, creates productive dialogue, and through this, facilitates catharsis and reform.

I turn now to explore the perils and powers of life writing in the works of several contemporary French women writers to consider how stories of the self create, respond to, or are shaped by scandal. Self-narratives, such as autobiography and the especially murky territory of autofiction, expose purported truths about personal experience and identity. Self-revelation in such accounts positions these texts as potential objects of controversy as authors test the limits of telling all.

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Inasmuch as personal narratives very often call our attention to the less-considered stories of others, scandal, the revelation of secrets, and other expressions and modes of provocation powerfully impact our relation between self and other. Many authors have turned to life-writing practices to speak about intimate loss, family secrets, stolen childhoods, and physical, psychological, or historical trauma. In this way, life writing is always a perilous terrain, especially regarding the implications of others on which such self-accounts unavoidably depend. Indeed, contemporary debates surrounding authenticity and ethical responsibility with regard to writing the self and other often overshadow the commercial success of such works. Writers such as Christine Angot (*Les Petits*, 2012), Catherine Breillat (*Abus de faiblesse*, 2013), Marcela Iacub (*Belle et bête*, 2013) and Camille Laurens (*L'Amour, roman*, 2003) have in fact all faced legal action for invasion of privacy as their respective works disclose personal details about the real lives of their fictional and autofictional characters.

Another dimension to this topic includes whether or not authors have the right to use the first-person narrative voice, as purveyor of veracity, to write fictional accounts of traumas they have not lived. This was the polemic raised by Camille Laurens in 2007 following the publication of Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom est mort*, a novel in which Darrieussecq pens a fictional account of a woman who experiences the death of her young son. Laurens's widely commented response to Darrieussecq's novel, "Marie Darrieussecq, ou Le syndrome du coucou," which appeared in *La Revue littéraire*, set in motion what could be described as a metatextual scandal, one that dominated the start of the literary season in France and divided journalists, critics, and readers alike.² In this essay, Laurens, shocked by Darrieussecq's usurpation of the theme of a deceased child (a loss that Darrieussecq did not actually experience but only imagined), accused Darrieussecq of "psychic plagiarism" and observed in *Tom est mort* an inexcusable appropriation of a trauma that has had lasting effects on Laurens's psyche: the loss of her newborn son, Philippe, about which she wrote in her 1995 text of the same name. Following a nearly three-year hiatus both writers returned to the literary scene in 2010 with two works that directly evoked this scandal: Darrieussecq's *Rapport de police* (2010), a nonfictional study of the history of plagiarism spanning literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis and Laurens's *Romance nerveuse* (2010), an autofictional novel in which the first-person narrator (Laurens), along with her inner voice (Ruel) reflects on these contentious events. For Laurens, writing this work reignited her outrage and shame and so became a springboard for discussing other past traumas that she (via her autofictional surrogates) feels called to write. These include reliv-

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ing the death of Philippe, being abandoned by her editor, and revealing memories of childhood sexual abuse about which she had written, albeit in passing, in some of her previous works.

Significantly, disclosures of personal trauma and sexual abuse in several contemporary memoirs have also found a mobilizing energy in the #MeToo movement. Speaking from a position of survivor and advocate has allowed writers to divulge their “uncomfortable” truths in a gesture of solidarity, as a call for justice, and for personal catharsis. In Vanessa Springora’s 2020 memoir, *Le Consentement* [Consent], for example, she discusses her relationship with writer Gabriel Matzneff, which began when she was fourteen and he nearly fifty. Springora’s account has exposed Matzneff’s history of sexually abusing minors, and this despite Matzneff’s own confessions of pedophilia in some of his earlier writings. Springora’s text has paved the way for justice as it has led to a criminal investigation and pending trial.

In another example, *Tu t’appelais Maria Schneider* [Your Name Was Maria Schneider] (2018), journalist Vanessa Schneider writes about her now-deceased cousin who was vilified in the press following the release of Bertolucci’s controversial film from 1972, *Last Tango in Paris*. Schneider writes on behalf of Maria to speak out about the actress’s exploitation while filming simulated sex scenes and an unscripted scene of simulated sodomy. No one at the time considered Maria’s experience of violation and shame, one which, Schneider shares, changed the course of the actress’s life, sending her on a downward spiral of drug addiction and reclusion. Speaking to and for Maria in this memoir, Schneider considers the scandal that eclipsed the actress’s life and relates her experience from a post-#MeToo perspective, writing: “Le monde occidental, en cet automne 2016, semble découvrir les violences faites aux femmes et les abus exercés par certains artistes sur de très jeunes filles. . . . L’heure n’est plus au silence. La parole a supplanté la honte” (221). [“The Western world, in this autumn of 2016, seems to be uncovering the violence committed against women and the abuse exerted over very young girls. . . . The hour is no longer for silence. Speaking has replaced shame.” (my translation)]

One final and extended example I share in this context of life writing and surviving scandal includes my ongoing work on actress, filmmaker, and author Eva Ionesco, which focuses on Ionesco’s reinvention of self in the aftermath of scandal following revelations of secrets and childhood trauma. Eva Ionesco’s story is an especially complex and layered one, shaped by a number of troubling factors such as a premature exposure to sexuality, an unhealthy relationship with her mother, and a belated mourning of a father whom she barely knew; she has written and directed two autobiographically inspired films, *My Little Princess*

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(2010) and *Une jeunesse dorée* [*Golden Youth*] (2019), and has written an autobiographical novel, *Innocence* (2017). As all of these works explore her personal experience with scandal, Ionesco demonstrates the reparative potential of life writing. Her work charts a path towards healed autonomy that depends on revisiting childhood wounds and delving into multi-generational family secrets. In short, Ionesco has harnessed the scandal of her childhood to write an account of survival.

The childhood memoir is already a complex subset of autobiography, due in part to the fluid and fragmented nature of memory work; writing about a traumatic childhood presents its own unique set of challenges to the autobiographer. In *Contested Childhood*, Kate Douglas asserts that, “[t]raumatic autobiography has had a radical effect on the way childhood can be depicted autobiographically” (85). As these life narratives explore memories of a child-as-victim while bearing witness to the adult-as-survivor, writers are faced with questions of self-representation in the textual modalities they choose to frame their stories, particularly when such self-disclosure is open to public scrutiny. Douglas considers, for example, how such writers must vouch for the veracity of their survival testimony and are often called to speak for others:

A performance of authorship is demanded from autobiographers of childhood, particularly traumatic autobiographers, as a means of authenticating their narrative. For instance the author of a traumatic childhood must write and speak in interviews as a survivor who is at once a creative adult, a unique individual, and a representative individual who is able to bring his or her child self back to life in ways that will be productive beyond the individual. (83)

Moreover, remembering the scars of childhood inevitably places the story of self in dialogue with the story of the (abusive) other. These narratives must therefore navigate “the contradictory but necessary forces of blame and forgiveness” that “coexist in much autobiographical writing about childhood” (Douglas 28). Nonetheless, by engaging in such a performance of authorship the survivor-writer may re-claim her self-worth by revisiting devastating memories in the textual haven she creates.

Ionesco’s celebrity within French culture stems foremost from her scandalous and sexualized public image during her childhood and adolescence in the 1970s. Since the early 2000s, after the judicial system denied her earlier lawsuits that she filed against her mother in the mid-1990s, Ionesco has assumed a more authoritative role in writing her his-

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tory as she breaks her silence about her stolen childhood and revisits memories from this period in her filmic and textual self-adaptations.

Ionesco has relied on two distinct modalities—filmic and textual—to probe the fragments of her childhood and in so doing answers the transformative call to creation that imbues self-narration with the task of re-appropriating one's past. *My Little Princess* maintains a comparatively limited temporal scope as the narrative focuses solely on the span of childhood through adolescence to highlight a daughter's toxic relationship with her mother, while *Innocence* attempts a more comprehensive life review. This latter text builds on several episodes shared in *My Little Princess*, thereby authenticating her childhood experience recounted in the film, and importantly includes the voice of Ionesco's adult self-as-narrator in her efforts to understand her place within a fractured family. Most notably, *Innocence* considers the previously unmentioned significance of her father's past and secret identity as she works through a process of belated mourning.

Writing about childhood trauma, as Douglas asserts, “[is] a means via which the previously disempowered person (in this instance, the child) can ‘write back’ (as an adult) after the fact, to offer a revised version of events” (107). As we shall see, the timeline of Ionesco's authorship of film and novel suggests a type of writing back to her mother and to her child self. In the first example, the filmic reply provides the most appropriate space for restaging unsettling scenes that demonstrate her mother's coercive control and conditional love. In the second example, the textual memoir overwrites the fictions her mother created and allows the adult narrator the textual means necessary for filling in the gaps of self-knowledge on which her child identity was built.

Ionesco's self-image, formed in and depicted from a number of angles—photographic, filmic, and literary—owes its fissures foremost to the disturbing and complicated relationship between Eva and her mother, Irina Ionesco, who produced, exhibited, and sold semi-pornographic images of her daughter beginning when Eva was four years old. At age ten, Eva appeared nude in an Italian edition of *Playboy*, and began a rather controversial career as a child actress with roles in Roman Polanski's 1976 film *The Tenant*, Charles Matton's *Spermula*, a softcore fantasy film, and Pier Giuseppe Murgia's 1977 film *Maladolescenza*, banned by several countries for simulated sex scenes involving underage children. In 1977, then twelve-years old, she was placed in the care of social services and was later hospitalized after attempting suicide. At the age of sixteen she was legally emancipated from her mother. Ionesco, it would seem, has always been her mother's unconsenting muse, if not pawn—transformed into a sexualized object stylized to

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appeal to predatory benefactors, commodified for her mother's monetary gain, and exploited in her mother's quest for artistic fame.

In 2004, despite ongoing lawsuits that Eva filed against her mother in her attempts to recuperate these photographs and ban any further sales or exhibits, Irina released a phototext with images curated from Irina's exhibit at the Nikon gallery in Paris in 1974 both titled *Eva: Éloge de ma fille*. Irina's actions clearly defy Eva's wishes and in a sense re-victimize her by perpetuating the objectified child images that deny Eva the control that she seeks to reclaim. Also in 2004, Irina published an autobiographical fiction, *The Doll's Eye [L'Oeil de la poupée]*, written in collaboration with Marie Desjardins, a work that she suggestively dedicates to her daughter, "for the memory of the memory" ["pour le souvenir du souvenir"] (7). Curiously, however, Irina's story is tellingly one-sided and makes no mention of Eva or even Irina's identity as a mother. It is in this third-person account that Irina, via her fictional surrogate Isa, revisits her own childhood to explore several traumatic experiences: living in Romania during the Second World War; being separated from her mother and father, which is experienced as abandonment; and harboring an especially shameful family secret: her identity as a child of incest born to her sister, Margot, who became pregnant by their stepfather. Margot abandons Isa, leaving her in the care of her mother (Isa's grandmother) Manie. Manie's Eastern European origins and her deep religious beliefs render her wary of Isa, the illegitimate child of incest, whom she considers "contaminée" and "le produit d'une alchimie maudite" ["the product of a cursed alchemy"] (17, 127). The timing of the release of both of Irina's projects may be considered, therefore, as Irina's public mode of addressing her daughter to somehow justify her harmful mothering in the wake of ongoing legal proceedings.

Another motivating factor for Ionesco's writing of her life account may be found in her husband's (Simon Liberati's) fictional biography, *Eva* (2015), a label most probably applied as a result of Irina's lawsuit that she filed against him (unsuccessfully), alleging an invasion of privacy. In *Eva*, Liberati narrativizes their love story as a series of fated encounters; he opens an investigation into Eva's performative life, distinguishing between the Eva he knows and *Eva*, the persona and product of her mother's camera. In the latter part of the text, Liberati moves to the darker spots of Eva's past, including a genealogy fractured by incest. Liberati speaks to the ways in which an adult Eva bears the scars of childhood trauma, such as her present-day eccentricities of modifying her voice to speak in a child-like manner, posing salaciously in front of a mirror as part of her daily routine, and playing dress up, as well as her fear of bright lights, outbursts of rage, and her suicide attempts in the early 2000s. In some ways Liberati acts as Eva's analyst;

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in order to get more information from her for his writing he probes her and wants to push the limits of what she explored in her fictional film. In so doing the act of scriptotherapy—what Suzette Henke terms “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” remains at this juncture relegated to the writing of an other (*Shattered Subjects* xii). Eva’s initial resistance stems understandably from having to assume once more the position of muse or model wherein her self-image threatens to escape her control and risks attributing to Liberati the role that her mother held. Nonetheless, the archival relics and memory scraps of Eva’s life that Ionesco and Liberati review together as he writes past the blind spots in Ionesco’s film, seem to inspire her quest for self-discovery that she develops in her own autobiographical novel.

It is perhaps unsurprising that *My Little Princess* assumes a distanced approach to Ionesco’s presentation of her childhood as it recasts her life account onto a fictional film, or what Ionesco has described in numerous interviews as a “fairy tale,” and privileges the prism of fiction for retelling her past: “*My Little Princess* est très en dessous de ce que j’ai vécu [. . .] Je n’aurais pas été capable de raconter cette histoire sur un mode réaliste, ça aurait été trop insupportable pour le spectateur, mais aussi pour moi.”³ [*My Little Princess* is much more understated than what I lived. I would not have been able to tell this story in a realistic manner; it would have been too unbearable for the audience and also for me” (my translation).] Likewise, as Kate Ince notes, the choice of visual medium remains a significant one as an adult Ionesco looks back on her child self: “The emotional abuse she suffered as a child was committed in images in the first place, and her story is one that could not have been as effectively told in any other medium” (115). Indeed, the visual medium in many ways is the only one that can re-create the harmful one-sided maternal gaze as detrimental to a child’s attainment of whole subjectivity. As Marianne Hirsch observes in a chapter of her work *Family Frames* that focuses on the mother-as-photographer of her children:

The mother with a camera . . . engages in a more active and controlling form of looking. . . . The child looking at the mother’s camera sees herself reflected in a lens, an instrument, an apparatus, not an eye. That lens transfers the child’s image to paper, and then, on the paper, the child can read the mother’s reflecting work, a work which necessarily displays the mother’s vision controlling the child’s. (157)

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The film form enables Ionesco to see herself as an other—to take charge behind the camera, thus usurping her mother’s destructive gaze while she re-visualizes the scenes of her exploitation. The film’s narrative allows Ionesco to tell her story on her terms, and she makes two important changes to the reality that she lived. These modifications center on Ionesco’s fictional on-screen double, Violetta Giurgiu, played by then ten-year-old actress Anamaria Vartolomei (a character who is significantly older than Ionesco when her mother began photographing her) and Violetta’s ability to address Hannah (played by Isabelle Huppert) as “maman,” a word that is never uttered in her textual account. These two alterations demonstrate, firstly, Ionesco’s mindfulness of the dangers of repeating the same victimization she experienced with her child actress and, secondly, the co-existing tensions between forgiveness and blame that the film cannot resolve.

In particular, the scenes of posing, as might be expected, lend special insight into the scandal of harmful mothering. The *mise-en-scène* visually translates Hannah’s narcissistic self-projection onto Violetta, Violetta’s shattered self-reflection, and the deeply stifling relationship between mother and daughter. Such staging of the maternal gaze shows that it is only accessible to Violetta through the lens of her mother’s camera; posing for her mother is thus the only way for Violetta to exist for Hannah. Moreover Violetta agrees to keep their sessions a secret, in a dialogue that recalls the testimony of survivors of sexual abuse: “Tu ne dis rien à Mamie, c’est un secret entre nous. Elle ne comprendrait pas.” [“Don’t say anything to Mamie. It’s a secret between us. She wouldn’t understand ” (my translation).] This maternal injunction further tightens Hannah’s control over Violetta in their dangerous artistic coupling and creates an internalized sense of shame whereby Violetta has no recourse to a necessary third party to intervene on her behalf.

Violetta’s privileged perspective in the film allows us to see a child struggling to find her place within the family and within the social fabric of what should be a “normal” childhood. It is therefore telling that each of the scenes of posing is juxtaposed with Violetta at school, where her private identity construction as Lolita-like muse bleeds into the public sphere. Her appearance at school (with platinum, permed hair and heavy makeup and dressed in provocative clothing) draws a clear contrast with that of her peers and carries traces of the costumes she wears for Hannah. She is bullied and mocked by her classmates when her obscene photographs are discovered. Violetta’s growing resistance to her mother places her in an untenable situation. Even if these portraits are the only means to her mother’s attention and affection, she develops an increasing awareness of Hannah putting her in unsafe situations (going so far as to physically force Violetta to allow one of

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Hannah's clients to touch her during a session) and that Hannah's love is conditional.

Violetta's developing self-awareness also stems from her growing concerns about the long-lasting ramifications of their artistic "collaboration." In a conversation in which Violetta describes their relationship as "incestuous" and explicitly tells her mother that she no longer wishes to "play," her mother dismisses Violetta's complaints and focuses instead on the importance of her art. Hannah denies any responsibility in sexually exploiting her child and reminds Violetta that whether she likes it or not, the images depicted in the photographs are forever etched in the memory of those who have seen them. This exchange brings together two elements of abuse, both of which hinge on consent, and this film like other narratives of abuse, inscribes dialogue between abuser and survivor, struggling between accusation and forgiveness.

Although Eva Ionesco experienced a degree of catharsis in filming *My Little Princess*, the film meets certain limitations of lived experience that remain under- and unexplored. Her textual account, *Innocence*, written from her adult perspective, therefore allows a deeper exploration of family fissures and offers a scriptural suturing of the subjective wounds opened in the process of putting together her film. The relational aspect of this life narrative demonstrates the interpenetration of stories linking a daughter's autobiography to her mother's past and to the even more dispersed traces of her previously unmentioned, absent, and now deceased father. As such, this work straddles the divide between filiation and disaffiliation, aspects of which Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson outline in their consideration of "new-model narratives of family," those authored "by a son or daughter whose parent was remote, unavailable, abusive, or absent" (154-156). These contemporary memoirs include, Smith and Watson note, stories of "detection in which the son or daughter conducts a journey to discover the story of the lost or abandoning parent," often including archival research in such quests; they may be motivated by "imaginative reaffiliation" in a pull toward establishing intimacy with the absent parent figure; finally, in "narratives of disaffiliation" the memoirist may expose the scandal of faulty parenting and voice revenge (155).

In *Innocence*, a title that alludes both to her unknowing child self and marks self-exoneration from lingering shame, Eva Ionesco attempts to organize her life story as the first-person narrator, named Eva, reflects on her earliest childhood memories, beginning in 1967, through the present of writing in 2017. *Innocence* thus performs as a memoir-masked-as-novel wherein experience, dialogue, and the orchestration of life material remain under the life writer's control. This

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generic nuance bestows empowerment on the author of a fictionalized life account of childhood trauma.

The novel, in these cases, can be read as what Philippe Gasparini calls a “site of sincerity,” especially when the narrative probes, as Ionesco’s does, family secrets and mourning. Gasparini asserts, for example:

Plutôt qu’édifier une fiction gratifiante, le sujet, miné par le mensonge ou le silence de son entourage, poursuit la vérité à tout prix. Le récit postule que la douleur de savoir et de dire est préférable à l’ignorance, car elle permet de se détacher du passé. Ce travail de mémoire motive et légitime l’écriture aux yeux du lecteur. Il en va de même en ce qui concerne l’écriture du deuil. (269)

[Instead of constructing a gratifying fictional work, the author, worn down by the lies or silence of one’s family, pursues the truth at any cost. The narrative posits that the pain of knowing and speaking out is preferable to ignorance because it allows one to break from the past. This memory work motivates and legitimizes writing in the eyes of the reader (my translation).]

It is precisely against her mother’s lies and silence regarding her father that Eva pursues a quest for truth, a call to writing a text that bares all about her family as she discloses her mother’s painful secrets, including her mother’s incestuous origins and childhood abandonment, as well as her father’s dark past in the Second World War, and, certainly, her own sexualized childhood—all of which allows Eva to properly recognize and mourn her father while also exposing the perverse mothering of which she was a victim.

Her unassimilated memories are further fragmented by competing layers of unconscious and conscious scraps that no one can verify or help her puzzle out. This admission of unreliable narration serves to validate the veracity of her account given the disquieting scenes that are recounted. Important memory objects come to the fore in this work, most of which are tied to her father, who is affectionately remembered as “papa.” These include his notebook, post cards that she wrote to him, and family photographs, all carefully curated by Irène. Curiously absent from this censored collection are any traces that would allow Eva to identify him. Eva recalls that this album was stored in Irène’s closet and that only she, Irène, would choose when and if Eva could access it. Irène thus maintains complete control over Eva’s father’s life narrative through the stories she chooses to pass on to Eva, revealing half-lies and disturbing truths about his life: that he is a spy and was an

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SS officer, that he lives in Germany, and that he did not want to pass on his last name to Eva. Irène also announces his death to Eva two years too late and claims to have forgotten where he is buried, depriving Eva of participating in bereavement rites that attenuate mourning. Eva must disentangle these stories as she seeks to recover her memories and his truths. Although Eva's child self does not understand his absence from their lives, she suspects that her mother's erratic behavior and outbursts of rage drove him away and that her mother prevents him from seeing her. Her sympathies clearly lie with her father, who, she imagines, sits alone, heartbroken over their separation. Eva conjures his phantom-like presence throughout her childhood as a source of protection. She recalls seeing him in crowds on the street as a child; as an adult, she re-visits the places where she last saw him in the hopes of meeting anyone who could provide more information.

Although *Innocence* grants much narrative space to the absent presence of her deceased father, it is unavoidable that Eva's childhood could be discussed without mention of her mother. Here, Ionesco amplifies certain events from her film narrative. For example, Irène prevents Eva from forming any childhood friendships, withholds money from Mamie unless Eva agrees to pose for her, emotionally blackmails Eva by threatening to photograph other young girls, and lends Eva (as an object) to a male photographer who photographs Eva and another girl performing sexual acts.

Innocence remains Ionesco's explicit way to settle accounts with her mother, exposing in extended scenes the magnitude of her mother's predatory-like behavior, revealing the imbalance in their relationship, magnifying the sexualization of her child body in these posing sessions, and articulating violent encounters between daughter and mother. Through dialogue, Eva quotes her mother to potently capture the perversion of her speech. To give just one example, Eva recites her mother's pet names for her genitalia to justify the horror she feels when her mother decides to pursue their exhibition. Eva continually expresses disgust at her mother's actions, and describes her self-loathing, acts of self-harm, and shame triggered by Eva's sense of powerlessness in view of her mother's growing fame and the media scandal that these images provoked.

Writing and filmmaking have allowed Eva Ionesco to take ownership of and to reclaim power over her stolen images and her lost childhood innocence in the two separate media of which she was previously a prisoner: image and text. Writing in the aftermath of the scandals that have shaped her life, Ionesco speaks out against what would certainly be considered abuse. As such, the fictional label applied to this

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self-account of trauma grants her text the authority of survivor testimony and further generates empathy in the reader.

To conclude, the genre of life writing is uniquely positioned to engage with the “drama[s] of concealment and exposure” that stoke scandal (Thompson 21). In their introduction to *Women’s Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*, Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye observe that “life-writing is a genre that has long been associated with female-authored works in their discernible emphasis on the intimate spaces of the self” (13). Given the profound intimacy at the core of these accounts of subjective and traumatic experiences, life writing indeed remains an especially thorny domain as it draws attention to the tension between public and private discourse. The risks and rewards of writing such revealing texts, whether to respond to accusations, to effect change, or to legitimize catharsis, depend foremost on getting out of one’s comfort zone and exposing one’s own vulnerable self to further scrutiny. These examples allow us to consider the extent to which one can re-envision and re-write traumatic events and the methods of self-adaptation served by a textual exploration of memory work. Harnessing life writing as a means of engaging with and exposing scandals allows for degrees of self-discovery in the process of narrativizing a traumatic past and so demonstrates the power of life writing in the aftermath of scandal.

Notes

1. The translation of this article from the French is furnished by JPD Systems.
2. For the full article, see Camille Laurens, “Marie Darrieussecq ou le syndrome du coucou.” *Revue littéraire*, no. 32, 2007, pp. 1-14.
3. « Isabelle Huppert dans *My Little Princess*. » *Elle*, <www.elle.fr/Loisirs/Cinema/Dossiers/Isabelle-Huppert-dans-My-little-princess-1631026>. Accessed 01 Oct 2020.

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Morrison's Call for Sisterhood and Unity in *God Help the Child*

Hannah Burdge

In Toni Morrison's final publication, *The Source of Self Regard*, her short essay titled "Cinderella's Stepsisters" examines women who abuse other women in the name of self-preservation and advancement, imploring the reader not to participate in the enslavement of one's "stepsisters." She takes the well-known story of Cinderella as a starting place and uses the models of female relationships presented in the fairytale as a framework that illustrates contemporary systems of oppression within our current generation of women, insisting that inter-female abuse "is not a wholly medieval problem. It is quite a contemporary one" (Morrison 111). Morrison focuses primarily on the stepsisters' complicity in the oppression of Cinderella, reminding the reader of the Grimm brothers' descriptions of their beauty, class status, and intelligence in order to avoid painting them as purely evil and detestable characters (110). They merely imitate and comply with their mother, who also very well could have been a victim of abuse herself, and her administration of abuse. For the rest of the essay, Morrison turns her attention to the future, outside the realms of the fairytale's reach, asking this guiding question: "Having watched and participated in the violent domination of another woman, will [the stepsisters] be any less cruel when it comes their turn to enslave other children, or even when they are required to take care of their own mother?" (110).

The application of this fundamental question not only sheds new light on classical folklore that is embedded in our society, but also unlocks new meaning for contemporary and often misunderstood texts such as *God Help the Child*, Morrison's latest novel published in 2015. I intend to expand upon Manuela López Ramírez's model of using folk and fairy tale lore as a structure for examination of *God Help the Child* as she does so in her piece, "Racialized Beauty: The Ugly Duckling in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*." By using "Cinderella's Stepsisters," I will examine the female relationships in *God Help the Child* in light of the abuse Cinderella endures at the hands of her stepsisters. Morrison's final oeuvre deals entirely with systems of abuse and the ways oppression is passed on, highlighting figures who participate in these sys-

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tems through their complicity, especially with regard to inter-female relationships.

When one applies the framework of “Cinderella’s Stepsisters” to *God Help the Child*, Morrison’s plea of female solidarity is unveiled to completely saturate the novel from start to finish. Through each female character, Morrison shows the ways that women undermine and enslave each other in the workplace, in friendships, and even in interactions with complete strangers, all for the sake of self-benefit. Morrison exposes the concept of “sisterhood” to be a rather messy and complicated yet essential endeavor, suggesting that in order to take in our differences and disagreements with full stride, we must truly listen to one another’s experiences so that we may make room for collective growth and healing.

For the sake of this essay, I will use the terms “stepsister” and “sisterhood” because these are the terms that Morrison uses in “Cinderella’s Stepsisters.” However, I do so with the understanding that what Morrison suggests is not to ignore our differences in experience, but rather, to create an all-inclusive celebration of womanhood and support of one another that holds genuine reverence for every facet of all forms of diversity. It is imperative that this idea of sisterhood is not confused with the grouping-in of all women of divergent backgrounds under the same umbrella of unity through overlooking our differences in race, experience, and ancestral histories. As Audre Lorde points out, white women frequently subsume their own experiences together with the experiences of all women, ignoring “differences in race, sexual preference, class, and age” (Lorde 116). She argues that the issue with the term *sisterhood* is that it suggests a “homogeneity of experience” and Lorde contends that this collective similarity in experience simply does not exist (48). Although the scholarship available pertaining to *God Help the Child* is sparse, what *does* exist largely deals with aesthetics of blackness in the novel, such as works by Manuela López Ramírez, Fatoumata Keita and Tamara Jovović. The presence of conversation surrounding the importance of race in Morrison’s work serves as obvious evidence that she did not mean to imply any form of colorblindness when using the term “sisterhood.” In fact, Delphine Gras demonstrates exactly how Morrison openly *challenges* any idea that the U.S. has entered into a post-race era in her article, “Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*.” Therefore, while using the term “sisterhood,” it is of utmost importance to recognize that one’s stepsisters do not share the same experiences simply because they share the same sexual organs. Buying into the ideology that women are inherently the same due to this scientific reasoning is equal to the act of subscribing to the patriarchy that attempts to group us to-

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gether as a method of coercing control. Honoring each other's uniqueness rather than blotting it out to find common ground works to fortify the unspoken "sisterly" bond available for all women to share. It is our multiple perspectives, when shared and considered, that strengthen the women's movement as a whole, for "unacknowledged class differences rob women of each other's energy and creative insight" (Lorde 116).

Morrison conveys this message in the novel by providing a multiplicity of female perspectives in order for the reader to see the sundry ways female abuse is passed on, internalized, and finally overcome. Brooklyn serves as an example of a woman who abuses another woman due to her own toxic jealousy and latent racism. Sofia's character shows both the effects of harboring traumas of the past within the self as well as the idea that healing is achievable but is not always reached in clean and conventional ways. Rain, although she also struggles with an ignorant sort of racism and desires to murder those around her, is finally allowed to be able to talk about her experience and release some of the trauma that she had previously been forced to keep to herself. Finally, Queen—a woman who by no means is free of flaws or regrets—welcomes Bride into her own home with open arms, fostering an environment of sharing, understanding, healing, and growth. Through these characters, Morrison demonstrates that systems of abuse among women are only broken when women provide magnanimous support for one another, learning from the experiences that are to be shared, and letting these stories transform the self in order to cultivate a greater practice of empathic nurturing within inter-female relationships.

In *God Help the Child*, Brooklyn's presence serves to illustrate Morrison's alarm at the professional, competitive, and emotional violence that women do to one another (Morrison, "Stepsisters" 111). While she is first introduced as Bride's faithful friend who comes to the rescue after Sofia's "attack," the reader gradually comes to the understanding that Brooklyn is not much of a friend to Bride at all. Brooklyn creates an inner dialogue that centers around Bride and continues throughout the novel. She barely talks about herself, with the exception of a short paragraph on her own experience of hardship, although this too takes place within a critique of Bride: "I ran away, too, Bride, but I was fourteen and there was nobody to take care of me so I invented myself, toughened myself. I thought you did too except when it came to boyfriends" (140). Brooklyn never opens the door for emotional vulnerability by sharing her personal experiences directly with Bride, nor does she make room to take in the true story of Bride's own suffering. Bride lies to Brooklyn about what really happened with Sofia, perhaps because she does not feel safe to share her experience and believes that

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Brooklyn would be more interested in passing judgment rather than offering support.

It is ironic that Brooklyn immediately assumes that Bride is a victim of rape—a crime done at the hands of a man rather than a woman—because she herself is complicit in the patriarchal structure of society by striving to dominate Bride professionally, competitively, and emotionally. In “Cinderella’s Stepsisters,” Morrison explains, “feminine power when directed at other women has historically been wielded in what has been described as a ‘masculine manner’” (111). It is a way of claiming dominance and moving up in the world socially, economically, and politically since it is indeed a “man’s world.” Because power and success have been defined as masculine traits (as is the case for both the male and female sexes), overt dominance becomes the only perceived way of achieving higher status of any form. Brooklyn oftentimes subtly enforces this dominance over Bride through a range of microaggressions and passive-aggressive comments, spanning from expressing interest in taking over Bride’s position at Sylvia Inc. (26) to seducing Booker (unsuccessfully) “just for fun” (59). Additionally, in Brooklyn’s final chapter, she essentially reduces Bride to a “Beautiful dumb bitch” who after “One fight with a crazy felon . . . surrendered, stupid enough to quit the best job in the world” (140). This kind of behavior leads López Ramírez to compare Brooklyn with the fairy tale character Goldilocks, who is “motivated by selfishness, taking what does not belong to her” (182). While Brooklyn only looks out for herself, Bride is still under the illusion that her intentions are genuine (Morrison 44). Bride even believes that she “couldn’t have healed without Brooklyn,” although she *does* note that her friend’s phone calls are “fewer and fewer” (57). Bride’s lack of understanding for Brooklyn’s true intentions displays not so much a sort of ignorance, but rather, the sorry state of the average female relationship in today’s society. That is, Bride may not recognize Brooklyn’s toxic behavior simply because she does not know what a true, healthy friendship looks like. In this manner, Morrison uses Brooklyn to expose this specific pernicious behavior that is complicit with patriarchy in order to invoke self-reflective thought in her female readers, bringing to light the multidimensional effects of microaggressions and inter-female competitiveness and domination.

Brooklyn’s problematic relationship with Bride may leave the reader feeling that there is no hope for female reconciliation, but Morrison proves time and time again through other characters in the novel that this is certainly not the case. For instance, the anomalous narrative that Bride and Sofia Huxley share is a rough illustration of the way healing is sometimes achieved in rather round-about and messy ways. In the beginning of their exchange, Lula Ann unknowingly enslaved her

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“stepsister” as a direct result of the abuse that she herself had experienced at the hands of Sweetness; she was desperately willing to do anything—even send an innocent woman to prison for twenty years—in order to earn her mother’s affection. Moreover, Lula Ann’s lie was only the beginning of Sofia’s long fifteen years of abuse in prison—an environment that was “packed with mistreated women and take-no-shit guards” who enforced their masculinity through physical beatings of the inmates (65). While Bride had intentions of mending Sofia’s hurt through offering gifts of material possessions, Sofia’s “fists took over” in an outburst that allowed her to release not only fifteen years of trauma that accumulated while she was in prison, but also years of pent-up suffering from childhood emotional abuse administered by her mother. In a reflection following the news of her mother’s death, she reflects on the way that Bride triggered this release:

Clean, upright and very good for you like the dining room corner in Mommy’s house. The blue-and-white wallpaper I came to know better than my own face . . . I stood there, sometimes for two hours; a quiet scolding, a punishment for something I don’t remember now or even then. I wet my underwear? I played “wrestle” with a neighbor’s son? . . . I blew. Really blew. I beat up that black girl who testified against me. Beating her, kicking and punching her freed me up more than being paroled. I felt I was ripping blue-and-white wallpaper returning slaps and running the devil Mommy knew so well out of my life. (76-77)

Although neither the realities of Sofia’s childhood trauma nor the gruesome details of her experiences in prison were ever verbally discussed with Bride, her presence alone was enough to trigger the extreme emotional release that Sofia needed in order to reflect on her trauma. This inner dialogue allows her to articulate her experiences to herself instead of repressing them further. For the first time in fifteen years, she cried—“cried and cried until [she] fell asleep”—eventually concluding that Bride was the one who helped her to do so: “Now I think of it, that black girl did do me a favor. Not the foolish one she had in mind, not the money she offered, but the gift of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth. Now I am clean and able” (70). Bride intended to help Sofia by rather consumerist and superficial means, nursing her wounds by using gifts rather than discussing Sofia’s pain and offering a true, heartfelt apology. Doing so would require her to be emotionally vulnerable and admit fault; at this early point in the novel, Bride has not yet undergone the necessary personal growth in order

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to do so. However, even though Bride does not seek reconciliation by using the “correct” methods, Sofia is able to feel gratitude toward Bride for helping her release the deeply repressed trauma stemming from long before her incarceration.

However, this emotional release was only the catalyst that triggered the beginning of Sofia’s long journey to healing, as she continues to heal through the practice of caring for the elderly patients of her new home-care job. In this act of tender nurturing for other human beings, Sofia explains to the reader the way she feels as if she is returning the healing phenomenon to Bride, “putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her. For the release” (77). This notion of reciprocal healing, even if imagined, is therapeutic for Sofia and renders tangible results within her heart where the pain and suffering of trauma used to be buried deep. Morrison uses this flawed yet honest exchange between Sofia and Bride of enslavement, abuse, and healing, to show that the process of redemption and reconciliation with one’s stepsisters may very well be a messy and ugly operation— but it is nevertheless a necessary one.

Furthermore, Morrison continues to explore this idea of healing-through-nurturing by using the surprisingly influential little spitfire, Rain/Raisin. While the child mostly keeps to herself and only tolerates Evelyn and Steve, she connects with Bride on a personal level. Bride opens the door to this unlikely friendship by inviting Rain to go on a walk with her, and it is on this walk when Rain shares her story of abuse and homelessness. Bride’s simple yet generous willingness to listen to every detail of Rain’s uncensored experience is what is central to the bond that forms between them. Moreover, Morrison implies that part of what helps Bride connect to the little girl is her ability to reflect on her own past of being abused by her mother— although less severe—for it helps her to have a deeper sense of empathy for Rain (101). Morrison describes the way Bride feels as she listens, showing how the strong bond is formed within the simple exchange of Rain sharing her story and Bride sincerely listening:

Rain giggled on occasion as she described her homeless life, relishing her smarts, her escapes, while Bride fought against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself. *Listening* to this tough little girl who wasted *no time on self-pity*, she felt a companionship that was *surprisingly free of envy*. Like the closeness of schoolgirls (103, my emphasis).

From the description that Morrison gives to the reader, it appears that Bride has never experienced anything like this sacred and unex-

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pected friendship before. Later, after she leaves, Rain tells the reader how Bride treated her differently from anyone else, explaining that although Evelyn and Steve take good care of her, they “frown or look away” when she talks about her mother’s house; in contrast, Bride “listens to [Rain] tell it how it was” (104). What Morrison calls for here is a child-like trust and vulnerability that allows for the therapeutic act of storytelling. Oftentimes children come to occupy a set-apart space in society that is free of corruption and suffering, resulting in the ability to form pure connections with complete strangers. However, Morrison shows here that Rain is able to make these same connections *in light of* the corruption that has been done to her and the suffering that she has experienced. While Evelyn and Steve might find it easier to think of Rain as still innocent, closing their ears to the ugly truth, Bride is able to welcome Rain’s experience with open arms in order to help the little girl begin to heal. Essentially, the relationship that Bride and Rain share is arguably the first representation of a healthy friendship to appear in the novel. As López Ramírez elucidates, Bride’s “fake relationship with Brooklyn,” for example, contrasts drastically with her “short true companionship with Rain,” and ultimately, “her genuine endeavor to save the child [is] a healing experience for Bride, a true act of restitution,” (185).

Bride not only cares for Rain emotionally, but she also physically shields Rain from being shot with birdshot by some neighborhood bullies, which further illustrates Morrison’s call to care for one’s stepsisters. Afterwards, Rain hurriedly helps Bride back to the house in an attempt to return the favor and later reflects to the reader that no one had protected her in such a way: “I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that’s what my black lady did without even thinking about it” (106). Through Bride and Rain’s short but significant friendship, Morrison incites maternal nurturing in her female readers and calls women to care for one another in order to achieve healing. Jean Wyatt also keenly notices this idea, connecting Bride’s past with her present: “Rain brings out in Bride new capacities that enable her to begin to move away from the *identity of an abused child* toward the position of *maternal protector and nurturer of an abused child*” (186) (my emphasis added). This concept of maternal nurturing is again reflected in “Cinderella’s Stepsisters” when Morrison says, “in pursuing your highest ambitions, don’t let your personal safety diminish the safety of your stepsister . . . Let your might and your power emanate from that place in you that is nurturing and caring” (112). Morrison’s encouragement to care for one another, explained in “Cinderella’s Stepsisters” and illustrated in *God*

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Help the Child, is central to her claim in both texts and essential to take into consideration when examining either piece.

Furthermore, when discussing the relationship between Rain and Bride, one must call into question whether Rain's use of the phrase "my black lady" disqualifies the credibility of the genuine nature of the exchange, for it certainly is problematic and racist to an extent. The use of the expression affirms the racially charged image of the "mammy" figure that the cruel boys in the truck propagate when "one of them holler[s] 'Hey, Rain. Who's your mammy?'" (105). However, the fact that Bride is undeniably impacted by the story of Rain's experience and proceeds to physically shield the little girl from the birdshot shows the way Morrison agrees with and plays on the arguments of bell hooks and Audre Lorde. In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks recounts times when she felt completely supported by fellow black feminists as well as times she was dehumanized and chastised simply for sharing her own unique experiences. She references Lorde's emphasis on "the importance of affirmation, encouraging black women to be gentle and affectionate with one another" and elaborates on this concept by stating that "tenderness should not simply be a form of care extended to those black women who think as we do," as it should be extended to "outsiders" as well (hooks 58). This collective examination is central to the relationship between Bride and Rain. The two characters are practically polar opposites in race and age, but Morrison places them intentionally together in a situation in which they learn from each other in a reciprocal relationship of teaching and learning. It is Bride's acts of self-sacrifice—both in listening to Rain's story with undivided attention and in shielding her from the birdshot—that exhibit the kind of inclusive unity that Morrison calls for all throughout both the novel and "Cinderella's Stepsisters." It is a sort of oneness that does not erase differences in race, age, or background, but rather, it embraces and accepts them in order to form this necessary bond.

Finally, the reader is introduced to Queen, an imperfect woman who, in spite of her own personal shortcomings, shows the reader how the act of offering generous hospitality and genuine support to a fellow woman in need can go a long way in helping her succeed. Although Bride originally knocks on Queen's door with the sole purpose of finding Booker, Queen invites her in to have some soup and healthy conversation. Ultimately, she ends up sharing Booker's writings and other details of his life that help Bride start to understand their broken past. After going through the writings, Bride feels discouraged and is not sure if she should go find him anymore: "She had counted on her looks for so long— how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallow-

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ness or her own cowardice" (151), but Queen encourages Bride to go see him anyway:

"What's the matter with you?" Queen sounded annoyed. "*You come all this way and just turn around and leave?*" Then she started singing, imitating the voice of a baby:

Don't know why
There's no sun up in the sky . . .
Can't go on.
Everything I had is gone,
Stormy weather . . .

"Damn!" Bride slapped the table. "You're absolutely right! Totally right! This is about me, not him. Me!" (152, my emphasis)

This is the first time in the whole novel that Bride has actually been encouraged to go and pursue the man whom she loves. By using the blues song, "Stormy Weather," Queen effectively "taunts" Bride by comparing her attitude to that of the blues singer whose selfhood is reduced to a "poorself, one with her misery" (Wyatt 183-184). Instead of succumbing to this "total immobility," Bride understands and rejects Queen's implication and "becomes an agent, active in her own interests" (Wyatt 184). Until now, Bride's quest to find Booker had been a self-motivated journey and she would have just as well abandoned it if Queen had not pushed her to carry on. In contrast, when one reflects on the sort of opinions that Brooklyn has offered in regard to Booker, this encouraging nudge from Queen comes to stand out definitively. Brooklyn's jealousy of Bride led her to try to seduce Booker and pass judgment on him as a "predator" and a "loser" (Morrison 58), while Queen offered honest insight on his true background and personality. Granted, Brooklyn did not know Booker as well as Queen did, but she also did not seem to care one bit about really getting to know him. She simply made biased snap-judgments and kept them to herself rather than at least sharing her thoughts with Bride to maybe spare her friend some heartache. Although Queen has her own imperfections and struggles in her personal family life, she still is able to offer Bride a bit of womanly companionship and genuine support lacking any trace of jealousy, selfishness, or malice. She even goes the extra mile to encourage Booker to open up to Bride about Adam and to not let his past interfere with their relationship (155-157).

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Although Queen and Bride were originally total strangers, they still share a level of intimate nurturing that goes beyond the realms of familiarity and into Morrison's objective of creating a unifying sisterhood. After the tragic accident of Queen's home catching fire, Bride returns the generous and pure hospitality to Queen as she handwashes her daily in the hospital: "Unable to rise to a bedpan, [Queen] had to be scoured, oiled and rewrapped—all of which Bride, not trusting the indifferent hands of the nurse, did herself as tenderly as possible" (166). This form of intimacy, shared with a woman that Bride barely knew, is a vivid illustration of sincere compassion that Morrison uses as a model for her female readers to follow. In "Cinderella's Stepsisters," she speaks to the importance of familial closeness between women in order to advance toward gender equality: "Women's rights is not only an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about 'us'; it is also about me and you. Just the two of us" (112). One must care for and look out for one's stepsisters; saying "I don't know her" cannot be used as an excuse to turn a blind eye to another woman in need.

Although tragic and unexpected, Queen's passing signals the beginning of a new chapter in Bride and Booker's life—a chapter that likely never would have been reached without Queen's kindness. After she passes, Bride accompanies Booker to scatter his aunt's remains in the river, although she stays in the car at his insistence. When he returns to the car after performing his solemn and "awkward" ceremony, he and Bride sit in silence for a moment. Then, Bride breaks the silence by announcing that she is pregnant. "I'm pregnant and it's yours," she says, and after a moment of contemplation, Booker turns to her "with just a hint of a smile" and says, "No . . . It's ours" (174-175). With Queen's passing and Bride's announcement, this scene is symbolic of the beginning of a new generation that signals the hope for an end to the chain of abuse that Morrison has portrayed throughout the entire novel. While some scholars such as Paula Martín-Salván have reduced Bride's pregnancy to a reinforcement of "patriarchal articulations of womanhood and motherhood" (621), I instead propose an argument that aligns more closely with Jean Wyatt's, interpreting the restoration of Bride's maternal body as indication of her rejection of skin-deep ideologies. The pregnancy evidences Bride's healing from the trauma caused by ideas that say the body's importance lies in external appearances (Wyatt 187). Fundamentally, Queen is one of the first people to stop Bride's chain of abuse, allowing for healing to take place by offering unconditional hospitality and then helping her and Booker to mend what was once broken. Their pregnancy—the bringing forth of new life and beginnings—was only possible due to Queen's generosity.

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While Sweetness's closing speech is heavily skeptical, Morrison's final remark in the previous chapter offers a bit more hope: "A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe" (175). As Sweetness rightly states, parenting is no easy feat and it will not be a bed of roses for Booker and Bride. However, the most important challenge Bride will have to face as a parent is to not enslave her own children in the same way that Sweetness enslaved her (and her mother before her, and her grandmother before her). Morrison comments on this and other risks like it in the following quote from "Cinderella's Stepsisters":

It is not safe to have a child. It is not safe to challenge the status quo. It is not safe to choose work that has not been done before. Or to do old work in a new way.

There will always be someone there to stop you. But in pursuing your highest ambitions, don't let your personal safety diminish the safety of your stepsister. In wielding the power that is deservedly yours, don't permit it to enslave your stepsisters. (112)

The similarity between this statement and the feeling that the reader is left with at the end of *God Help the Child* is uncanny to say the least. While Sweetness comes from a position of authority in parenting based off of experience (in contrast to Bride and Booker's lack thereof), it is not her place to verbally enslave and condemn her daughter to the same parenting fate that she herself experienced or to those she witnessed in her mother's and grandmother's lives as parents. At the end of *God Help the Child*, Morrison leaves the reader with hope that Bride will be the one to reverse the pattern of female abuse in her family. Bride is not perfect—she has her own flaws and hang-ups that she will need to work through in her life—but I believe that Morrison is intentional in painting such a humanized and relatable main character to do the job of discontinuing this generational enslavement. What we need are not superheroes or perfect women, but a generation of real women who are willing to extend genuine kindness to one another in the spirit of sisterhood. Progress towards women's rights and gender equality is not about the individual's success, but rather, it is about the success of the whole, embracing our diversity in every way, for it is what makes us stronger.

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Dragon Year

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Most Chinese fancy the year of the Dragon. We have it inscribed on vases, furniture, art where the dragon slithers all the way from the dynasty days, on the emperor's golden robes, the walls of his palace, and the throne he sits upon. A symbol of honor, power, danger. I was born in the year of the Dragon and that gave me pride each time I said it, as if the Dragon spirit lived on in me. I don't believe in superstitions, of course, but it was still nice being born in the Dragon year. It added a little feistiness to my speech, an extra hop in my walk, I reckoned, especially when I spoke to my Chinese friends. Honestly, though, growing up, I felt anything but honorable and powerful.

It was Chinese New Year's Eve of 1996, when we gathered for our dinner celebration, *Tuan Yuan Fan*. This was the year of the Rat, according to our calendar. My cousin was born that year and his parents were not pleased: "At least, he's a boy *lah*. We will go to the temple to pray more for blessings . . ." I remember getting off the Kuen Cheng school bus that evening at the stop in front of my house. I had just woken up from a nap on the ride back and the bus driver was shouting for me, "Peng, Peng, where is Peng?" The boys on the bus were laughing and teasing, "Peng, sleeping again? Peng, the little pig!" I rolled my eyes at the boys. The ring leader, Ah Cheong, always made fun of me every chance he got— my name, my short bushy hair, my tiny eyes. My *popo* used to tell me, "Every night before you sleep, use the tip of your fingernail, this one," as she pointed towards my 7-year-old index finger, "draw it across the top of your eye. After a while, you will get double eye-lids and bigger eyes." I would pick up my tiny fingers and trace them across the top of my eyes each night, just like a dutiful granddaughter would have. I heard Ah Cheong shouting, "P for Peng; P for Pig!" with all of his cronies laughing. Before I got off the bus, I turned and punched his bony ribs. He was shorter than I was. He seemed to like my annoyance and just grinned sheepishly as I got off the bus. Strangely, at the end of that school year, he would leave me a cute *Winnie the Pooh* Piglet sticker collection arranged in a way that said, 我爱你, *wo ai ni* – *I love you*. Boys, I didn't understand them then. I don't understand them now.

I remember that day I was looking forward to seeing my dad after his long time away for business, but he wasn't home yet for our *Tuan Yuan*

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Fan. After setting my bag on the floor in the living room, I went straight towards the back of the house, outside into the wet kitchen. I wore my red wooden clogs. (“Don’t get your feet wet from all the water. I’ve just cleaned the charcoal ashes away!” Mom would yell.)

“Hi, Mom! What are you cooking?” I could see her grating some ginger by the sink, her back turned towards me. She was in a floral print dress as usual. She had one for every day of the week, sometimes two—if the Malaysian humidity got us showering more than once. Banana Yellow, Barney Lavender, Dora the Explorer Fuchsia, Little Mermaid Turquoise, Edamame Green. Mom’s wardrobe was the dancing rainbow of the house. Both the wet and dry kitchen smelled like warmth. My mom was preparing to steam my favorite cod-fish (“very expensive . . . you have to finish every bit on your plate!”). I looked inside the gas stove in the dry kitchen and could see the fire flickering and winking at me. On the floor as I stood outside at the wet kitchen was a small fire stone stove. I could see the black charcoal inside and ashes floating midair, sashaying in the wind like a slow dance. Gravity won as the ashes fell silently onto the grey cement floor. Once the smell of the ashes faded, I caught a whiff of the lotus, daikon radish aroma coming out from the stone stove. I peeked over and saw little bubbles swimming around the light orange liquid obediently sitting inside the clay pot. The slow burn, the patience, the deep fire and its measured rhythms swirled to make the perfect soup. “You can’t rush boiling the soup, Peng,” my mom would say. “You need time, the longer, the better. Charcoal is better than using the gas stove.” “Mom, why are you telling me this? Aren’t you going to cook for me forever?” She would laugh when I said this, but as an 8-year-old, I had no thoughts of becoming fast friends with flickering gas stoves and patient charcoals. She would hurry me out of the kitchen like I was a housefly hovering around her masterpiece, except she didn’t use a fly swatter on me, she just used her words, “Go shower and come down to get ready for dinner!” to swat me out of her way.

In the shower, in the middle of singing *Part of Your World* from *The Little Mermaid*, I heard a loud knock at the door. “Peng, stop singing! And can you not take all day showering? I need to shower, too.” Wen, my sister, had just got back from Wesley High School, and because she had to take the public bus, she was usually stinky after her hour-long bus journey. “I will take however long I want. Go shower in Mom’s and Dad’s bathroom.” I could hear her slam her bedroom door in annoyance. I stopped singing and got out quickly right after.

My dad was sitting in the living room reading his Chinese newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily*, finally back from work, still in his suit and tie, looking handsome as always. Teng, my older sister, had also just arrived

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home from Singapore and was sitting on the couch, reading her *Calvin and Hobbes*. I noticed her hair was dyed a different color again; her natural black hair was hot red two weekends ago when she was home from college in Singapore, but today, she had lime green highlights. It looked like she was wearing an overripe watermelon on her head. The dark shades of her natural curly, black hair lined as barricades against the green: a row of zesty lime, a row of steady black. One bright, one dark. One oozing freshness, one harboring rottenness. I was intrigued by her look.

“Teng, will you come help dish out the rice?” my mom shouted from the dry kitchen. Teng ignored her in the same way she would ignore all the other things my mom would say to her. I walked down the stairs into the living room, and when Teng saw me, she threw her *Calvin and Hobbes* on the floor and sat upright, her watermelon head bouncing out of the sofa. My dad was still deep in thought, reading the papers like his life depended on it.

“Peng Peng! Come here! How are you doing little fuzz ball?” She liked to call me Peng Peng and would tickle me each time she saw me. In her good mood, of course. Wen walked down the stairs and glanced over at us, winced and walked past us, straight to the dry kitchen to help my mom. She didn’t greet Teng, even after not seeing Teng for two weeks now. Teng did not even look up at Wen walked past.

“What are you reading, *Che?*”, as I pointed towards her *Calvin and Hobbes*.

“Oh, the story’s about this little boy and his tiger. They explore the world and go on adventures together. They do what they want and make up their own rules. How fun is that right, Peng? Wouldn’t you like to play all day?”

“Yes I would! Mom and Wen won’t like that though. They are always nagging . . . Also, my school teacher says we have to listen to our elders, we must honor and respect them. We can’t just do what we want. . .”

“You don’t need to care what people think, whether they are older or younger. You do what you want to do and never let anyone talk down to you, Peng Peng. I’ll take care of you. Here take this book, it’s yours now. You keep it and read it, okay?” My little Chinese eyes lit up and I could see her braces-filled mouth, radiant lime hair and black-brown eyes grinning back at me. “Thanks, *Che* . . .”

“*Sek fan lou!* Let’s eat! What do we have for dinner?” My dad said in his jolly voice, finally putting down the newspapers on the marble floor in the living room.

“Wait, let me take a 5-minute shower!”, my mom said as she removed her apron, rushing past all of us to take her less-than-5-minute shower. I’m not sure how she did it, even without someone rudely knocking on

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her door interrupting her, but she got in and out of the shower, pronto. That's mom for you. Mom, who left her ginger-smelling, onion-tainted odor lingering in the living room as she hurried up the stairs. We all sat down around the dining table, passing the chopsticks along. Our bowls of rice and soup were already in front of us, steaming hot, waiting to be united with the sizzling fish, lemongrass, tomatoes, garlic, ginger, soy-sauce . . . the simple tastes of home. Mom joined us in her fun green floral dress, her long hair tied up in a little bun now. She hadn't washed her hair, but she still smelled like fresh flowers with only tinges of stir-fried veggies and sesame oil. I made sure to pass her the right set of chopsticks. Both chopsticks had to be uniform: same length, same color, and same patterns. If I didn't pair them off properly, Mom and Wen would stare me down, disapproving of my careless attitude. Dad and Teng would not make a big deal out of this, though.

"So, how's everyone doing?" Teng asked. I could see my parents sitting straighter when she said that. My parents never asked "How was your day?" or "How are you?" to us as we were growing up. That was a "Western" thing, my dad would say.

"I'm super good," I said. "It's *Tuan Yuan Fan!* I love special family dinners like this. Everyone together. Dad home, you home, mom's cooking . . ." I couldn't think of anything nice to say about Wen, so I just trailed off.

My dad could sense some tension amongst us siblings and handled it in the best way he knew how: silently and then sharing a *Reader's Digest* story. I used to love those moments. Ceremoniously, he stood up to use his chopsticks and picked out the best part of the fish for my mom: the fish cheeks. "It's because it's the sweetest and softest part of the fish," my mom would tell me. He gave the other fish cheek to me and I asked if there was more of the cheek. There was none left, only a meaty fish with hollow cheekbones and one black pearly eye staring back at me. Wen and Teng were drinking their soup while waiting for my dad to finish serving the best parts of the fish.

"Many years ago in China, at the Beijing railway station," my dad begins, "was a man trying very hard to board the train . . . is it called a train? 火車 *huo che*?" He turned to me. My dad was Chinese-educated Malaysian and had learnt English in the past few years, but only for business purposes. He tried hard to instill the Chinese language in all three of us, but both my sisters dropped out of Chinese school and, instead, went to English primary schools in Malaysia. I didn't follow their footsteps—I never knew why. It wasn't a conscious thing I did, to be different, to stand out, to prove a point. It just happened that way. And it created a connection with my dad, which both my sisters always strived for but could never share. "Your sisters won't understand, Peng,

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they think too much like the *angmohlang*. English and Chinese values don't match up . . ." He once said to me.

"Yes, it's train. Choo-choo train, *Pa!*" I dragged the "choo-choo" for effect. Even then, I liked the dramatic. Teng and mom would giggle, but Wen was not impressed. I felt that my presence annoyed her, "here's my little pesky sister," she would tell her friends who came over. I knew I liked annoying her, too. It was easy and I didn't need to try hard. "The man starts to board the train, but *uh-oh*, somehow one of his shoes is caught and was left behind on the platform, and he couldn't get it, and the train starts moving . . ." My dad would pause for effect. I noticed my mom letting a gentle smile escape her, as if she already knew where the story was going; as if she already knew this story and she could recite it by heart; as if, perhaps, my dad used this story to woo her during their early days of dating in the country side of Malaysia, Ipoh. "I knew your mom was the one because my own mom loved her. Older people knows best. You must listen to them no matter what." Growing up, my dad would tell us again and again about my mom, about my grandma, about never disagreeing with an older person.

As my dad was telling his story, I noticed Teng rolling her eyes. She didn't believe the story my dad was telling. She was just eating her rice, chewing it daintily with her mouth closed. Using her chopsticks to put the white cod-fish into her mouth. Her cheeks started to move and she started to pout as the fish bones appeared slowly from her mouth, slender bone by slender bone, like money out of the cash machine. It was her way of paying her dues to my dad's story. Not by listening, but by rejecting it slowly and quietly. My dad doesn't look at her while telling the story, but only to Wen and me, ". . . just as the train was moving, the man looked down at the remaining shoe on his foot , '死了, *Sei lou*, I'm dead!' the man said. So, what did he do? He quickly took off this shoe and threw it to the platform!"

"What? Why? How can that be?" Wen declared indignantly. I looked at her, nodding and agreeing. She had stopped eating her half-emptied bowl of rice and the soy-sauce and ginger from the fish left on the rice was leaving its mark on it. Imbuing it with its essence.

The grain of rice looked bloated with gravy.

"That's what a passenger on the train asked the man, too. But, the man smiled and replied confidently, 'one shoe to me or to the other person on the platform would be useless to either of us. With two shoes, the person on the platform can benefit from it!'" Mom, Wen, and I, burst out in giggles.

"Always be kind and generous," my dad would say, "even if it means you have to lose something . . ."

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"I'm full and done. Can I go now?" Teng asked suddenly. My dad turned and stared at her. Wen turned to look at mom; I could see both their expressions whispering "Oh no . . . not now, not today . . ." Silent pleas rising up to the walls.

"No . . . stay till we've all finished eating. It's *Tuan Yuan F*—"

"Okay, I know, I know," Teng said, not even looking at my dad as she stared at her bowl of fish bones, her whole body slumped on the chair like my dad had just deboned her, slender bone by slender bone. Her cheeks looked sunken and hollow, too.

"Hot tea, anyone? *Tien Gu Yam* tea leaves?" my mom offered, cognizant of her daughters' ways, cognizant of my dad's good-natured story-telling but intolerant temper to words of *dishonor*, of *disrespect*. Teng was a ticking-time bomb of shame, I could hear it in her watermelon head, *tick, tick, tick* . . . it was only a matter of time. We still had time to spare then, in the Year of the Rat.

"I'll help you with the tea, Mom." Wen got up, heading to the dry kitchen. My dad turned to look at me, his only remaining spectator and listener. "Good story, Peng?" he asked. I nodded and smiled. Any story my dad would tell, I loved. It was the stories he didn't tell that hurt me, that tore the family, page by page. . . . We became like the man standing on the train platform, holding both of my father's shoes, looking at my dad as he disappeared with the train. *Be kind and generous, even if it means leaving your family behind.*

My dad would continue his moralizing, "I never got to go to school since *Gong Gong* wanted me to help him in his business. He left China when he was 16 to come to Malaysia. Making it big. What a story. You can be like that, too, Peng. Be hardworking. I made my first million when I was 21, met your mom, read the newspapers and *Reader's Digest* every day. This is how I became smart, how I became successful," he would say proudly as he placed more bok choy and tofu onto my almost empty bowl of rice.

"I don't like *Gong Gong*. He always scolds you and says you are useless. Why do you work for him?" I would ask my dad, recalling the countless times my physically frail grandfather hurled curses in Hakka at my dad, at his siblings, all full-grown adults—doctors, lawyers, engineers. Even at 8-years-old, I saw my *Gong Gong* as a cruel man as I looked at all my uncles and aunts, my dad, my mom, just silently receiving his tirade during Mooncake festival the year before. Did they think it was *honorable*? *Respectful*? The right response to a cursing father: silence. Silence and honor. All the spines made of chopsticks; one chopstick belonging to them, one to their father: the same color, the same height, the same pattern.

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“Peng, you are still young. *Gong Gong* has eaten more salt than you have eaten rice--” “*Gong Gong* doesn’t eat salt. He doesn’t like it in his food, *Pa* . . .”

“It’s the Chinese saying, 吃盐多过你吃米, *chi yan duo guo ni chi mi*, *Gong Gong* has eaten more salt, experienced more hardship, than you have eaten rice, than you have lived, Peng. We must respect him, even when he scolds us. One day you will learn . . .”

I heard a loud screech from the dining table chair and Teng’s voice saying, “Dad, enough of all your stories! *Gong Gong* is an asshole, and you know it! Sometimes I wish you had the guts to stand up to him, instead of covering it up with all this Chinese-honor bullshit!” Teng pushed her chair back and ran up the stairs to her room, the one she shared with Wen. I remember not knowing what “asshole” or “bullshit” meant, but I remember my dad’s suddenly wearied eyes blinking hard as he carefully put down his chopsticks after my sister’s outburst.

“Go and help mom and Wen in the kitchen, Peng.”

“*Pa*, but they don’t need . . .”

“*Xian Zai!* Now!” He raised his voice, and I immediately rose up, dropping my chopsticks and scurrying to the kitchen. Mom’s and Wen’s backs were toward me. They were perfectly still, silent, two tall chopsticks, black hair, same pattern, same length. My thoughts wandered to dad’s *Reader’s Digest* story. Teng was the man on the train platform, but instead of happily receiving the generosity of new shoes, she threw them right back at my father’s face. The kettle was boiling in the kitchen, and all we could hear that night was the continuous steam, the vapor frantically bustling. *Choo-choo train*. But, the stillness in the air engulfed it, and that night, there was nothing about the Dragon spirit in me that rose in honor and power.

I remember not seeing Teng for a long time after that. Wen would still be around, but each time I would try to be near her, she would say, “Stop disturbing me, I’m trying to read.” Or when I got in trouble with my mom, Wen would scold me, saying “Don’t be rude to mom, I’ll buy her a cane to punish you.” All those canes that I would throw behind the six foot mahogany piano, as I practiced my pieces to Wen’s annoyance. “Stop playing that horrible music!” “Stop singing!” Wen was one grouchy sister. Why couldn’t she be the one in Singapore and Teng back with us. . .

Yet now, here I am, more than fifteen years later, finding myself in Kuala Lumpur International Airport, waiting to board *All Nippon Airways* to see Wen in Tokyo, the only sister I have left. It’s been almost ten years since I last saw Wen, and she is now working in Japan. Like Teng, she rarely made an effort to return home during her years of study in Edinburgh, Scotland. But, in light of Teng going missing, Wen

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thought it would be a good idea to spend time together, just to patch things up. “Come to Tokyo, Peng. I know I haven’t always been the best sister, but come. . . especially during this time,” she would text over *Whatsapp*, never calling me. It’s just been a month since I saw Teng at KL Sentral, and on the outside, I looked as calm as the steamed cod-fish during that *Tuan Yuan Fan* many years ago. My friends thought I was strong and forgiving; they didn’t know I felt nothing for Teng anymore. I made myself feel nothing for her. It wasn’t strength. . . It was a cut-off distancing writhing towards the other direction. Except you didn’t see the writhing, you saw the porcelain China doll face.

“Don’t take it personally, Peng. She doesn’t mean it. Just know that,” my friends, my sister, Wen, say.

Of course, I take it personally, Teng’s my sister. My *Che*. But no, now she must become Jada to me . . . Jada, the brilliant Malaysian girl who got a scholarship to Cambridge to study law. She must be Jada, the investigative journalist who wrote for our local papers here in Malaysia. She must be Jada, the person on the headlines of the same local papers she wrote for which later reported her story. Jada, the clinically depressed; Jada, the schizo, the paranoid. Jada the mentally-ill. *Jada*. Yes, Jada, I can and will not take it personally. I was the last in my family to see her. On the streets at KL Sentral in Brickfields, where faceless people trudge through for trains in and out of the city. “Get out of my way, do you think I’ve all day?” People honk with their voices, shove you aside with frustration if you come between them and their clockwork routine. *I’m late, I’m late, I’m late*, all of them like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, except this feels like a nightmare.

I walked in a daze past the newspaper seller, Uncle Wong, who was shouting the latest news at the top of his voice. I walked past the aunties selling pastries, fried chestnuts, tropical fruits (mangoes, dragon fruits, jackfruits . . .), smells of burnt shells and juicy saps. I walked on to See Chuan restaurant on the second floor, and I recognized my sister’s face from the distance. *Is that really Teng?* She was sitting pensively, smoking.

I was excited and happy to know that my sister was alive, but I dreaded the moment, too. I reminded myself to send a message to my parents, they don’t do well with talking over the phone. “Don’t call if you can text, it’s a waste of money.” I often roll my eyes at my father’s antics and beliefs. At this moment though, I’m glad to be texting them. The distance in words helps. I might break down hearing their voices, their concerns . . . hearing them react to the news of my missing sister. Neither of them replied to me, so I called my dad.

“*Pa*, I’ve found Teng. After all these years, I’ve finally found her. She’s here at KL Sentral. Come now, I’ll wait for you at . . .”

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“No.”

I thought I misheard and continued, “I’ll wait for you at . . .”

“No! I am not coming. Mom is not coming, too. Teng is doing this to humiliate me. She’s acting like a crazy person to humiliate us. Why should I go see her? As far as I’m concerned, I’ve no more daughter. Anyway, we are eating dinner at home now.”

I heard my once-rainbow dancing mother sobbing in the background. Both of them in the same dining room, where dad, mom, Teng, Wen, and I sat during that *Tuan Yuan Fan*. I could feel fear like a reptile clutching my upper body, sinking its claws into my skin as I walked on the glossy floors of KL Sentral. *How did it come to this?*

I felt like screaming and screaming. I was transported to the train platform in the *Reader’s Digest* story once again, to my dad’s story, to his life motto of being kind and generous, except this time, I was stuck on the platform as I saw him step into the train, well-dressed, expensive shoes, leaving me behind, leaving Teng behind, *barefooted*. All I said was “okay” and I hung up. *Respect and honor your elders.*

My lips curved to a smile hesitantly as I walked towards Teng, “Che! I’m so happy to see you!”

She turned around and glanced up towards me. It took her a while to register who I was. When she did, a frown emerged—quickly dissipated into anger. I froze.

“What are you doing here? Who sent you here to kill me?” she shouted.

She got up from where she was sitting and left. She had not showered for days, her hair had lost its yellow dye, her face looked sunburnt, not the glamorous copper bronze, but a rusty, tetanus-jab inducing crust. There was a grimy stench, the one you get when you leave ginger peels, fish bones, and kalian in the sink overnight, a stench that I would smell every single day after that. *Who was I looking at? What had become of my Che?* She ran off like a bull in a china shop. A mad bull in a shattered, crumbling china shop. And I don’t stop her. I refuse to go after. I stand still. My face was boiling, but I don’t allow myself to feel anything.

Don’t take it personally, Peng. Don’t take don’t take your sister personally, don’t take your dad personally, don’t take anyone personally. I tell myself.

I see Wen waiting at the Arrival halls at Tokyo Narita Airport. After all these years, she still looks the same—her long silky black hair, big round eyes, perfect teeth—except this time, she’s in a brightly colored

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two-piece suit instead of faded hand-me-downs from Teng. She was always such a dull dresser when we were younger. The truth is, we were no longer the kids we used to be. But at the same time, we still were, bound by a tragedy. Tragedies are no respecter of people. They don't give a damn if you have an illustrious career or if you're in a colorful two-piece executive suit. I pick up my pace and grin, blurting "Hi, *Che* . . ." which sounded unnatural. I only called Teng *Che*, not Wen. She didn't seem to hear it as we embraced in a hug, the first in ten years.

She held me a little longer than usual, finally whispering, "You never use to call me *Che* . . . Why the sudden change?"

"I don't know, Wen . . . it's been a long flight..." I offer, hoping she would just let it be.

I make a mental note to myself not to call her *Che* again. *Che* was meant for Teng. It was paired that way. To combine *Che* with Wen would be like a mismatched chopstick . . . but what did I know about the right way of things, the proper order. My life was in chaos. *How things ought to be . . . How it is supposed to be . . .* Even now, I felt like a lone chopstick, straddling through the grains of rice, but never being able to taste, to savor the warm white rice with my favorite cod-fish, the freshly grated ginger . . . I could no longer touch home. Maybe, just maybe, Wen, too, knew, what it meant to be in this place, unpaired and unpattern.

We went straight to dinner that night. Our first in many years. It was the year of the Dragon.

About the Author

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Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature.
By Elizabeth Outka. University of Columbia Press, 2019. 344 pp.
\$35.00 (paperback)

During the influenza pandemic of 1918-19, observes Elizabeth Outka, “the United States suffered more deaths . . . than in World War I, World War II, and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq—combined” (1). And yet the Spanish flu did not have nearly as strong an imprint upon cultural memory as these military engagements, with few Anglophone artists—or scholars—chronicling an event that led to some 50 to 100 million deaths globally. Outka’s book “investigates this conspicuous literary and critical silence” by assembling authors who did write about the pandemic and explaining the representational problems involved in conveying this brutal, ubiquitous, yet faceless killer (2). Even if *Viral Modernism* had not appeared mere months before the coronavirus pandemic, this book would still provide two invaluable critical contributions: first, cataloguing the varying “aesthetic consolations” that writers might seek out when facing the spectral violence of contagion (7); and second, grappling with the psychological and social urge to subsume pandemic within more comfortable narratives about human agency and political conflict. That *Viral Modernism* does arrive at this all-too timely moment only adds an immediate pragmatic value to its durable historical insights about the interwar years.

Several of the recurring representational problems explored in *Viral Modernism* concern the nature of illness itself. As a microscopic threat, explains Outka, the influenza virus “resisted incorporation into an understandable narrative,” ravaging communities invisibly, offering no obvious agent with which to narrate causality, pin blame, and direct one’s fear and rage (30). This poses obvious challenges for the writer: as Virginia Woolf once remarked, “the public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot” (qtd. in Outka 30). Those authors who attempted to metabolize their experience with the disease faced further difficulties in capturing the scope of the pandemic’s effects. Along with horrendous physical symptoms, from projectile bleeding to lungs drowning in their own fluid, the Spanish flu also triggering lasting forms of “psychological suffering,” including survivor’s guilt, forms of delirium, and a pervasive sense of helplessness (13). The flu triggered a widespread “shattering of self,” exposing bodies as permeable and vulnerable things, and leaving its victims in a state between life and death, experiences difficult to capture through traditional literary characterization (26).

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Beyond even these serious mimetic challenges, however, the central representational problem in *Viral Modernism* involves a struggle between the pandemic and World War I. For all its attendant horrors on the front, the Great War could still be narrated at home as an honorable conflict against a known enemy, especially since the news was being censored by governments, most of whom, as the outbreak escalated, “were eager not to spread panic” (23). But, as Outka shows, the virus soon began to destabilize heroic, public narratives circulating around the War. It interrupted some men from serving, including William Faulkner and John Dos Passos, and many soldiers who had made it through battles returned home only to die from a supposedly everyday illness, an end “too humiliating, or too bitterly ironic to contemplate” (23). Unlike the lengthy war, the virus would sweep across a region and then suddenly disappear; the corpses it left behind seemed bereft of any meaning, casualties to a force beyond human understanding or control. To combat this anarchic violence, the pandemic was routinely “incorporated into the outpouring of mourning and remembrance after the war,” a process that Outka recognizes as emotionally understandable for those left behind, and yet problematic at the level of cultural memory, a tendency that risks erasing the distinctive experience of the pandemic (24).

Viral Modernism contains three sections demonstrating the ways that different literary formations grappled with the flu years; together they show how literature can alternately conceal and expose trauma. In Part I, “Pandemic Realism,” Outka wisely begins not with the earliest texts, but the most “overt” realist efforts at representing illness through conventional characters and narrative form, which help us “establish the frame we need to see the diffuse elements” in more experimental writing (40). The rich first chapter on Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* (1922) and Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) provides a template for the book’s larger project by demonstrating how the two novels diverge markedly in their treatment of the relationship between war and contagion. Cather’s novel frames the outbreak as “a strange eruption” interfering with “the war’s larger purpose” (47). While many critics see *One of Ours* as ending in a critique of heroic masculine sacrifice, the novel nonetheless incorporates influenza into one episode within its larger wartime arc, exemplifying a larger culture effort to subsume the virus back into a more familiar expressive narrative (47). Porter, by contrast, allows the physical and psychological traumas of the disease to alter the form of her novella, with hallucinatory sections capturing how men and women’s bodies alike struggled with “new vulnerabilities” to this miasmatic threat (53).

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For Outka, the modernist style Porter adopted, including fragmented or disjointed syntax, nonlinear temporality, and an attendant sense of character as plastic, were ideally suited to conveying the consequences of pandemic, not just wartime trauma. This claim, reiterated in the following chapter on family life in fiction by Thomas Wolfe and William Maxwell, then becomes the organizing idea for the book's next, central section, "Pandemic Modernism." In chapters on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming," Outka shows how the corpses and rats, infiltrated and hallucinatory bodies, and tolling apocalyptic bells from these iconic modernist works display "a symbolic atmosphere of influence" left behind by the virus (101). Among them, the chapter on *Mrs. Dalloway*, read through Woolf's essay "On Being Ill," stands out, as Outka shows how Septimus and Clarissa each have their relationship to "language and perception" conditioned by "the body's experience" with disease (106). The Eliot chapter, too, deserves widespread attention from teachers looking to expand their contextual understanding of *The Waste Land* beyond WWI.

Outka's final section, "Pandemic Cultures," examines how popular culture provided "alternatives to the grim ambiguity of the literary" through narratives emphasizing material presence and agential control (199). Spiritualism gained widespread currency in the 1920s, notably finding a major promoter in the aging and bereaved Arthur Conan Doyle. Its dubious practices offered grievers an appealing way to combat the meaninglessness of viral death, to gain "reassuring consolation," through "material evidence of a loved one's presence," such as ectoplasm and spirit photography (200). Outka contrasts this palliative form of "viral resurrection" against early Anglophone depictions of the zombie. In H.P. Lovecraft's stories, doctor-scientists create monstrous undead that destroy communities, and these horrific fantasies, observes Outka, directed "simmering frustration and rage at the medical establishment toward an identified and clear target" (234). Laced with racism and homophobia, Lovecraft's stories provide a jarring but important reminder that a nonhuman threat can still be politically mobilized by those willing to turn an Other into an "outlet for anger and guilt" (242).

Even without mentioning COVID-19, and even granting the myriad differences between the 1918 pandemic and our own, Outka's study reads with an uncanny perspicacity today. One can hardly deny the words that open her final page: "we are not ready for the next severe global pandemic" (254). Above all, her study reminds us of another struggle awaiting beyond the present one, a struggle over whether and how we will retain the ambient, spectral violence of contagion in our

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collective cultural memory so it might be a lesson for the future. *Viral Modernism* succeeds admirably in capturing “the ways literature may register a vast hidden trauma like the influenza pandemic,” while simultaneously illustrating a salient social desire to repress the same traumatic experience (253).

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Blasphemous Modernism: The 20th-Century Word Made Flesh. By Steve Pinkerton. Oxford University Press, 2017. xiii + 141 pp. \$35.00 (paperback).

In *Blasphemous Modernism: The 20th-Century Word Made Flesh*, Steve Pinkerton argues that Christianity maintained an ongoing relevance within literary modernism despite consistent claims to the contrary. He makes his argument by locating Christianity in the utterances that are supposed to deny it: blasphemy. Indeed, one of his main points is that blasphemy actually affirms religious belief. To help prove his point, Pinkerton turns to G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot, two of modernism's most important Christian believers. Chesterton once suggested that "[b]laspemy depends upon belief, and is fading with it. If any one doubts this, let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor" (Pinkerton 4). Eliot, moreover, bemoaned the scarcity of "first-rate blasphemy" because it is only this form that stems from genuine religious conviction (Pinkerton 4). Pinkerton thus proceeds by showing how blasphemy betrays a continued preoccupation with, interest in, and adherence to religious belief: "What blasphemy requires is not 'spiritual sickness' but rather a commitment to playful and critical reworkings of orthodoxy, coupled with a respect and even reverence, not for God, or scripture, or the church, but for *religious faith itself* and its enduring cultural sway" (5).

The modernists are often studied because of their literary experimentations, so they are an appropriate choice for the study. As Suzanne Hobson explains in her review of Pinkerton's book, considering modernist blasphemy is productive "because it is a predominantly textual form, and, second, because it lends itself to the forms of verbal dexterity and play for which these writers are best known" (581). The modernist proclivity for "verbal dexterity" is a main reason why Pinkerton yokes modernism and blasphemy; both the modernists and the Christian religion place a strong emphasis on words. "God exists," he explains, "in language if nowhere else" (1). He goes on to note how the "Bible rather strikingly encourages this discursive emphasis" before noting "Christianity's special concern for the linguistic" (1). The Bible describes Christ as the divine Word, so Pinkerton's assessment of the Christian faith is reasonable enough. The innovations that help to define the writers under consideration—James Joyce, Mina Loy, the "Niggeratti," and Djuna Barnes—offer Pinkerton plenty to work with as he considers the importance of blasphemous faith in modernist literature.

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In Pinkerton's understanding, Joyce functions "as a kind of patron saint" of modernist blasphemy (7), a "spokesperson for the sacredly profane" (20). The importance of Joyce's literary ingenuity—of which blasphemy played an important part—is hard to overstate, so it certainly makes some sense to elevate him to such a lofty position. Pinkerton allows the Joyce chapter to

demonstrate three central theses of *Blasphemous Modernism*: first, that for modernist writers blasphemy is as much a political weapon as a formal or stylistic device; second, that this discourse is always rooted in and expressed through figurations of the often emphatically sexualized body; and third, that blasphemy relies upon and exploits an essential ambivalence, at once affirmative and transgressive, in its relation to the religious structures it engages. (21)

Pinkerton returns to these three central topics at various points. Past criticism about the study's "misleading" opinion on Joycean spirituality is off the mark (Lernout 435). In the Joyce chapter (and, for that matter, throughout the whole book), Pinkerton shows good attention to detail, consistently offering engaging, nuanced close readings that help enrich our understanding of the author. It is commonplace for Pinkerton to partner unique insight with unique expression, such as with his claim that Joyce is able "to put the scatology in eschatology" (48). Readers who are interested in Joyce's complex, paradoxical faith are likely to benefit from this chapter.

Pinkerton smoothly transitions to Loy's work by beginning with a discussion of her poem "Joyce's Ulysses." Pinkerton proceeds by showing how Loy's writing "retains and wonderfully exploits the blasphemy inherent in artistic creation as it strives to rival that of God himself" (52). One of her characteristic moves is to offer "profane invocations of sacred things," often combining "sexuality and sacrament in profane communion" (53). The significance of the argument goes beyond merely identifying these trends in her writing, for he shows the "range of aesthetic and polemical implications" of Loy's work, most prominently in her assault on "the gendered hierarchies of both church and state, orthodoxy and patriarchy" (53). The discussion of Loy's idiosyncratic faith is important to our understanding of modernism. As Pericles Lewis very rightly observes, modernity was not a time of widespread secularism but of "conflict over the possibilities for a religious life in the modern world" (Lewis 43). Modernists, quite often, were not outright irreligious; on the contrary, they were often quite individualistic in their approach to faith. Loy adheres to this trend through her

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“supremely idiosyncratic version of Christian Science” (55) and eventual preoccupation with literary “blasphemy, desecration, [and] damnation” to aid her in her “ideological critiques” of orthodox faith (64).

In chapter three, “Blasphemy and the New Negro,” Pinkerton departs from the single-author structure that characterizes the rest of his study. Instead, the focus rests on “the artistic rebellion undertaken by a coterie of young Harlem artists of the 1920s and 1930s,” a group referred to as the “Niggeratti” (7). This “renegade coterie of artists and writers [. . .] included Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes” (79); collectively, they pushed against the ideas espoused in Alain Locke’s *New Negro*. A large part of the focus in this chapter rests on Pinkerton’s insistence that Locke’s *New Negro* took on near biblical authority, a process he refers to as “biblicization” (88). The issue is that Locke’s work is “only prophetic” (89); for Thurman, Nugent, Hurston, and Hughes, it was no longer adequate to merely “await the Chosen One” (89). This “Word, not yet flesh” feeds into their desire to “proffer emphatic depictions of the body, of sexuality, and of parodic scriptural figures that profanes both organized Christianity and the New Negro enterprise as sacralized by Locke’s anthology” (89). Chapter three is fascinating, and yet it is somewhat peculiar to shift to a multi-author focus in a book that is dominated by single-author chapters. Martin Lockerd suggests that adding a second chapter would have helped (424); another possibility would have been to bring chapter three down to just a single author. One could easily envision a chapter on, for instance, the poetry of Langston Hughes. His communist poetry from the 1930s provides ample material for a discussion of blasphemy, especially given the study’s emphasis on understanding the “political potential” of modernist “irreverence” (4). To his credit, Pinkerton does provide some concise analysis of Hughes’s work, showing how the conflation between lynching and crucifixion is put “into the service of political” goals (100).

Chapter four shifts to Djuna Barnes and *Nightwood*. The central thesis is that Barnes’s blasphemy contradicts early twentieth-century sexology. “Blasphemy,” Pinkerton claims, “is Barnes’s preferred weapon in this battle, the principal means—in accordance with its trademark inversions of the sacred—by which Barnes turns contemporary sexology on its head” (112). The discussion of her reliance on language that has a dual meaning—both sacred and sexual—is fascinating, and it’s a focus that recalls Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Furthermore, the analysis of O’Connor’s “inversions of orthodoxy” and status as “*Nightwood*’s resident father-confessor as well as its prophet of inversion” is thoughtful (123). For a variety of reasons, *Nightwood* is difficult to understand, not the least of which being because of the religious component of the

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text. Pinkerton does a nice job of leveraging the novel's blasphemy to broaden our understanding.

By the end of *Blasphemous Modernism*, the main question I have about Pinkerton's study rests in the relationship between literary modernism's orthodox believers and blasphemy. Eliot, who is so important for framing the study, could have been a fascinating point of discussion. Before his conversion, Eliot ventures into blasphemy in his writing, such as in "The Hippopotamus." Can we find blasphemy in Eliot's writing after his conversion? After all, it was Eliot himself who suggested that "'first-rate blasphemy'" requires genuine belief. Eliot was obviously a key figure within modernism—one who was a keen admirer of both Joyce's and Barnes's blasphemous writings—so some greater focus on orthodox blasphemy may have been worthwhile. These quibbles, though, might also be configured as a compliment. To my mind, the main issue simply rests in how rich the topic/material is; modernists had a lot to say about religion, and they often did so in a blasphemous manner. Perhaps Pinkerton could one day return to this topic, doing so with a focus on orthodoxy. Eliot could be a central focus, but there are numerous options, as Lockerd suggests (425).

In the final pages, Pinkerton meditates on some of the main take-aways from his work. "For although God lives on in the pages of many modernist texts," Pinkerton writes, "he does so in spite of, and inevitably in response to, his widely conceded 'death' beyond those pages" (132). Pinkerton thus suggests that "[w]e may even do well to regard modernist blasphemy as a literary working-through of God's putative death that discursively forestalls that event, preserving God as the melancholic object of both identification and profanation" (132). These words are thought-provoking and worthy of continued reflection. Whether Nietzsche's divine death actually occurred—or if it ever actually has—remains open to debate, and yet there is no debating the importance of Pinkerton's work. *Blasphemous Modernism* stands alongside Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* and Erik Tonning's *Modernism and Christianity* as invaluable studies on modernism's preoccupation with Christianity. Anyone interested in better understanding modernism's relationship with faith—or, indeed, modernism itself—would be well-served by reading Pinkerton's study.

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Shakespeare and the Politics of Commoners: Digesting the New Social History. Edited by Chris Fitter. Oxford University Press, 2017. 264 pp. \$80.00 (hardcover).

Starting with the not uncommon argument that new historicist work overstates elite dominance, this collection attends to the ways that commoners in Shakespeare's plays express a political voice. The editor, Chris Fitter, suggests that previous scholarship has narrowed the role of popular politics by restricting political consciousness to the elite; however, "it is from this tunnel vision," Fitter contends, "that the new social history may free us, restoring the complex breadth and depth of Shakespeare's political climate, its gamut of appeals, options, and constituencies, populist and elite" (11). Drawing on the social history of Keith Wrightson and others, the book makes the case that dramatic texts are useful historical records that have been underexamined by historians, and methodologies used by social historians—analysis of society emphasizing the dynamic and interactional nature of political power—have been overlooked by Shakespeareans. Fitter draws together an impressive group of distinguished literary scholars and social historians who each contribute chapters that reflect on the complex, sometimes contradictory, ways that plebeians respond to social pressures. The contributors seek to re-engage scholarship with commoners' political agency by accounting for the social depth of politics in Shakespeare's plays.

In the introduction, Fitter claims that new historicist criticism overestimates the power of dominant culture; however, Fitter contends that more recent criticism—borrowing from the new social history—reveals forms of resistance and dissent in popular culture. Fitter positions the theater as a space where popular politics is exercised through dramatization, which suggests that plays are instrumental political acts. In fact, many of the chapters are eager to emphasize Shakespeare's abiding sensitivity to plebeian plight. In chapter two, Peter Lake surveys the use of the word "popularity," mostly used as a term of opprobrium in the period for winning public support, to demonstrate the Tudors' uneasiness about engaging in popularity politics. Lake looks to *Richard II* and the *Henry IV* plays to argue that Shakespeare presents competing outlooks on popularity politics, underscoring the different ways that Richard II and Hal court public opinion. While the introduction and second chapter carve out the basic function and parameters of popularity in the period, chapters three through six draw from social history to explore the circulation of popular politics in the history plays.

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Chapter three, by David Rollison, invokes the etymology of “commonwealth” to explore the popular tradition that political authority depends not on lineage but on cooperation with the people. Analyzing *2 Henry VI* alongside popular Tudor rebellions, Rollison claims that the rebellion in the play is quelled only when the commoners’ voice is heard, suggesting that “Shakespeare inherited, embraced, and voiced a broad-fronted vernacular political tradition in which what ‘all’ thought mattered” (80). Rollison’s conclusion that it was “the commonwealth that legitimized the state” is a key part of the collection’s interest in the importance of cooperation, interdependence, and interaction (80). In fact, it is this premise—that historians have largely undervalued the degree to which elite authority depends on popular assent—that ties many of the collection’s chapters together. In chapter four, Andy Wood again takes up *2 Henry VI* to focus on representations of rebellion in the 1590s. Wood demonstrates that Shakespeare’s dramatic representation of Cade’s rebellion maps onto social tensions in the 1590s, arguing that the play reflects widespread animosity toward the elite, an animosity that was expressed on the stage but did not directly boil over into active rebellion. Therefore, Wood convincingly infers, there were few full-scale rebellions in the 1590s because resentments were purged through staged representations of rebellion. Thomas Cartelli’s chapter five explores how commoners use silence as a form of resistance in *Richard III*. Using the work of anthropologist James C. Scott, Cartelli calls attention to the difference between “public” and “hidden” transcripts in the play. Cartelli notes that moments of silence in *Richard III* are “hidden” transcripts that express resistance. Each of the three chapters looks to Shakespeare’s history plays as representations of popular speech and silence that encode subversive commentary on early modern politics, and that emphasis on subversion continues in the next four chapters.

In chapter six, Stephen Longstaffe, like Rollison and Wood, explores Cade’s rebellion in *2 Henry VI*. Noting the different representations of Cade in the Quarto and Folio editions, Longstaffe suggests that the Quarto excludes much of Cade’s wanton destructiveness while the Folio amplifies that matter; consequently, Longstaffe suggests that the Quarto emphasizes merry carnivalesque while the Folio reveals a suspicion of commoners. Turning once again to the history plays, Paola Pugliatti’s chapter seven looks to *1 Henry IV* as a reflection of anxieties about new military theory, particularly whether the use of gunpowder can be considered just. While the chapter has less to do with popular politics or commoners, it does briefly take up the issue of the conscription of commoners. In chapter eight, Markku Peltonen offers a rhetorical reading of Brutus’s and Antony’s speeches in *Julius Caesar*,

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and while the topic of rhetoric in the play is well-rehearsed, Peltonen's analysis is a striking account of attitudes in the period toward popular politics and republicanism. While most chapters in the collection read the plays as sympathetic toward commoners, Peltonen's conclusion is decidedly skeptical. In fact, the chapter suggests that Brutus' formal oration—though noble and sophisticated—fails to win the audience like Antony's speech because the latter's speech plays to the audience's baser instincts. Much like Lake's chapter, Antony plays on popularity politics to ingratiate himself with the commoners, which triggers a civil war. David Norbrook's chapter nine, which Annabel Patterson calls "unusually dense intellectual history" in the afterward, reflects on a radical tradition of republicanism stretching from Livy to Shakespeare (260). For Norbrook, *Coriolanus* dramatizes conflicting attitudes toward republicanism, concluding with a "caustically ironic and destabilizing vision" of politics (211). The four chapters in this section explore how political and military theory is put into practice, a consideration that the final two chapters build upon in their exploration of how Shakespeare dramatizes commoners' plight.

In chapter ten, Chris Fitter argues that *King Lear* critiques the state's handling of widespread poverty in the period and exposes the experience of England's underclass. The play, Fitter claims, dismantles stereotypes about vagrants and criticizes the elite's lack of charity. In the final chapter, Jeffrey Doty turns to the work of James C. Scott once again to recover a "hidden" transcript in *The Tempest*. Doty explores how Prospero's culture of service damages Caliban's ability to self-actualize, and he points out that Prospero's treatment of Caliban contradicts theories of service relations in the period. Furthermore, the play's repeated interest in "freedom" and "liberty" is juxtaposed with images of coercion and violence toward servants, which Doty connects with apprentice uprisings in the period. Both Fitter's and Doty's chapters indicate how Shakespeare uses the stage to reflect the suffering of ordinary commoners. The collection concludes with a learned afterward, written by Annabel Patterson, that contemplates critical shifts since the publication of her *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (1989), shifts that ultimately point to the confirmation that commoners did indeed express "a collective political sagacity" (257).

The collection is a helpful addition to Shakespearean criticism because it uses social history to answer some of the plays' knotty questions, and it is useful for social historians because it seeks to include dramatic texts into the canon of legitimate historical documentation. This book encourages scholars to engage with the dramatic representation of commoners and their lived experience in nuanced ways. Scholars interested in issues related to class in the history plays will

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find ample material; however, the collection rarely brings up gender or race, which—given the demographics of what we would call “popular”—seems like a fairly large blind spot. Furthermore, the book focuses its attention on the history plays, but we miss a sustained reflection of how the popular voice circulated in other genres—or how genre itself might be a useful category to query. These essays demonstrate, however, that historical evidence can be used to produce new readings about politics in Shakespeare’s plays.

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The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games. By Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. New York University Press, 2019. 225 pp. \$28.00 (hardcover).

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* is a wide-reaching book with an intimate focus and real-world implications. This book delves into the murky waters of racial representation in YA texts (literature, film, and television alike) with a clear thesis, point of view, and impactful conclusion. Throughout the book, Thomas brings her perspective as a Critical Race theorist, and her experience as an educator, aunt, and fan to a manifesto on treating the imaginations of young people (especially those of color) as a precious, nonrenewable resource meant to be nurtured. This inventive approach is grounded by Thomas's creation of the *Dark Fantastic Cycle*. This cycle combines literary criticism, pop culture critique, and Critical Race Theory into a tangible metric by which to measure how creators of YA texts create and treat their Black women characters.

One thing (of many) the book does deftly introduce, early on, the idea of the "Dark Fantastic" cycle that affects Black women and girl characters in popular fantasy/sci-fi texts. The book wastes no time with its accessible explanation that reappears throughout the book. This cycle is made up of four to five steps and frames Thomas's subsequent discussion of the treatment of Black women characters in the aforementioned genres. These steps include spectacle, hesitation, violence, haunting, and (rarely) emancipation (which in Thomas's view is the only way to subvert the entire cycle).

In this introduction she gives a helpful "Tour of *The Dark Fantastic*," which outlines what will be contained in each chapter, including the different texts analyzed and how she will situate each character in the Dark Fantastic cycle. Thomas makes it clear in her introduction that she will be focusing on popular television and book series (including *The Hunger Games* and the BBC's *Merlin*) precisely because they are helmed by largely white creators for a mainstream audience, and therefore not focused on the liberatory racialized and gendered possibilities that other projects within this genre (such as Afrofuturism) could be. Lastly, this introduction gives insight into what Thomas calls the "imagination gap," which in her view is responsible for the dearth of Black characters (and Black characters with diverse experiences and storylines) in publishing and television, specifically those marketed to teens and young adults. She draws on her own experiences with children and as a child and declares that it is not the lack of imagination

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on the part of the child that is the root of the problem; it is “the failures of adults” (6). This section of her introduction morphs into the clarion call that pervades the rest of the book for creators to do better and those in the position to do so to lift up the voices of non-white/non-male creators so that children of color don’t have to rely solely on their own imaginations to envision themselves in worlds that care about them.

In chapter one Thomas lays out the specifics of her *Dark Fantastic* cycle. It is also here where she addresses the book’s most glaring omission: Black trans and non-binary characters. She offers the explanation that when setting her focus on the mainstream publishing and television world, there is simply not enough/no examples, or as Thomas states: “their limited number in popular speculative transmedia during the period of research and writing (2013-2017)” (33). While, to some, this explanation could mimic the same “I couldn’t find any” excuses of white creators/casting directors accused of under- or misrepresentation on screen, this is actually a main tenet of Thomas’s thesis. The only reason that the *Dark Fantastic* cycle is so prevalent is because of this paucity of representation, perpetuated by the white-dominated industries of publishing and television production.

In each subsequent chapter, Thomas starts off with a series of quotes: one from the text centered in the chapter, one from a theoretical text, and one from a different, well-known, usually fictional text that centers around a theme such as darkness, sacrifice, or something else pertinent to the chapter. She then establishes the cultural context of each text, gives a short summary of the plot and how the character in question is treated and then expands on how the cycle plays out.

Chapter two focuses on *The Hunger Games*. She situates her analysis in the original book series, but uses examples from the movie, especially in the section in which she highlights the backlash to the choice of casting a Black actor in the role of Rue (the series’ most prominent Black character).

Chapter three centers around the BBC’s series *Merlin* and the race-swapped character of Guinevere. She walks us through the cycle, and then focuses on how both the fans and the show itself failed Gwen. She discusses the backlash of how a Black woman being the object of affection for a white king was deemed “unrealistic” and “historically inaccurate” in a show with a talking dragon and an immortal magician. She places this discussion in the context of how most mainstream Black stories (even fantastical ones) take place somewhere along the Middle Passage, even if they take place centuries later. The point is these stories are always, even if theoretically, rooted in slavery and trauma, which, in Thomas’s words results in the “impossibility of Black

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heroism, agency, and beauty” (93), especially when such stories take place outside of this realm.

Chapter four centers around Bonnie Bennett, a character from the popular YA-novels-turned-CW-series *The Vampire Diaries*. She compares and contrasts Bonnie from the books with the Bonnie from the movies. She highlights the uncommon choice of making a supporting character Black who wasn't already canon Black in the texts. Importantly, she pays special attention to how Bonnie's character background and storylines changed. Crucially, a romance with one of the main (white) vampire brothers, Damon Salvatore, that was present in the books is completely absent in the television series, despite the desire from both actors to pursue this storyline and their undeniable onscreen chemistry. She analyzes how, especially in the first seasons of the show, fans were inclined to dislike Bonnie because of her antagonism towards vampires. Thomas connects the (tv) character of Bonnie to her own life and personal experience watching the show with her niece, discussing how, even though it might not have been intentional by the writers and creators, Bonnie is a character that these two Black women specifically can claim as their own, emancipating her in their own imaginations.

In the last chapter, Thomas effortlessly blends “fantasy” and “reality” with her discussion of Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series. In each chapter, Thomas weaves a bit of her own life into her analysis, usually detailing her connection to each character she discusses in detail. However, in chapter five she takes a firmly ethnographic approach, discussing her early days in some of the first *Harry Potter* online fandoms. This chapter is particularly strong, especially in the sections in which Thomas details how racial marginalization in fiction jumps off the page and seeps into fan communities, affecting Thomas personally in the early 2000s when she dealt with allegations of plagiarism in nascent online fan fiction forums.

Overall, this book is a must-read for those who engage in pop-culture criticism, specifically television and film scholars. Additionally, educators teaching children about the wonders of literature would benefit greatly from seeing just how society impacts and restricts the imagination of those most in need of its sanctuary. More broadly, this book should be high on the list for anyone involved in fandom/fanfiction communities, from the casual watcher and reader to the die-hard Trekkie. Consciously engaging with these properties means understanding the implications not just of their content but of the actions of supporters alike. Although this may be wishful thinking on my part, if I had my way, every book and television writer, publisher, and producer, especially those who are white, would read this book immediately and

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take its words to heart, using it as a road map to structure and restructure the YA offerings that impact our children on a foundational level. If we heed Thomas's words, we might make it to the fifth step after all and our characters, our children, and our national imaginations, would be—finally—emancipated.

Genevieve Ruzicka

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Langston Hughes. By W. Jason Miller. Reaktion Books, 2020. 224 pp. \$19.00 (paperback).

During the last thirty-seven years, biographers have advanced toward writing a work that would reveal the complete story of James Langston Hughes's life. In 1983 Faith Berry brought out *Before and Beyond Harlem*, which in addition to a fine presentation of factual details was particularly good in suggesting the mysteries of the poet's experiences. By the end of the decade, Arnold Rampersad finished *The Life of Langston Hughes* (1986; 1988), a two-volume tome, which remains definitive for its unrivaled detail and scope. W. Jason Miller's *Langston Hughes* emerges as his third book on Hughes in slightly less than a decade. Just nine years ago, he first established his authority in Hughes scholarship with the social study *Langston Hughes and American Lynching Culture* (2011). Only four years later, he published the *Origins of the Dream: Hughes's Poetry and King's Rhetoric* (2015), an interdisciplinary inquiry focusing on Hughes's poems as sources for the speeches and writings of the Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. In keeping with the political bent of his earlier work, Miller continues to emphasize the importance of Hughes as a social poet. Along the way, he provides new twists in how we can understand Hughes and his literary art. In addition to the biographical research into the sources for many of Hughes's writings, Miller explores concurrently the economics that exerted an impact on the works. Further, he narrates a story of Hughes's latent bisexuality, which has been largely erased from polite discourse. My review will finish with an optimistic theory of Miller's own contribution.

Each of eleven pithy chapters ranges from twelve to nineteen pages. The primary sources, typical of the author's preference, include numerous letters and columns culled from the Hughes correspondences in the James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Beinecke Library at Yale. Miller retrieves obscure facts, telling bits of information that help complete a portrait of Hughes. Early in the study, Miller recovers a handwritten manuscript of the poem "Dream Deferred," originally titled "Harlem," then devises a clever scheme involving initially the sources of poems for political leaders such as Martin Luther King, and later explains the social themes carefully organized according to first appearances in Hughes's oeuvre. Such arrangements incorporate the subplots of the communist party in the thirties and the FBI surveillance of Hughes during the forties. A significant motif concerns the impact of photography on the development of Hughes's experimental poetics.

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Miller reports some nice new twists on available information. As many know, Hughes won the literary prize of \$80 from *Opportunity Magazine* for the submission of "Weary Blues," a title poem that helped launch his career in 1926. Today few would realize that the poet's entry succeeded in a major competition, on 1 May 1924, over more than seven hundred others at a banquet sponsored by *Opportunity Magazine*. While the reason for Hughes's not attending Howard University, the employer of his mentor Alain Locke, has often been overlooked, Miller explains the circumstances. Locke, a former Rhodes scholar (for whom the administration building at Howard is now named,) was fired during 1925-26. Apparently, his bold requests for equal pay for black faculty and his support of the elimination of mandatory chapel services for students was too progressive for the liking of the administration. Later during the decade, Hughes's fellow undergraduates at Columbia burned a cross on the lawn outside of his residence hall. After forty years, the poet saved his own life by ducking away from Harlem gunfire on Lenox Avenue and then surviving a pistol held to his head during a mugging. In the last decade of his life, he declined an invitation by King to attend the March for Civil Rights at Washington in 1963. By nearly all accounts Langston Hughes was sixty-one then, but Miller insists the writer was only sixty.

Sometimes Miller proves quite speculative. He suggests that Hughes's landlord, Mrs. Dorsey, may have been as significant a source for the poem "Mother and Son" in 1922 as Hughes's own grandmother had been. There are other surprising suppositions as well. For years no one could specify Hughes's undergraduate major. When I asked Blyden Jackson, then the senior scholar of African American literature in the South at the University of North Carolina, he ventured that the specialty was Sociology. After all, Hughes had completed a senior paper on the subject at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1929. The Registrar's office at Lincoln has never responded to my query as to Hughes's specialty, but Miller insists Hughes was trained to be a teacher. How does he know?

Owing to Professor Miller, a few cold cases are now resolved. Charlotte Mason, Hughes's wealthy patron of the late twenties, wore pearls. For ninety years, she has been the most logical source for Dora Ellsworth, the elderly white patron in the tale "The Blues I'm Playing." While factual evidence of the connection between the real woman and her fictional representation has been sparse to date, the biographical proof now exists. With a little less detail, Miller confirms Patsy's Bar and Grill, a tavern located at 2623 Eighth Avenue in Harlem as the site of the Hughes Simple tales published between 1943 and 1965. Such columns had appeared mostly in the African American newspaper *The*

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Chicago Defender but were finally concluded in *The New York Post*. Later, Miller discusses the invitation by Martin Luther King, Jr. to write a tribute in 1959 for the labor activist A. Philip Randolph. It had been Randolph, of course, who led the Union of Sleeper Car Porters and Maids in 1925 to acquire worker rights on the national railways. In 1941 he would influence President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to desegregate the armed forces. By 1963 Randolph would manage the busy calendar for the March on Washington.

All the time, economics mattered. During Hughes's brief employment as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C., the young poet left a few poems beside the dinner plate of the modern American bard Vachel Lindsay, who along with his contemporary Carl Sandburg, was literary heir to the Whitman tradition. When *Vanity Fair* paid the newly publicized Hughes fifty cents a line for three verses, Hughes had an idea. Instead of writing the standard blues bar in the AAB rhyme scheme, he would double the metric lines and therefore his income from published verses. Over his long career, he rarely made money off his dramatic productions either. An exception was the 1947 Broadway production *Street Scene* (a revision of Elmer Rice's 1929 Pulitzer prize-winning play), which Miller recognizes as the first real financial success of Hughes's career. The performances resulted in royalties of \$10,000 from 142 shows, enabling Hughes to move into his now famous residence at 20 E. 127th Street in Harlem.

Miller explores the subject of the writer's latent bisexuality as few have done before. Until now there were whispers of clandestine overtures by Locke to Hughes hidden in Moorland-Spingarn Collection at Howard University. Miller brings the discussion into broad daylight. Hughes sailed alone to Europe on 13 June 1922, despite invitations by fellow poet Countee Cullen and Alain Locke to travel intimately with them. After a historic dinner sponsored by *Opportunity Magazine*, the publication organ of the National Association for Colored People (NAACP), Hughes and Cullen became inexplicably distant from each other. Miller proposes that Hughes had already declined Cullen's sexual overtures. To further the contentions, Miller uses the cryptic modern poem "Café 3 a.m." to evince Hughes's empathy for gay rights in 1951, the year of a national crackdown on sexual orientation. In tandem with "Blessed Assurance," a tale included in *Something in Common and Other Stories* (1963), Hughes's final collection of the kind, the recovered poem strengthens a case for Hughes's emergent place in gay studies.

The airing of African American culture's dirty laundry, as some would call such disclosures, will hardly endear this biography to the more conservative black audiences. As the late literary historian

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Blyden Jackson assured me a generation ago, "If Hughes were gay, I would certainly have known it." While there is still no smoking gun to disprove the pioneering critic, a new surge in circumstantial evidence is certainly turning the tide.

To realize the full potential of Miller's new biography would mean to theorize a distinction between a journalistic storyline and a scholarly narrative. For while the reporter's strategy emphasizes collections of all facts, the literary biographer's privileges the integration of selective details into a focused story of the writer's own voice and mind. Though the journalist is primarily a literary historian, a critic reveals the beauty and meaning (Hughes's terms) of the subject's life. Both the literary historian and the critic collect historical data almost obsessively; but the critic extrapolates figures of meaning from history and indeed human existence. The reporter and literary biographer are both therefore essential to holistic scholarship, each completing the other.

Perhaps a fine instance would serve to illustrate a potential future of Hughes biography. After the death of Hughes's father, the senior James Hughes, in 1934, the son (James) Langston would walk in Mexican corridors past colorful prints by the celebrated painter Diego Rivera (1886-1957), whose frescoes had helped establish the mural tradition in international art. The moment, set amid the measured grandeur, encapsulates the grief of the surviving author. And the demise of the father, foreshadowed in a troubling dream according to Langston himself in *The Big Sea* and Faith Berry in *Before and Beyond Harlem*, leaves Hughes to ponder anew his place in the world. In a different way from Rivera, Hughes contemplates the communal revelations he himself must inscribe on the tableaux of African American history. It is important to perceive the writer's life as he does then.

Miller could extrapolate Hughes's most defining traits from historical facts. The patterns consist of Hughes's refusal to make sexual commitments either to women or men, his compulsion to write a montage of dreams on the canvases of world history, his inscription of serious and comic work within and across time, his declaration of independence from white sponsorship in America, and his survival of the Great Depression for future generations. Despite the many odd jobs over the decades, Hughes accomplished major breakthroughs in publishing. Beyond the reportage of his career, he depicts a blues piano (*The Ways of White Folks*) as a private sacrament of communal liberation.

What compelled Langston Hughes to become an inspiring voice? An incomplete answer motivates W. Jason Miller to be the most prolific Hughes scholar of the decade. In this book, he completes an excellent report, tilling the ground for more profound, interpretive texts. On the

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way, he rediscovers several significant sources for a new millennium. Hughes scholars are greatly indebted to his impeccable research.

R. Baxter Miller

R. Baxter Miller, a doctoral graduate of English at Brown University, is Professor Emeritus of English and African American Studies at the University of Georgia. A leading literary and cultural critic, he has written or edited eleven books and two new pamphlets on contemporary subjects. His most recent critical study is *Arc of Modernism: The Rise of African American Poetics from Langston Hughes to Gwendolyn Brooks* (2021); and his earlier work, *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*, won the American Book Award in 1991.

Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath. By Heather Clark. Knopf, 2020. xxix + 1118 pp. \$30.00 (hardcover).

I know what you're thinking: who has time to read a thousand-page book right now, with papers to grade, lessons to prepare, a conference paper due next week (assuming your travel funding hasn't been cut in the wake of COVID-19), and some committee drudge work to complete.

I won't argue with you, but don't dismiss this book. Wait until you have a free week over summer, or winter break—I read *Red Comet* the week between Christmas and New Year's. Even if Sylvia Plath isn't, as yet, one of your scholarly or personal interests, save it for later, as the English Beat used to say.

In *Red Comet*, Plath finally gets the biography she deserves. Heather Clark, a literature professor at the University of Huddersfield, is the first Plath biographer to make use of the complete letters, published only in 2018, and to gain full access to the Plath and Hughes archives, including a series of unpublished interviews with close friends of the couple housed in the Hughes archive at Emory University. Throughout, Clark brings both the biographer's detective-like doggedness and the literary critic's sensitivity to bear on Plath's richly dramatic life and work. In this capacity she seeks to free Plath the complex human being from the often overwrought discourse that has encrusted Plath's life and work since her suicide nearly sixty years ago, a kind of mythology that holds her up as "a high priestess of poetry, obsessed with death" (xviii) and reduces her *oeuvre* to a particular poem or two.

And Clark succeeds, at least to the extent that it is possible to do so, by delving into Plath's family background and her cultural and social inheritance. As she puts it, Plath "took herself and her desires seriously in a world that often refused to do so [. . .] she hoped to be a writer, wife, and mother, but she was raised in a culture that openly derided female artistic ambition" (xvi). In other words, Clark applies to her subject's life the central question of Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, set in the era of McCarthy, the Rosenbergs, and *Mad Men*: is mental illness merely a sane response to living in an insane world?

Among Clark's contributions are fuller, more nuanced, backstories for Plath's parents. Otto Plath was already in his mid-40s when Sylvia was born, and had a rather more complicated youth than that implied in "Daddy." Among other things, he married but soon abandoned his first wife, and was investigated by the Bureau of Investigation for pro-German sentiments during the First World War while studying at UC Berkeley; he was a Harvard-trained full professor at Boston University when he met Aurelia, one of his students and herself a college valedic-

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torian. She soon reluctantly assumed the role of mother and housewife, and in the wake of Otto's death, Aurelia raised two children while teaching shorthand. A brilliant but complex father, and an accomplished but stifled mother—these were the models that both inspired and horrified Plath, who would graduate *summa cum laude* from Smith College on a full scholarship and win a Fulbright to Cambridge, but who would also be left alone with two small children by her estranged husband.

Clark is also able to delve deeply not only into Plath's mental health history, but also into the cultural and institutional contexts for psychiatric treatment of the 1950s and 60s. The electric shocks Plath received in the wake of her first breakdown were much stronger and more frequent than those normally used today, and without any muscle relaxants or anesthetic. Clark also tells us that the number of hospitalized psychiatric patients peaked in 1953 (the same year Plath was hospitalized, and the same year Jacqueline Kennedy underwent shock treatments at her husband's behest). Clark also offers much detail on Plath's final, lonely days in the bitterly cold London winter of 1963: her doctor, not a psychiatrist, prescribed several powerful medications that interacted with serious side effects. Additionally, perhaps fatally, he told Plath he was planning to admit her to a mental hospital on February 11. Fearing a repeat of her 1953 psychiatric treatment, Plath killed herself around dawn that morning.

We learn too that Plath's family has suffered from mental illnesses for generations. Clark tells us that Plath's maternal grandmother died in 1919 in the Oregon Hospital for the Insane. And she argues that Otto Plath's relatively early death was likely hastened by his depressive and fatalistic refusal of medical treatment for the chronic diseases that killed him. Plath's son Nicholas committed suicide while working in Alaska as a wildlife biologist in 2009. Clark wisely doesn't speculate on any causal relationships between the various Plath family members' mental illnesses, though perhaps if or when depression and suicide become better understood, a study of the family's history would be rewarding. Clark does, however, make compelling connections between Plath's suicide and the fate of Assia Wevill, the woman for whom Ted Hughes left Sylvia. But that terrible story is better read in Clark's book, not summarized here.

In line with her book's overall aims, Clark treats the Plath-Hughes marriage evenhandedly—aided, no doubt, by her own fine book *The Grief of Influence*, an examination of Sylvia and Ted's complexly symbiotic literary relationship, as well as by her access to the full Plath and Hughes archives. In addition to detailing the influence of Hughes's earthier, Lawrentian style on Plath's rather formal and ornate early

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verse, and Plath's shepherding of Hughes's work into print, Clark explains how husband and wife would split childcare duties—Ted would take the kids in the morning to allow Sylvia to write, while she would handle the afternoons. Again, context is everything. While this arrangement would be fairly normal today, it was nearly unheard of in the early 1960s. Life was not without its strains, of course. Plath took a full-time position teaching composition and literature at Smith so the couple could save some money, but soon she chafed at the bit, writing to her brother, Warren, that "I am sacrificing my energy, writing, and versatile intellectual life for grubbing over 66 Hawthorne papers a week and trying to be articulate in front of a rough class of spoiled bitches." Clark details the Lawrentian tones of Plath's romantic life as well. She seems to have been a virgin until her early 20s, but then quickly made up for lost time, beginning with her "blonde" phase in the summer following her first breakdown. (Clark's book includes many photographs of a smiling, swimsuit-clad Plath that are rather jarring to see, given Plath's dour reputation.) A few weeks after meeting Hughes in 1956, Plath wrote in her journal: "I lust for him, and in my mind I am ripped to bits by the words he welds and wields . . . and glory in the temporary sun of his ruthless force."

Literary success brought its strains as well. By 1960 Hughes had published a second volume of poems to great acclaim, and was soon joining the likes of Eliot and Auden at London soirees. Plath, her first volume *The Colossus* still in preparation, went along as "the wife." In a time before the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the handsome Hughes was the equivalent of a rock star, and soon the temptations of fame led him away from Sylvia and the children into the company of admirers like Wevill. The separation dealt Plath a terrible blow, and with two young children, made time for her literary endeavors much more difficult to come by. Still, Plath rallied bravely at times: "I'll be damned if I want to sit here like a cow, milked by babies. I love my children, but want my own life. I want to write books, see people and travel . . . I refuse the role of passive, suffering wife." It was in these first few weeks of bitter independence in the fall of 1962 that Plath wrote with a still-unmatched invention and fury the poems we read today.

Helpfully, Clark reminds us that "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" were not mere "spontaneous overflow[s] of powerful feelings." In the last few years of her life, Plath gradually retooled her rather neoclassical early style under the influence of Hughes's darker, Lawrentian tones and the "confessional" work of Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, whose seminar Plath attended in the late 1950s. Such influences also inspired Plath to write *The Bell Jar*. Incredibly, Plath's novel was rejected by American publishers, and *The New Yorker*—which had by then published many

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of Plath's poems—refused all of her great late 1962 poems. (*The Bell Jar* and Plath's posthumous collection *Ariel* would each eventually sell millions of copies, and Plath would be awarded a Pulitzer for her *Collected Poems* in 1982). These rejections, Clark writes, plus a failed fling with Al Alvarez, the leading literary critic of the day, seemed to have pushed Plath closer to surrender, chillingly captured in the flat minimalism of "Child" and "Edge," the latter poem written just a week before Plath's death.

Red Comet leaves the reader both aggrieved and astonished. For all the tragedy, and there is plenty, Plath lived more in thirty years than most people do in eighty. Thanks to Heather Clark, we get to spend a rewarding week—whenever we can find it—with the most compelling American poet of the twentieth century.

Douglas Higbee

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Ida Lupino, Director: Her Art and Resilience in Times of Transition. By Therese Grisham and Julie Grossman. Rutgers University Press, 2017. 264 pp. \$31.95 (paperback).

As Therese Grisham and Julie Grossman remind us in this groundbreaking and judiciously comprehensive study, the multi-faceted career of Ida Lupino (1918-1995) played out in times of transition as the studio system in which she had worked as actress, writer, director, and producer slipped into history, while the emergence of television provided important opportunities for those left stranded to continue their careers in a related form of recorded screen narrative. It was the survival of the fittest, and a period in which the “resilient,” to pick up the term of art Grisham and Grossman use to describe Lupino, might prosper, at a time in their careers when, according to Hollywood wisdom, age began to disqualify them from playing romantic leads. Only Loretta Young, also moving to network television in the 50s, was able to prosper, proving able to project glamour, beauty, and fantasy in the introductory and closing sections of her half-hour series, dramas, so she pretended, that had been prompted by letters from her fans. Her career on the small screen was a continuation of her years as an A-List performer. Unlike Lupino, she did not use the changed circumstances of the profession as a way exploring interests and talents that her studio career had prevented her from doing.

While she continued to perform often on the small screen, Lupino was more interested in practicing the art of directing/producing she had taught herself years earlier. Among the many talented and savvy women working from Hollywood mostly in television during this period, only Lupino proved able to fashion such a varied and substantial career as she took full advantage of a certain uncertainty in the industry, then abandoning for legal and other reasons the studio system and, sensing further opportunities to occupy the director’s chair, making her accommodation with a medium still defining its forms of production. At first as a performer (but she did write two episodes), Lupino was the only woman member of the consortium that gave its name to one of early television’s most successful and acclaimed anthology series: *Four Star Playhouse* (1952-56), holding her own with Dick Powell, Charles Boyer, and David Niven. After that run, she got the chance to direct more than sixty series episodes, from sitcoms like *The Donna Reed Show* to Westerns such as *Have Gun, Will Travel*. Her competence insured that she was able to work as both a journey-woman director and performer on television through the 70s until her death from cancer at 77.

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This much-needed volume exemplifies that, even after five decades of prolific scholarship, there remain significant silences in the written history of classic Hollywood, especially in the postwar era, when Ida Lupino flourished as a performer, but also, breaking a significant glass ceiling, founded a production company with then-husband Collier Young. Despite the flourishing of feminist film scholarship since the 1980s, not enough has previously been made of how a successful woman exploited every opportunity, including taking charge of productions, to gain the director's chair in an industry dominated by men in executive positions. Having succeeded in Hollywood as actress, director, writer, and entrepreneur, Lupino did the same in the television industry, of which she was one of the most significant and successful pioneers. Looking backward at the history of film studies in the US, it seems remarkable that Lupino was more or less ignored by the influential generation of women film scholars who pioneered feminist film criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, with, for reasons of identity politics, attention paid instead to a few women from the period whose careers were less noteworthy than her own.

This "second act," as Grisham and Grossman record in wonderful detail, would be enough to qualify her as one of the most important female presences behind the camera in an era in which that profession belonged almost exclusively to men. This book offers a fully-detailed, no nonsense, and appropriately appreciative account of a career that was already remarkable even before the decline of the studio era and the rise of television. The authors treat their subject with a variety of methods. Their work with relevant archives shines a useful light on the production history of the five films that Lupino directed for her Filmmakers Company, which was like others working on the margins of the industry that turned out lower budget productions; contextual analysis of their themes, which range from bigamy, to unplanned, unmarried pregnancy, to rape reveals that they take on subject matter from which other directors shied away; close analysis of her work with framing, performance, and editing establishes Lupino as an artist committed to enhancing with style the dramatic qualities of her scripts; her career is situated by a discussion of a Hollywood in the postwar era that was becoming ever more slightly open to the independent work from artists eager to take advantage of the freedom of expression that lower budget productions might permit.

In terms of consummate artistry and intellectual adventurousness, Lupino invites comparison to a figure from the same period, also active, as was she, in what we now call film noir, Edgar G. Ulmer; his *Detour* (1945) might usefully be set aside her *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), journeys through space and consciousness in which the dark sides of human

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nature continue to register their presence. From our postfeminist moment, it is easy enough to dismiss these films as, in the end, supportive of conventional values. But this would be to slight their artistry. A production such as *The Bigamist* explores not only the contrasting appeals for a man of the two women, one a supportive homemaker, the other an eager companion, to whom, for complex reasons he becomes serially married. The film, providing the “bigamist” with the weapon of self-explanatory voice-over, also offers a careful depiction of male interiority. The story moves into more problematic areas of human relations through its exploration of the promiscuity of male desire, finding a real-world solution of sorts for the wreckage and pain it causes.

Because this book is more grounded in production history, biographical depth, and sensitive readings of the relevant films, the considerable failings of decades of feminist-oriented criticism to take Lupino seriously are at last made right. For years, the only comprehensive study of the director referred to Lupino with misogyny and condescension, as “Queen of the B’s.” Those interested in late studio-era filmmaking and the first decades of television programming production will find this book a balanced assessment of a career that, had more opportunity presented itself, would surely have been even more spectacular than it was.

As Grisham and Grossman point out, Ida Lupino shattered several glass ceilings, demonstrating an intelligence, aplomb, and business sense that might have been recognized more substantially by her colleagues than with the two stars she was granted (one for film, the other for television) that memorialize her on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. This book remedies that slight in the most appropriate fashion, simply by chronicling a career characterized by a restless energy, much of which shines through in their enthusiastic, but balanced account. This well-written and carefully researched volume demonstrates how the most effective sort of film criticism is best informed by the drawing of connections between texts and context without the excess of airy theorizing for which the discipline of film studies, it is to be regretted, has become notorious in the last several decades. As with all effective studies of this kind, success depends on the mining of archival and journalistic sources for color and depth. It does not hurt, of course, that both authors write clear, readable English prose.

Interestingly, this book, devoted to a figure the authors unabashedly proclaim an auteur (a term of art that seems too limited to contain the depth and range of her accomplishments), itself appears in a time of transition within the industry. Once again the institutions and forms devoted to the production and distribution of screen narrative (think Netflix) are in flux. Once again the certain restless nimbleness

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that emerges as Lupino's most important personal quality has enabled the adventurous to reap substantial rewards (think David Fincher). Choosing to write in a time-honored academic genre—the director study—the authors also find themselves in a period of transition. The discipline of film studies, with its roots deep in the humanities and the neoromantic glorification of the personal, continues steadily on its decades-long turn toward the institutional impersonality of “media.” There are many within the field, including your humble narrator, who regret that this has meant fewer director-centered projects and less interest in Hollywood history, which—and this is a lesson worth attending to—still contains significant gaps, including accomplishments like those of Lupino that have not yet been properly recounted or celebrated.

This is book you will find impossible to put down as, avoiding the *préciosité* of both theoretical obfuscation and obsessive virtue signaling in a topic that could easily be overwhelmed by issues of identity politics, the two authors, who are masters of their subject, tell a story that is as engaging as it is remarkable. In terms of the auteurism that informs but does not limit their conception of authorship to assessments of neoromantic struggles against the proverbial grain, their highlighting of “resilience” as a key element of Lupino's career behind the camera is especially perspicacious. If, as they say, “art” is the quiddity that gives the finished object its allure and fascination, “resilience,” the ability to respond creatively to unfortunate circumstances, is the key to success in a commercial art form, where persistence and ingenuity must assert their force so that the object may take shape in the material world. That, acting as her own producer, and, needing to pay the bills, Lupino was able to negotiate money from commercial sponsors for product placement (creating a new source of interest for cinematographic representation) speaks as much to the success of her films as her fine eye for composition. Lupino shares artistic excellence with many of the others who occupied the director's chair in the era, but few could match her for guts, determination, and a refusal to be discouraged by the world of work she found herself in and which she had no little success in transforming.

R. Barton Palmer

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A Bristol, Rhode Island, and Matanzas, Cuba, Slavery Connection (The Diary of George Howe). By Rafael Ocasio. Lexington Books, 2020. 292 pp. \$95.00 (hardback).

In *A Bristol, Rhode Island, and Matanzas, Cuba, Slavery Connection (The Diary of George Howe)*, prolific scholar Rafael Ocasio explores the transatlantic connections between Bristol, Rhode Island and Matanzas, Cuba in the early nineteenth century, examining the ripple effects of the international sugar industry —along with its byproducts, molasses and rum—on peoples from three continents. The text focuses on this dynamic historical period when Cuba was at the center of a technological boom that witnessed the development of a stagecoach system linking Havana and Matanzas, the arrival of the railroad to the island, its first steamship and steam engine, along with dramatic changes to sugarcane plantation machinery. All of these innovations markedly affected the transatlantic economies and populations of Matanzas and Bristol, chiefly amongst them, enslaved peoples originating from Africa. Moreover, adding to the dynamism of this historical juncture, Cuba was a popular destination for leisure travelers, adventurers and naturalists, such as Alexander Van Homboldt (1767-1835), who visited the island in 1800 and 1804 (Ocasio 126), and whose written impressions of Cuba would influence others to follow. This is the complicated background Ocasio skillfully recovers in his multidisciplinary approach to George Howe's diary.

Ocasio highlights transatlantic dialogues, laying bare how the production of sugar bolstered economies on both sides of the trade equation, resulting in incredible growth not only for the wealthy plantation owners in Matanzas, but also, in parallel fashion, Bristolians who knew how to take advantage of evolving international laws allowing for non-Spaniards (/Cuban residents) to own land in Cuba. Ocasio centers much of his work on the fundamental and tragic role played by enslaved peoples in the international sugar trade. He recreates the historical, anthropological, social, political, economic, artistic, and literary context that bridged Cuba, then a Spanish colony with burgeoning hopes of independence along with growing abolitionist sentiments, with Rhode Island, a small American state sharing much with its transatlantic trade partner.

As the main thread of his study, Ocasio features the fascinating diary of George Howe (1791-1837), a Bristolian who traveled to Matanzas to manage a sugarcane plantation, or *ingenio*, there. The diary of Howe, a hybrid travelogue-plantation log of sorts, with the fanciful and lengthy full title of *The Diary with Letters, Lucubrations, Dreams, Flim-flams,*

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Cogitations, Whims, and Fantasies of the Author, offers first-hand insights into the often shuttered world of Cuban *ingenios* from an American perspective. Ocasio emphasizes Rhode Island's often ignored, central role in the international, illicit slave trade, particularly in connection with sugar production. Rhode Island's involvement in the illegal trade was not just limited to the United States; its tentacle reached across the Atlantic to Cuba, where wealthy Bristolians owned *ingenios*.

George Howe traveled to the New Hope Sugarcane Plantation near Matanzas, owned by Rhode Island magnate and politician James D'Wolf (1764-1837), where he served as a manager in the absence of D'Wolf from 1832-1834. While there, Howe wrote his fancifully titled text to a diverse audience and with multiple apparent outcomes. As Ocasio shows, Howe's manuscript, with its periphrastic title, is hybrid in nature. At once, Howe's *Diary* is a travelogue; a plantation narrative; a personal diary exposing his own disillusionment; a plantation manager's business log (akin to a ship log), featuring agrarian and technological descriptions of both sugarcane production and the timber industry; a naturalist's journal revealing awe in light of the Cuban flora and fauna; a set of reflections on potential business opportunities in the "new frontier" that was Cuba for Americans; along with occasional literary, intellectual essays, including a speech in honor of the opening of a sawmill whose construction he had led; and poems, one dedicated to the sawmill, and another, to a slave-cook, Peter, for whom Howe expressed deep compassion. Howe's text even contains a sketch book with self-portraits, drawings of the countryside and its novel creatures, the beloved sawmill, and even one of the slave-cook Peter. As Ocasio points out, censorship regarding slavery in Cuba was severe during the Spanish colonial period. The author notes that, though Howe avoids directly discussing many of the more sordid aspects of life on the sugarcane plantation, such as corporal punishment of slaves, the frequency of slave suicides, and the inherent horrific nature of slavery itself, Howe's compassionate representation of Peter as a named, fellow human was daring for its time and historical context.

Howe's hybrid diary text is distinctive not only for its sympathetic attitude towards enslaved peoples, but also because "Cuban nationals were unable to publish testimonies about their experiences on plantations, mainly because political or personal reasons forced them into self-censorship" (Ocasio 132). For many Cubans, much of what happened on the *ingenios* was to a large degree mysterious, given not only the fact of censorship, but also because *ingenios* were usually removed from center cities. Nor were the ongoings of the *ingenios* well understood by the foreign visitors who were often treated lavishly as guests

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while visiting the island. Though Cuba was indeed a popular destination for American and (other tourists) in the early 1800s, and a few did indeed write about their impressions in contemporary travelogues, as Ocasio reveals in his analysis of their travelogues, they did not possess Howe's firsthand experience of living on an *ingenio* for two years.

Ocasio describes Howe's "work sketches" as "significant historical documents detailing agrarian practices," emphasizing how, "Howe wrote from the vantage point of an administrator of a sugarcane plantation with the inside knowledge of a work protocol that often went against existing legal regulations" (140). Ocasio points out how the diary implies, though not discussed directly, that slaves were still being imported to support the plantation, despite a treaty signed between Spain and Great Britain prohibiting the slave trade north of the equator in 1817 (219). Additionally, Howe's diary reveals daily difficulties on the plantation—for example, how not only the enslaved workers on the plantation, but how Howe too, did not have adequate food, medicine, nor medical care, and how he had been essentially abandoned by D'Wolf to manage the plantation for himself. Again, though Howe skirted around the thornier issues of plantation life and the lives of those forced to reside therein, he undoubtedly intimates a sympathetic attitude towards enslaved individuals. Nonetheless, as Ocasio underscores, New Hope was enriched on the backs of slave labor. Thus, while Howe's diary is a "sanitized [often] poetic view of an *ingenio*" (196), it indeed provides us with a rare glimpse—though still not in full view—into the daily life of a generally shuttered world.

Alongside his principal focus on Howe's diary, dividing his study into an introduction, five main chapters, and an epilogue, Ocasio simultaneously lays out an impressive review of early nineteenth-century economic practices, international law, agrarian norms, and literary movements. In the first chapter, he looks at Howe's diary in relationship to other examples of "literature of the plantation." Ocasio further enriches his work by comparative analysis, studying other Cuban writers from the tradition of the literary movement known as *Costumbrismo*, whose texts offered up brief "literary sketches" of local customs and traditions, in this particular case, as also related to slavery. In the second chapter, Ocasio explores Howe's writing in its dialogue with the genre of "travel writing," in conjunction with other texts from the tradition, highlighting Howe's representation of the Matanzas countryside, local foods and agrarian practices, along with his work on the *ingenio*. Ocasio illustrates how Howe's narrative fits into a literary tradition; travel writing books were consistently bestsellers between 1830 and 1900 (48). The third chapter "examines details of frequent labor practices" in the diary which often "drew from the aesthetics of the literary sketch" (xx).

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Chapter four is perhaps the most fascinating, as it “discusses Howe’s handling of data pertaining to slavery practices” at New Hope (xx). Again, Ocasio provides compelling evidence of Howe’s sympathetic position toward enslaved peoples, despite New Hope’s—and Howe’s—complicity in the illicit slave trade. The fifth chapter looks at the more formal, literary elements of Howe’s writing, in the vein of Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book* (1819–1820). Finally, in his epilogue, Ocasio analyzes additional lacunae in Howe’s work, underscoring his conspicuous silence on the importance of Afro-Cubans’ music, religions, and cultural traditions, and how those traditions have been appropriated and promoted by the contemporary revolutionary government. In conclusion, the author asks what the role of the physical space of the *ingenio* should be today, as these physical reminders of slavery and foreign economic intervention now sometimes are used in Cuba as parks and leisure destinations. These are questions, inspired by Howe’s captivating text, that future scholars will continue to contemplate.

In his interdisciplinary, profoundly researched book, Ocasio convincingly argues for the importance of studying the generally unknown diary of George Howe, illustrating how its relevance reverberates today, for scholars not only of Cuba, but also the United States and beyond. Ocasio demonstrates that by “reading between the lines,” the reader of Howe’s diary gains access to the harsh and hidden realities of a nineteenth-century Cuban *ingenio*. In its intertwining approaches from multiple fields, this compelling book would be of immense value to students of Cuban Studies, Latin American Studies, Atlantic Studies, Africana Studies, Caribbean Studies, American Studies, and even Environmental Studies.

Angela L. Willis

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Consciousness and Loneliness: Theoria and Praxis. By Ben Lazare Mijuskovic. Brill Rodopi, 2019. 505 pp. \$25.00 (eBook and softcover).

In *Consciousness and Loneliness: Theoria and Praxis*, Ben Lazare Mijuskovic takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the innate qualities of human loneliness that exist between the concept of consciousness and the self. He looks at the many ways that philosophy, such as Husserlian phenomenology and Kant's view of *a priori* understanding, to conclude that human consciousness is "inevitably lonely" as Mijuskovic analyzes the human drives between fear of loneliness and the need for intimacy (4). Mijuskovic's work offers an important holistic approach to an emotional state usually defined by the concept of lack instead of absolutes, drawing together many modes to suggest that the human consciousness battles loneliness in multiple different facets.

The text is broken into three parts. The first part contextualizes his views on loneliness and provides relevant research about consciousness. Chapter one is an introduction to the general concepts, while chapters two through five develop the simplicity argument and different modes, such as freedom of consciousness and immanent time-consciousness. Part two consists of one chapter, "The Simplicity Argument Versus a Materialist Theory of Mind" and serves as the turning point of the text. The question posed at the beginning of the chapter is how difficult it can be to distinguish one concept of consciousness from another, so as "to be dealt with as clearly and distinctly as possible" (323). In this chapter, he connects this current text to his past works on loneliness, stating how in his previous book, *Loneliness in Philosophy, Psychology, and Literature* (1979), he distinguished five mutually exclusive paradigms of human consciousness. This review is helpful in contextualizing the following chapters.

Part three consists of three chapters that expand on the concept of loneliness and the ways that it interacts with consciousness. Of note is the second to last chapter, "Loneliness: In Harm's Way," in which he develops one of the main arguments of the whole work, which is that human beings wish to "escape loneliness" after higher order drives, such as food and shelter, are met (403). He contends that "escaping loneliness" is "the most insistent psychological need and motivational drive" (403). The chapter proves his point through multiple illustrations and connections to other philosophies and literature. This penultimate chapter provides a great space for Mijuskovic to develop loneliness as it is conceptualized throughout the text. This chapter leads to the concluding chapter, "Metaphysical Dualism, Subjective Idealism

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and Existentialism,” in which he outlines other philosophies and how existentialism may apply to loneliness as a concept.

One aspect that stands out from many other approaches is the way that Mijuskovic uses literature to explore the expression of loneliness and human consciousness. Literary references are used throughout the text, including using *The Brothers Karamazov* to discuss evil or *Heart of Darkness* and *The Lord of the Flies* to expound on Schopenhauer's concept of the noumenal Will to suggest that “Schopenhauer's insights into human nature with its darker aspects are fundamentally correct” (171). Not only is literature important to the concept of loneliness, but Mijuskovic ends his book with a small section, “By Way of an Epilogue,” which is a short paragraph that is both love letter to his wife as well as a form of creative non-fiction to express his own relief from the existential loneliness portrayed in the text.

In particular, chapter six, “Neuromania and Neo-Phrenology Versus Consciousness,” uses a comparison of James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway to argue that “each human consciousness expresses a unique existential style of existence” (317). Mijuskovic ends the chapter with a reflection of his own personal experience in the medical field, which not only creates an important critique of the psychiatric hospital system but allows the reader connections to current trends in psychiatric science.

Similarly, chapter seven, “The Simplicity Argument Versus a Materialist Theory of Mind,” uses Locke, Hobbes, and Hume as the cornerstone between feeling and perception, which is a theme carried through the entire text. Not only is literature a space to examine this duality, but philosophy and social critique offer unique insights into the lonely human consciousness. Both chapters are influential in deciphering the many ways human consciousness may express loneliness and how it influences social modes and genres.

Mijuskovic's work can involve deep-felt emotions and a reader may find themselves wanting to linger over a sentence for a few days and unravel the many connections they find. Mijuskovic adroitly explores the ways that loneliness represents the consciousness. Though this text is not a direct literary analysis, one might wish that in some instances the literary examples went a bit further, but this might be too much to ask given the scope of the book. That Mijuskovic blends literature into his synthesis shows the importance of literature in expressing human emotion. Unraveling loneliness can affect human social structures and can lead to greater understanding of the multifaceted ways that existential loneliness affects the arts, philosophy, and expression. Any scholar interested in the varied ways that emotion intersects the sciences and liberal arts may turn to this work to expand on the *a priori* concept of loneliness as it defines human consciousness.

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Marie Hendry

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Feminist Connections: Rhetoric and Activism Across Time, Space, and Place. Edited by Katherine Fredlund, Kerri Hauman, and Jessica Ouellette. The University of Alabama Press, 2020. 312 pp. \$59.95 (hardcover).

Feminist Connections: Rhetoric and Activism Across Time, Place, and Space captures the zeitgeist of contemporary feminist rhetorical studies, reflecting on the #metoo era, the role of social media in activism, and the way our past affects our present. In a thoughtful collection that deconstructs barriers of time and place, editors Katherine Fredlund, Kerri Hauman, and Jessica Ouellette compile voices that contextualize current feminist rhetorical practices by showcasing often-striking similarities to past ones. On one hand, the editors and authors in this collection reach back in order to make visible the strides toward equality that have been made by feminist rhetors. Yet though the focus on history calls attention to progress, the long view of feminist rhetorical practices also emphasizes how deeply anti-feminist ideals have traditionally permeated systems of power. In each essay, the authors apply a Rhetorical Transversal Methodology, looking first to find connections between two rhetorical situations through temporarily removing the bounds of time from their contexts. This methodology creates space for the emergence of previously unnoticed connections, and these connections can better shape our understanding of feminist rhetorical practices. Importantly, through the process of charting the progression of feminist rhetoric, scholars can study its efficacy, its evolution, and ultimately, make advances towards improving its reach.

Rather than organizing the contributions linearly according to “waves,” or by topical considerations, such as race or sexuality, the editors arrange the essays by three particular feminist rhetorical frameworks: Revisionary Rhetoric, Circulatory Rhetoric, and Response Rhetoric. This choice makes sense when considering the qualities of the essays in the collections, each of which consider a distant feminist rhetorical moment alongside one more contemporary, and often digital; in pairing these moments, the authors refuse to position the rhetorical discourse in their individual speculations along one singular timeline, but instead reflect a continuum of experience. This view of feminist rhetoric is interstitial, what Tarez Samra Graban, in a forward to the collection, describes as ways of looking at “*what occurs between organizations, their archives, their practices, and their beliefs*” (xii, emphasis mine). Graban explains that in accentuating these in-between spaces, the authors bring voices previously designated to margins to the forefront. As mentioned in the afterward by Kristine L. Blair, the

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2020 publication of this collection occurs exactly one hundred years after the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which granted women in America the right to vote. Yet despite this accomplishment, the editors and Blair point out that 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump as opposed to Hillary Clinton, that there is an increase in white nationalism, and that “state violence” continues to be perpetuated against people of color (14). These, among a host of additional social injustices, pave the way for feminist rhetoric to speak against not only the imbalance of power structures, but also the ideologies that perpetuate these inequalities.

In the first section of the collection, Kerri Hauman explains, when defining “Revisionary Rhetoric,” that feminist rhetoric has a tendency to “recover, retell, reclaim, reconceptualize, reconceive, re-present, re-gender, and revise” (17). With four essays, this collection within the collection urges readers not only to consider the contemporary alongside the past, but also to re-think generally accepted narratives about the history of the women’s movement. For example, the first article in the section by Jill Swiencicki, Maria Brandt, Barbara LeSavoy, and Deborah Uman, discusses the pervasive myth of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention as the site of the beginning of the women’s rights movement. While Hillary Clinton, at the 2016 Democratic Primary, wore “suffragist white” as a way to invoke a sense of the accomplishments that were, indeed, made in large part by the meeting of the minds at Seneca Falls, what the authors of this collection point out is that a ubiquitous mythologizing of Seneca Falls “deflects and silences other aspects of women’s history” (23). In other words, the authors urge readers not to forget that Susan B. Anthony was “a racist” whose argument for suffrage leaned on the notion white women are more valuable than black persons (24). In order to revise the myth of Seneca Falls, and the quasi-idolization of Anthony, the authors of the essay have organized a conference titled “Seneca Falls Dialogue,” or SFD. Hosted at the original site of the Seneca Falls convention, the SFD encourages participants to acknowledge the murky history of the women’s rights movement, but also to take part in reshaping the narrative by collectively participating in activities that encourage response to items such as the famous Declaration of Sentiments or the Clinton Campaign. Participants in the conference purposefully revise history to make way for previously excluded voices.

The following pieces in the Revisionary Rhetoric section have similar aims. Most similarly, in demythologizing the liberation of “the pill,” Kellie Jean Sharp makes visible the “medicalization of sexuality,” and shows in particular the kind of “biopower” that birth control has on the populace. Despite the thought that the emergence of the pill was a

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way of allowing women control over their reproductive health, Sharp points out that the promises for clear skin, enlarged breasts, and so forth, could be seen as a way of “keeping a cis-hetero woman attractive to a heterosexual man” (82). Additionally, Tara Propper, in “Epideictic Rhetoric and Emergent Media: From CAM to BLM,” revises our understanding of the history of black women’s use of media and participation in public rhetoric through drawing on similarities between the Colored American Magazine (CAM) that ran from 1901-1904 and the Say Her Name movement within Black Lives Matter—a project that Propper showcases as building on “the same rhetorical practices deployed in CAM” (51). In a fascinating piece by Risa Applegarth, Sarah Hallenbeck, and Chelsea Redeker Milbourne, a rhetorical analysis of recruitment advertisements for women telegraphers in the mid 1800s and modern ads for women coders in tech shows a perpetual de-intellectualization of women’s work, further revealing the sturdiness of norms that expect women to balance career with motherhood. In each case, the authors revise assumptions in order to either showcase inequities or to reimagine the kinds of rhetorical work women participate in.

Jessica Ouellette’s introduction to *Circulatory Rhetorics* considers “rhetorics in motion,” or the way the rhetoric evolves and changes, to think about circulation beyond just delivery, but also as ways of recycling and revising meanings in context (92). Each of the four articles in this section features activism online, as compared to earlier models before the internet. Kristin Winet analyzes a contemporary travel blog, *Everywhere All the Time*, which seeks to de-colonize narratives of travel by facilitating dialogue and community between women who travel. In another direction, Kristin Kondrill’s piece likens Victorian novels written by and featuring women doctors to current reactions to sexism in the medical field with the #LikeALadyDoc movement on Twitter in order to show how in both cases, “women reshaped their ethos by writing in nonprofessional genres” (110). Liz Lane, like Propper, looks at the Say Her Name Movement, but with the intention of drawing a parallel to African traditions of naming, *nommo*, and the Greek storytelling practice, *muthos*. Finally, Lisa Blankenship features Jane Addams, a spokeswoman for domestically employed immigrant women in the late 1800s, and Joye Fernandes’s #EuEmpregadaDoméstica to show how each woman employed notions of rhetorical empathy to persuade her audience of injustice against domestic workers. After reading these chapters, one cannot help but consider how the contributors to the section on *Circulatory Rhetoric* also participate in *Revisionary Rhetoric*, as outlined in the previous section of the book. It is with this knowledge that the editors of the collection have cautioned readers against firmly

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situating each essay within its designated classification. The essays categorized by Circulatory Rhetoric, though, particularly draw on the ways women have made their discourse public, showcasing the power of social media activism. Blankenship, at the end of her essays, calls on women in privileged positions to “adopt a stance informed by listening and rhetorical empathy” (157). No doubt, to “circulate” knowledge requires “listening” on many levels—in each of the cases mentioned in this section, the women rhetors listen to and build community with one another. Indeed, Winet’s article in particular draws on the potential relationships that can be built through interview, to move away from “falsely intimate conversation” in order to “building relationships through cultivated conversation” (95). Indeed, though not explicitly stated, this theme of listening as interwoven through the process of circulation brings a specific awareness not just to the vocalizations of women, but also to the power of empathy.

Lastly, the Response Rhetorics section contains five essays that Katherine Fredlund explains are illustrative of how women choose to respond to often hostile environments of oppression (162). Skye Roberson draws connections between women who have published anonymously, both in print and online. While the moniker of “Anonymous” can, and ought to be, seen as an oppressive force in many cases, Roberson points out how women have chosen to deploy anonymity purposefully to assert agency and provide freedom for authenticity. Tiffany Kinney speaks to the role of feminist rhetors in the Mormon church. As the only piece in the collection that directly takes on the topic of religion, Kinney shows how Response Rhetoric may “fail” to meet a particular end goal when seeking to reach powerfully unreceptive audiences, but yet the work still advances the legitimacy of women as traceable by taking account of women’s movements in the church and otherwise across time. In a standout piece from the collection, Clancy Ratcliff discusses how the blogosphere refuses to integrate women’s voices. Tracing attitudes about women bloggers from 2002, and making visible the similar rhetoric deployed about the women’s suffragist movement in 1909, Ratcliff points out that the pervasive idea that “women aren’t interested in politics” stretches into the new millennium. From there, in an analysis of Ida B. Wells and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, Paige V. Banaji shows the ways women of color have had to “call out” white feminism, and Bethany Mannon closes out the collection with an important piece that emphasizes the power of narrative and counternarrative as a way to respond to “public perceptions” and “power structures” (243). Though each of the essays in the collection is responsive—as, indeed is rhetoric more generally—the final collection of the book gathers a group of situations in which the response has particular risk, such as in speaking

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out against powerful, religious institutions. Importantly, the risks do not always merit instant rewards for the rhetors in this collection, but as Fredlund points out in the introduction, a receptive audience—a listening audience—is required for rhetoric to be successful. As is made visible in this collection overall, *Feminist Rhetoric* is often not privy to reception, which, in some ways, makes it all the more necessary.

Feminist Connections, through the Rhetorical Transversal Methodology, models an innovative way to begin thinking about how to structure activist rhetoric more generally. The weaknesses of the collection are mentioned by the editors in the introduction: there lies an absence of Indigenous and immigrant voices, no piece directly addresses concerns of trans and gender nonbinary people, there are few voices outside of the United States, and there is a failure to consider physical ability and neurodiversity (12). However, these missing elements of the book are, in my view, a sort of call to action for further research, more than direct omission. Indeed, with its publication before the election of our first woman Vice President—a woman of color too, no less—*Feminist Connections* is an invitation for scholars to think more purposefully across time and place, to create links, networks, communities, and systems of language between women who, though maybe from a different place or time altogether, still remain in solidarity with one another.

Jenna Morris Harte

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Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy. By Lisa Blankenship. Utah State UP, 2019. 170 pp. \$20.95 (paperback).

Lisa Blankenship's theory of rhetorical empathy, outlined and exemplified in *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), is a welcomed addition to current approaches to understanding and teaching rhetoric. In a slim volume (129 pages before notes and references), the author demonstrates how Western, Aristotelian rhetoric, or rhetoric-as-persuasion, has defined nearly all rhetorical situations as argument, upholding the idea of one right answer. For anyone teaching first-year composition and seeking a way to move classroom discussions beyond an argumentative approach, rhetorical empathy is a revelation. In the wake of a year that emphasized differences and brought political and societal discourse to a head, Blankenship's premise that "engaging with the Other is one of the primary purposes of rhetoric" is a productive alternative to rhetoric as "winning" an argument (28). Across four chapters, an introduction, and epilogue, the author offers examples that showcase the power of rhetorical empathy, inviting a non-Western approach to rhetorical theory, and asks participants to be vulnerable and come to the table to *listen* to one another. This theory is not without its weaknesses, but those weaknesses do not discount the radical opportunities Blankenship's theory may offer.

The author's deep knowledge and analysis of not only Greek rhetorical theory but the Classical Chinese, Indian, and Arab-Islamic frameworks make for a well-articulated and well-researched thesis. In my studies of ancient rhetoric, I found myself somewhat enlightened but mostly unimpressed as a budding scholar, wondering how I might frame my own ideas when the dominance of rhetoric as argument felt so unfitting to my own approach to learning, living, and teaching. Blankenship's knowledge and expertise helped me better understand those texts for their strengths while embracing and pushing beyond their many gaps. Where were women in the rhetorical tradition? How has our understanding of logos omitted the importance of listening and silence? Such gaps have prompted feminist rhetoricians to challenge the hegemony of rhetoric as persuasion (see Glenn; Royster; Ratcliffe), and Blankenship falls in line with these challengers. Other scholars who find themselves teaching first-year composition but lacking a real engagement with the Classical rhetorical ideas included in the curriculum will find this text beneficial to their pedagogy.

In her theory of rhetorical empathy, Blankenship first wants to expand our understanding of *what rhetoric is*. She challenges the hegemony of Aristotle's rhetoric, continuing work in rhetorical theory

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started by Kenneth Burke (identification), I. A. Richards (understanding), and several scholars who frame rhetoric more as seeking common ground (Young, Becker, Pike). Her work especially continues Rogerian rhetoric, which formed in the 1970s and defined rhetoric as work that begins with identifying with one's audience, and seeks learning, connecting, and understanding as goals rather than persuasion in order to defeat an opponent. In Rogerian rhetoric, the goal is "to reduce an audience's sense of threat so they will be open to what the writer has to say and willing to consider alternatives to their own beliefs" (49). Blankenship's approach, a theory of rhetorical empathy, differs importantly from Rogerian rhetoric in that it takes a firm feminist approach; that is, it "does not remove the personal and the body from rhetorical engagement" (50). Instead, rhetorical empathy acknowledges that rhetoric cannot be separated from the personal and the body; it acknowledges judgement and knowledge are connected to experience and culturally taught. For those of us tasked with teaching and theorizing *rhetoric* to our students, communities, and scholarly communities, Blankenship's rhetorical empathy is an ethical and feminist-grounded approach. Her theory aligns with other feminist rhetorical approaches challenging rhetoric as persuasion, especially rhetorical listening (Krista Ratcliffe), which echoes calls for a recognition that speaking is only half of *logos* and listening must be restored in our use of the concept. Blankenship's rhetorical empathy theorizes toward negotiation rather than battle to "win" or gain-over others. Indeed, 2020 invited me to have several intense conversations with non-academics on *what rhetoric is*, when we did not agree on or share the same experience of a global pandemic, a reckoning for social justice, and a fraught political environment. Not surprisingly, non-academics did not quite understand what I meant in a casual use of the word "rhetoric." These kinds of conversations become increasingly important for rhetoricians, but they are also critical for those with literary and creative writing backgrounds who are also tasked with navigating similar barriers to understanding rhetoric in the twenty-first century in and beyond their disciplines and classrooms.

Rhetoric *could be*, if we can engage it in nuanced ways, a "being-with" championed by non-Western rhetoric, rather than the "power-over" premise we have become so accustomed to. This is the revelation, of no small importance and long overdue, that Blankenship proposes. Traditional Euro-American rhetorical theory holds that an effective persuasion means a change in your audience; rhetorical empathy, by contrast, might lead to a change within yourself. This could affront many readers who quietly protest: "my [neighbor/relative/co-worker/friend/partner] won't change my mind on this subject." And

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of course, in the era of QAnon and “flat Earthers”—some of whom are in our classes—listening might feel frustrating or impossible. I think Blankenship would argue (and some might hold this up as a weakness of the text) it’s not that my views or beliefs are changed by the process of rhetorical empathy, but the way I approach those who are opposed to them. Rhetorical empathy, she argues, “resists the echo chamber of contemporary, digital, and political culture and forces us to engage with the Other in the form of real people with real stories that, chances are, do not align with our own understanding of the world” (119). Rhetorical empathy centers mutual change in the form of understanding and listening, valuing lived experience and difference, rather than attempting to *change* specific beliefs (though challenging *why* we hold our beliefs is a huge part of rhetorical empathy, too).

The first chapter establishes the author’s proposed theory, placing rhetorical empathy in the large context of Western rhetoric, especially drawing deeply upon translations and interpretations of ancient texts, including an in-depth look at how “empathy” has been translated across cultures and centuries. She then widens our vantage point by introducing concepts of rhetoric beyond the West, especially Classical Chinese and Arab-Islamic rhetorical traditions. The theory of rhetorical empathy proposed in this book relies on established work of feminist theories of listening and understanding, engagement with and of personal narratives and “a willingness to yield in a stance of self-risk and vulnerability, situating rhetoric as an ethical way of negotiating difference rather than an attempt to win a battle or gain power over others” (22; 55).

The remaining three chapters detail different scenarios in which rhetorical empathy plays out across spaces of women’s rhetorical action, digital spaces, and the first-year composition classroom. First, the author looks at two labor-rights activists one hundred years apart: first-wave feminist Jane Addams and contemporary activist and rapper Joyce Fernandes. Using vastly different platforms (a nineteenth-century world’s fair and a global, digital online space, respectively), the author argues both women employ key components of rhetorical empathy, especially the use of personal story (their own and others’) to invite strong response from their audience. Blankenship points out the significant shift Fernandes represents, away from women in privileged position (like Addams) as the voice speaking *for* other women. Next, Blankenship applies her theory to the gay rights divide in religious communities by deeply analyzing an online exchange between gay-rights activist Justin Lee and mostly evangelical Christians. The author sees rhetorical empathy functioning importantly in what remains a polarizing civil rights struggle. Her analysis of the strategies Jason Lee

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applies in his online column and subsequent discussion offers readers a suggestion for ways they might similarly engage the theory in this and other debates on civil rights and their overlap or conflict with deeply held beliefs. Finally, she applies rhetorical listening in composition pedagogy, by first acknowledging her own distaste for some of her students' beliefs and offering rhetorical empathy as a method to get past that—for instructor and student alike. Here she tackles the function of “persuasion” in composition, the richness of combining political and personal as method for composing, and pedagogical strategies that engage rhetorical empathy. Across these chapters, what emerges are diverse arenas in which rhetorical empathy is applied and becomes praxis.

An obvious concern for readers is the inherent power imbalance when we engage an Other: who has more burden to bear in utilizing rhetorical empathy? Whose responsibility is it to bring people to the table to listen, and what if they refuse? One could argue rhetorical empathy reads a bit too idealistic for our current cultural times. A cornerstone of Blankenship's case studies is the use of pathos and personal narrative. The author does not present a case study in which the person with less privilege must first narrativize their history, bringing much more burden to their “side” of the proverbial table. While engaging personal narrative can be a useful tool for marginalized voices to speak with rhetorical authority, this same device risks louder speech from those who already have the floor. How do we ask a cultural structure that was built to support and sustains white supremacy to yield its power? Does rhetorical empathy work as well for *all* positions and voices, or only those with the power and willingness to engage? Marginalized voices may be the ones with the most to gain but lack an Other willing to listen. Another concern for readers may be the labor involved with using rhetorical empathy in the classroom. Blankenship does admit, but not until the epilogue, that this approach doesn't work for everyone. Throughout the text, a reader might question how selective or curated the example chapters are in this text, showing cases in which rhetorical empathy was successful. Ironically, this theory and text may have been strengthened by inclusion of a chapter in which it *didn't* work, offering author and audience a chance to break down why it did not and creating a space to theorize on failure.

I offer this suggestion because I ultimately found this theory compelling and useful. I think engaging with its weakness or failure will only make this approach to rhetoric stronger and more useful, in our scholarship and in our classrooms. In Fall 2020, a semester unlike any other any of us has experienced, I read this book alongside peers in a graduate seminar. The book elicited lively discussion at a time when

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we—students and instructor—needed thoughtful conversation. Our class met synchronously a few times, during which we discussed theories including Blankenship’s, and how we might apply rhetorical empathy in our classrooms and in our research. I have those classmates to thank for their astute observations on the affordances and limitations of this text.

As I have noted in this review, it can feel affronting, impossible, to do what the title asks of us: change the subject—in other words, *you*. Through the empathetic act of listening, of coming to the table to do more than “win,” there is a potential for change on the part of the individual. This can also make for an idealistic view of things. If it were that easy, all previous work on peace-making might have solved our societal and political problems. However, rhetoric, one of our oldest tools of debate, might have something to offer that the many political science or philosophy books pedaling theories of peace cannot: thoughtful engagement with an Other or many Others, to reframe our goal of tolerance and collaboration across viewpoint, culture, gender, race, and class, *without* the notion of a “right” answer.

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