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# Introduction: Whose Adaptation Is It Anyway?: Fan Expectations, Interpretations, and Receptions via Popular Adaptations

*Rachel M. Hartnett and Kathryn J. McClain*

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Fans have always maintained power in literary publication and reception practices, with particular expansions in the twenty-first century due to direct access to creators through social media platforms, commentary on narrative content from globally accessible interviews and advertisements, and adaptations of materials as fan art and fanfiction available at the click of the button. None of this engagement is totally new, of course, as fan desires to keep narratives alive may have best been illustrated through Sherlock Holmes's famous return from the dead despite his creator's intentions (Nussbaum); yet contemporary fans are present, engaged, and interactive in ways seemingly impossible a century earlier in light of the speed, consistency, and variability possible today. With this reality in mind, our cluster of essays explores two dominant fandoms in connection with famous television adaptations from the 2010s. These adaptations—one from a fandom with almost 140 years of fan engagement and passion, another newer but influential in the current television landscape—highlight the intersections between fan studies, adaptation studies, and the influence of participatory fan culture on legacy media.

To be clear, our cluster of essays on the *Game of Thrones* fandom and the Sherlock Holmes fandom does not advocate that fans are always correct in their expectations for literary works; likewise, we agree with fan scholar Henry Jenkins that fan communities rarely agree in their overall narrative presumptions (“It’s Not” 132). However, our cluster does consider the importance of participatory fan culture—one “which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community,” which serves to disrupt the “radical separation between readers and writers” (“Get a Life!” 45-46)—in light of fan expectations as set by creators,

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fan interpretations as desired for personal reflection and representation in online spaces, and fan receptions as indicated by perceptions of character arcs and narrative endings. For example, the impact of participatory fan culture on the interpretations of and responses to adapted television media can perhaps be best demonstrated through the significance of the series finale. James Poniewozik, the chief television critic for *The New York Times*, argues that in the twenty-first century fans “have become conditioned to view a series finale [. . .] as a high-stakes, legacy-defining challenge.” This determination is because, through online forums such as *Reddit*, fans build communities and “spend years speculating on the resolutions to mysteries and debating the most proper rewards and punishments to be meted out to heroes and antiheroes” (Poniewozik). As a recent example of this occurrence, a post on a *Subreddit* concerning the Netflix television adaptation *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-2024) features a comment from user *u/WorkAway23* about the negative fan response to the series’s recent final season:

The fact that the ending is so disliked by a large group of the fanbase just shows how much people cared for the characters and liked the show in the first place. When I say I didn’t like the ending, I’m not mocking those who did...I’m disappointed that we didn’t get the ending that I, personally (along with a lot of people), think the series deserved. (*u/bengetyashoeon*)

Such investment in endings, the concept of “deserving” for fans and narrative characters alike, represents a core element in this concept of participatory culture: a desire to see resolution for storylines and recognition of preoccupations over years of a series’s development (or even longer in the case of many fandoms).

Our interest in this fan engagement with popular adaptations in particular arose out of a roundtable panel for the Association of Adaptation Studies at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference in Fall 2023: the panel was lovingly titled “Whose Adaptation Is It Anyway?: A Roundtable Discussion on Popular Adaptations and Fan Responses.” Although our presentations seemed diverse in topic at first, all three emphasized participatory fan culture and engagement in recent television adaptations, albeit in unique ways. Therefore, after the strong response to the roundtable and high levels of audience engagement, we thought that expanding our presentations into a cluster of essays for the *South Atlantic Review* was a natural evolution of our project. As a cohesive submission, our critical framework has developed to primarily recognize Jenkins’s fan studies criticism *Textual*

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*Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (as well as its extended analysis *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*) as guidance for our analysis on fandom as a cultural force: rather than viewing fans as appropriators of culturally relevant texts, Jenkins argues that “fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. In the process, fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (“Get a Life!” 23-24). Our panel interrogated this process, and our cluster intends to push this conversation further in light of fandom’s consistently evolving identity in online spaces.

In his interview with Suzanne Scott, reflecting on the twentieth anniversary of *Textual Poachers*’s publication in 2013, Jenkins argues his scholarship should be viewed as a “time capsule” and “not an account of contemporary media fandom” (xx); Scott, however, contends that “there are facets of *Textual Poachers* that deserve further consideration” because “it is a living time capsule, one that refuses to be sealed, informing scholars and students about the significance of fan culture, and taking in new materials” (xlii). Within our cluster, we therefore revisit Jenkins’s claims on participatory culture over thirty years later and consider these ideas for the *Game of Thrones* television series (2011-2019) fandom—an overlap with the fandom for the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) by fantasy author George R. R. Martin—as well as the Sherlock Holmes fandom—with specific focus on the BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010-2017) and CBS’s *Elementary* (2012-2019)—in light of *Reddit* fan commentary, fan and creator interactions, and expectations for endings in adaptations from the 2010s.<sup>1</sup>

Our first article, “Unraveling the Mad Queen: Creator Influences, Fan Assumptions, and Adaptation in *Game of Thrones*,” attempts to reconcile the divisive final episodes of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* through a sustained analysis of the moral and ethical framework utilized by the showrunners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, throughout the full eight seasons. As Rachel M. Hartnett argues, Daenerys Targaryen rose to popularity as a character who committed brutal actions, yet her actions were consistently rationalized by the logic of the storyworld and her own quest for a more just society. However, in the final seasons, although most of her actions did not change in severity or justification, Benioff and Weiss expected fans to view Daenerys as not morally grey but evil—a Mad Queen. Largely, fans did not view her later actions prior to the burning of King’s Landing as such, as indicated by online interactions selected primarily from *Reddit*. In the end, the article considers the largely negative backlash to the final season due to incon-

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sistency within the series, primarily from the series's showrunners, as recognized by the fans.

In our second article, "The Neu Game of Fandom: Neurodivergence, Representation, and the Mask of the Great Detective," Kristopher Mecholsky analyzes the online speculation about the potential neurodivergence of Sherlock Holmes as a fictional character throughout numerous contemporary adaptations. Although the Holmes fandom has historically engaged with questions of difference and marginality through the Great Detective, the turn to mental health discussions comes with extenuating circumstances because fans now engage in these discussions with particular views on mental health as well as mental health terminology. With limited focus on the Holmes fandom during the 2010s, the article considers fan engagement, primarily through posts on *Reddit*, in light of diagnosis gatekeeping, terminology debates, and ableism concerns. Mecholsky finally argues that although the attempts to "diagnose" Holmes as neurodivergent typically come from a desire by fans for recognition and community, these actions can unfortunately exclude, limit, or marginalize instead.

And lastly, our third article, "Not So Elementary After All: The Construction of Audience Expectations, the BBC's *Sherlock*, and CBS's *Elementary*" considers the tensions between creator-set expectations for fans of the famous detective within two television adaptations, with *Sherlock* falling out of favor with fans and *Elementary* gaining praise over its run. Kathryn J. McClain explores how the *Sherlock* creators established expectations for fans of Holmes adaptations but did not maintain those promises in connection with the Holmes-Watson partnership. Conversely, the *Elementary* creators promised fans a platonic relationship between their Holmes and Watson after considerable concern due to "genderbending" casting and romantic potential between the two leads. Ultimately, the reception for each show related less to the dramatic tensions and mysterious twists; instead, fans responded positively to trust built by the creators to maintain promises as presented both within interviews and online promotion materials as well as within the storyworld content overall.

As our cluster of articles demonstrates, participatory fan culture can be a double-edged sword. Creators depend upon strong fandom responses to increase engagement, viewership, and revenue; yet fans then develop a sense of ownership over intellectual property they have no control over. As Jenkins illustrates, "While fans display a particularly strong attachment to popular narratives, act upon them in ways which make them their own property in some senses, they are also acutely and painfully aware that those fictions do not belong to them and that someone else has the power to do things to those characters that are in

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direct contradiction to the fans' own cultural interests" ("Get a Life!" 24). Both the Holmes fandom and the *Game of Thrones* fandom stand out as exemplary in such a conversation due to their passion and influence. Through the analysis of these adaptations and their fandoms, we demonstrate the importance of fan expectations, interpretations, and receptions, even if that influence can be in conflict with creators or even others within the fan communities. As fan culture and participation continues to grow in the twenty-first century, critics should engage with fan responses alongside cultural contexts to understand the process of adaptation and creation. Fandom should likewise maintain a productive balance between fans and creators, and this relationship can only be possible if all participants understand and respect the responsibilities and contributions of each other.

## Notes

1. Interestingly, Jenkins claims in his twentieth-anniversary discussion of *Textual Poachers* that the chapter titled "It's Not a Fairy Tale Anymore: Gender, Genre, *Beauty and the Beast*" has been "the least mined by subsequent scholars" and that he remains "curious to see whether more people pay attention to this chapter in the future" (xli). Hartnett and McClain both explore similar situations to the *Beauty and the Beast* fan responses in their articles, and they are pleased to take inspiration from Jenkins's research with this work.

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# Unraveling the Mad Queen: Creator Influences, Fan Assumptions, and Adaptation in *Game of Thrones*

Rachel M. Hartnett

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“Who is Jon Snow’s mother?” David Benioff and D. B. Weiss needed to answer this question in March 2006, during their fateful meeting with George R.R. Martin. Benioff and Weiss set the meeting to convince the fantasy author they should adapt his bestselling fantasy saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, into a television series (Radish). Martin acknowledges that he asked the two “a few pointed questions to determine whether they had actually read the books, and they gave me the right answers” (qtd. in Radish). Only after this “Wonka test” were the two men allowed to pitch an adaptation to HBO and Showtime (Radish). HBO picked up the series in 2010, and *Game of Thrones* ran for eight seasons from 2011 to 2019 (Horowitz). Although neither Martin, Benioff, nor Weiss have confirmed the answer given that day, the flashback in the season six finale confirmed that Jon Snow was the child of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen, not the bastard son of Eddard “Ned” Stark (“The Winds of Winter” 0:54:42-0:57:28). Although Martin considered this question significant enough to determine if Benioff and Weiss could adapt the book series, did the two men knowing the answer truly demonstrate that they understood the books? And what would understanding the books even mean when facing the process of adaptation?

The identity of Jon Snow’s mother has been a hotly debated topic since the first book, *A Game of Thrones*, was released in 1996. The earliest known speculation that Jon’s mother was Lyanna Stark comes from a post on the Usenet group rec.arts.sf.written in 1997. User Rodrick Su lists five questions left unanswered by the novel including: “4. Jon Snow’s parent. It is wholly [sic] consistent that Jon Snow is the offspring of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark.” This theory later became so dominant in fan circles that it earned a shorthand, R+L=J (Rhaegar Targaryen + Lyanna Stark = Jon Snow). In fact, by the meeting between Martin, Benioff, and Weiss, book fans were all but convinced. A 2006 post by Stark Future on Westeros.org’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* forum titled “The Lyanna + Rhaegar = Jon Thread” posits “Stop me if this has been said before... What if Jon Snow is truly the child of

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Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen.” The first comment, from user Bazzlebane, reads simply: “Wow, I’ve never heard this idea before. ;) Welcome to the boards.” The response’s irony demonstrates the widespread knowledge and accepted position of the R+L=J theory by fans. Even some book theorists started to believe that R+L=J was too obvious and there was a more complex mystery surrounding Jon’s parentage (Jacobs). Thus, before the books were adapted into the trans-media phenomenon of *Game of Thrones*, Martin’s world was deeply entrenched in participatory fandom. Henry Jenkins defines fandom as a “participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community,” which serves to disrupt the “radical separation between readers and writers” (“Get a Life!” 45-46). With this definition in mind—and considering the reach of the R+L=J theory—it is highly likely that to convince Martin to agree to their proposed adaptation, Benioff and Weiss drew from this community. Their likely utilization of participatory fan culture becomes even more significant during the show’s final seasons, when Benioff and Weiss railed against the backlash from this same participatory culture regarding their adaptive choices.

Although the series finale of *Game of Thrones* was HBO’s most-watched show with 13.6 million live viewers and 6 million replays (Gartenberg), there were extreme amounts of fan and critical backlash, including a petition demanding that HBO remake the final season (“Remake *Game of Thrones*...”). *Time* ranked the final episode of the series amongst its fifteen most controversial TV series finales (Rosenstock). This backlash was due to many reasons—including the crowning of Bran the Broken as king—but none more controversial than the ending for fan-favorite protagonist, Daenerys Targaryen. A significant portion of her final storylines focused on her return to Westeros and fight for the Iron Throne, usurped from her father, the “Mad King” Aerys Targaryen, over twenty years before. The penultimate episode features a battle at the capitol city of King’s Landing, culminating with Daenerys setting fire to the city and its citizens (“The Bells” 0:42:10-0:44:45). Many fans criticized this narrative decision, and some went so far as to accuse the adaptation of character assassination and the emotionally unstable women trope (Yauss 7). Since the series’ end in 2019, there have been persistent attempts by fans to both defend and deride Daenerys’s destructive decisions in the final two episodes. Ultimately, the widespread audience resistance to her ending is inextricably tied to the series’ dependence on fan participatory culture, known popularity of morally gray characters within the series, and critical missteps by the showrunners.

## How It Started: Seasons One through Six

Westeros is a violent, bloody world, and both the book and television series depict the multiple people who are willing to risk everything just to claim the throne. These potential kings and queens, along with most of the protagonists, are depicted as morally gray, consistent with the series' placement in the subgenre of Gritty Fantasy. As Helen Young articulates, Gritty Fantasy arose in the mid-twentieth century as a response to High Fantasy and is "marked by low-levels of magic, high-levels of violence, [and] in-depth character development" (63). Within this subgenre, the multimedia world of George R.R. Martin is the most well-known example (63). And, make no mistake, the world of *Game of Thrones* is a violent one. One of the most significant scenes from the pilot features Ned Stark executing a deserter from the Night's Watch. Although the man only deserted after watching his fellow soldiers be killed by magical creatures known as White Walkers, Ned beheads the deserter ("Winter is Coming" 0:12:14-0:15:15). Through this introduction, fans are not left with the impression of a cruel or unjust man. Instead, throughout the series, Ned is heralded as one of the most honorable figures within Westeros ("Baelor" 0:03:43-0:05:50). However, most show characters are not depicted as good or bad, but instead morally gray, falling into the characteristics of Gritty Fantasy. These morally gray characters include fan favorites such as Tyrion Lannister and Arya Stark, who all commit brutal actions—murdering their own father ("The Children" 0:56:40-0:59:54) or slaughtering a family after forcing them to eat their own relatives ("Dragonstone" 0:0:21-0:03:58). These morally gray characters are shown as distinct from both the "evil" characters, who have very few redeeming features, and the extremely rare "good" characters, who are defined by their unselfish commitment to others. These "evil" characters include, most prominently, Joffrey Baratheon and Ramsay Bolton; the "good" characters include Samwell Tarly and Brienne of Tarth. Throughout the series, fans rooted against the "evil" characters and for the "good" and morally gray characters, with Daenerys as no exception.

Within this world, Daenerys is not a "good" or "evil" character; she is morally gray, similar to Tyrion and Arya. Throughout all eight seasons, Daenerys's story was driven by vengeance. Before she frees any cities or hatches her dragons, Daenerys tries to convince Khal Drogo, her husband, to invade Westeros for both her and their unborn son ("You Win or You Die" 0:24:44-0:28:06). She frequently threatens those who refuse to help her on her quest to take back what she sees as hers with "fire and blood": "When my dragons are grown, we will take back what was stolen from me and destroy those who have wronged me. We will

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lay waste to armies and burn cities to the ground” (“Garden of Bones” 0:34:55-0:35:24). However, for most of the series her actions are framed as righting an unjust world. Tyrion states so directly when the two finally meet near the end of the fifth season, when he calls himself and Daenerys “two terrible children of two terrible fathers” (“Hardhome” 0:20:49-0:20:56). Daenerys asks why Tyrion would travel to meet someone terrible, and he responds it was “to see if you were the right kind of terrible. [. . .] The kind that prevents your people from being even more so” (0:21:03-0:21:11). Here, Tyrion—arguably the show’s smartest character—is claiming that within Westeros, particularly for a ruler, one must be terrible. He, and the writers, are reinforcing the necessity of Daenerys’s moral grayness. Daenerys responds to Tyrion by claiming that her goal is not to simply take the Iron Throne. She lists the noble houses of Westeros and then says, “they’re all just spokes on a wheel. This one’s on top then that one’s on top; and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground. [. . .] I’m not going to stop the wheel; I’m going to break the wheel” (0:24:27-0:25:00).<sup>2</sup> Fans took these words at face value. They believed that her brutality against those who have wronged her—or those simply in her way—was validated via the creation of a more equitable world. Justified violence, especially because Daenerys was harming those who were indisputably bad, led fans and critics to celebrate her brutal actions.

Within the series, this moral ambiguity of Daenerys begins early in her journey to acquire power. Needing a significant army to invade Westeros, Daenerys travels to Astapor and purchases an army of Unsullied soldiers, enslaved eunuchs who are famed as the greatest warriors in all of Essos (“Valar Dohaeris” 0:45:50-0:50:06). However, when Daenerys is unable to afford more than 123 soldiers, she agrees to trade one of her young dragons for the full regiment of 8,000 Unsullied (“Walk of Punishment” 0:30:50-0:33:46). After completing the trade, with the dragon refusing to obey the main slave master, Daenerys claims that “[a] dragon is not a slave” before ordering her new Unsullied army to kill their former masters. She then orders her dragon to burn the main slave master with the command that becomes a catchphrase for the character: “Dracarys” (“And Now His Watch Is Ended” 0:48:04-0:49:38). While the actions of the slave masters of Astapor are undeniably brutal and horrific—the final test of an Unsullied is the murder of an infant in front of their mother (“Valar Dohaeris” 0:48:40-0:49:37)—Daenerys’s actions are cruel yet are framed in pursuit of a slavery-free society. However, even in this act of heroism, she burns a man alive and orders the deaths of hundreds because she refuses to surrender her dragon “child” and does not have enough funds to purchase the Unsullied. Significantly, fans celebrated the “liberation” of Astapor. In

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a post-episode discussion thread on the *Game of Thrones* subreddit for the episode “And Now His Watch Is Ended,” user u/Snow-White writes, “[a]nd with that, [Daenerys] took the entire fucking city. Dracarys” (u/libbykino). Later, user u/WarTamil responds, “My body was not ready. That was so fucking badass,” followed by user u/skynolongerblue stating “I fist pumped like I would at a hockey game. Go Team Targaryen!” (u/libbykino). Clearly, despite the brutality of her actions, fans still rooted for Daenerys, supporting her popularity as a morally gray character. Her killing of the soldiers and masters is justified within the storyworld because it was necessary for Daenerys to keep all her dragon children while freeing the slaves of Astapor.

Daenerys’s violence within Meereen grows, particularly in the fifth season as she attempts to maintain control of the city, further reinforcing her position as morally gray. After a member of an underground insurgency group is apprehended, Daenerys and her council debate the future of this prisoner. Mossador, a former slave who represents Meereen’s freedmen on Daenerys’s Small Council, argues for a swift execution, but Daenerys decides to give the accused a trial (“The House of Black and White” 0:24:12–0:25:40). However, instead of a trial, the prisoner is assassinated in his cell by Mossador. After Mossador confesses, Daenerys has him publicly executed. In this scene, she can barely look at Mossador and struggles to contain her sadness as she orders his death (“The House of Black and White” 0:49:00–0:51:10). Conversely, just one episode later, after one advisor is killed and another severely wounded, she abandons this “just” approach. Instead, she orders the heads of the Meereenese Great Families, whom she suspects are behind the insurgency group—though there is no direct evidence to support this link—brought to the catacombs.<sup>3</sup> Here, Daenerys lines the men up in front of her dragons before choosing one man—seemingly at random—to push within the dragon’s reach. The man is set afire by a dragon before being ripped apart and eaten, which all occurs while Daenerys watches coldly and lectures the men about how a mother never abandons her children (“Kill the Boy” 0:03:50–0:06:53).<sup>4</sup> Although the episode ends with no additional nobles burned, and a conciliatory proposal by Daenerys to wed a Meereenese noble and reopen the fighting pits, these two episodes serve as juxtaposition. As she conducts a justified execution, Daenerys is emotional and distraught. As a potentially innocent man is burned and eaten by dragons, she is cold and unemotional. However, through the change of her position at the end of the episode, and her attempts at appeasing Meereenese cultural practices, again the audience is left with moral ambiguity, not evil incarnate.

Likewise, fans reacted in oppositional ways to this burning as well. Instead of an outpouring of disgust, there is largely no discussion

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of her actions on the post-episode subreddit discussion thread. The threads' highest up-voted comment referencing Daenerys, from user [u/SUSAN\\_IS\\_A\\_BITCH](#), states: "Daenerys, mother of dragons, fed her citizens to her children." While this comment acknowledges the failure of Daenerys as a fair ruler to the Meereenese, it is included on a sarcastic post about the episode airing on Mother's Day despite the plentitude of bad mothers within the series, again a recognition of Daenerys's moral ambiguity. The next highest up-voted comment about Daenerys, from user [u/SNcommand](#), argues: "Well, at least Daenerys Procrastagaryan is taking a more active role than in the books, not a big fan of protagonists where stuff just happen [sic] around them." Similarly, user [u/baslindo](#) calls it "the best episode this season so far" and lists one reason being that "Daenerys then finally had a badass moment. My patience with her was running out!" ([u/AutoModerator](#), "[S5]"). Despite blatant hypocrisy regarding the justice system in Meereen, there was no real outrage about Daenerys's actions, like there is with other actions taken by morally gray characters. Although she is included in a list of bad mothers for her decision to feed a man to her dragons, other comments approve of Daenerys's choice to burn a (potentially) innocent man alive as "badass" and finally taking an "active role."

Yet some fans recognized the injustice of Daenerys's actions in these and similar scenes. On the post-episode subreddit discussion thread for "The Laws of Gods and Men," user [u/BluBabe1981](#) argues that, though Daenerys had previously seen the "world in black and white," she is now "starting to see the grey." User [u/Swisskisses](#) reinforces this statement: "Yeah, I think this was very very [sic] important for her character development." Having a character make a rash decision and face the repercussions of said action could contribute to a compelling character arc, particularly for a young woman who is seeking to rule justly. However, just a few comments later, it becomes clear that these brutal missteps are allowed for Daenerys via her location. User [u/MrMango786](#) states, "Better now than later on the Iron Throne right?" and user [u/JDLovesElliot](#) responds, "I feel like this is the reasoning for letting her roam around as queen outside of Westeros. It's basically practice for her to get good" ([u/AutoModerator](#), "[Season 4 Spoilers]"). These fans seemingly accept cruel, unjust decisions if they make Daenerys a more suitable ruler for Westeros. These interpretations make sense when considering Daenerys as a morally gray character. She makes mistakes—even cruel, unjust ones—but she is learning and growing. Unfortunately, this growth comes at the expense of the citizens of Essos and their cultural traditions, all in the service of Daenerys "practicing" queen for the important Eurocentric Westeros, the true prize of the series.<sup>5</sup>

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Even beyond analyses of individual discussion threads, the continued popularity of Daenerys throughout the first six seasons is illustrated through her significance in other forms of participatory fan culture—most notably fan art, children’s names, and interactions with online media. Although “Arya”—the name of House Stark’s youngest female member—has proven the most popular character name for real children, Daenerys’s popularity is confirmed through her place as second, with six babies directly named after her and sixty-eight more named after her title “Khaleesi” in 2015 in the United Kingdom alone (Duff). Analysis of book and television series fan art demonstrates that not only is Daenerys is one of “the most popular figures depicted in Fan Art,” she is also depicted in multiple different roles: mother, goddess, Amazon, and queen, among others (Howe 243). Furthermore, according to YouTube statistics before the seventh season’s premiere, Daenerys was not only the most popular character in videos, but House Targaryen—of which she was the last official member—was also the most popular House (Cohen). In their analysis of Twitter engagement prior to the eighth and final season’s premiere, CNN lists Daenerys as the second most tweeted-about character, placing only behind Jon Snow (Respers). Both the case studies of the post-episode subreddits and the larger participatory fan analyses clearly demonstrate that, despite her brutal-but-justified actions, Daenerys was a fan-favorite character before the final two seasons.

### How It Ended: Seasons Seven and Eight

In season six’s final episode, “The Winds of Winter,” the audience witnesses Daenerys finally setting sail for Westeros to reclaim her supposed stolen birthright with a huge fleet and three dragons (1:04:27-1:06:40). Although this moment should have marked a high point in her journey, it now serves primarily as the demarcation between morally gray Daenerys and “the Mad Queen.” However, through an analysis of scenes intended to justify Daenerys’s “mad” actions, it becomes clear, despite consistency within her actions, that the only changes are the location and recipients of Daenerys’s cruelty as well as the moral framework imposed by the showrunners.

Within these last two seasons, showrunners Benioff and Weiss attempt to present Daenerys’s actions as overtly evil. However, one of the scenes that demonstrates the consistency of Daenerys’s actions despite the showrunners’ intentions is the death of Lord Randyll Tarly and his son Dickon. These men take part in the Lannister supply train to King’s Landing, which is attacked by Daenerys on her dragon Drogon.

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The Lannister forces are swiftly defeated, but both Randyll and Dickon refuse to bend the knee to Daenerys. Daenerys chooses to execute the two men instead of imprisoning them, burning them to death in an echo of the execution of the Meereenese nobleman in season five. The actions remain the same, except this time Tyrion pleads for mercy on the men's behalf. After the men are burned, Tyrion looks away and the Tarly soldiers bend the knee in terror. Somber and imposing music begins to play as Daenerys watches coldly before leaving the field. The scene ends by showing a grieved Tyrion out of focus behind the still burning bodies of the Tarly men in the foreground ("Eastwatch" 0:04:32-0:09:52). The framing of this scene communicates an unjust, cruel action. However, what makes the deaths of the Tarlys different from the scene in "The House of Black and White" previously? Why would the show runners expect fans to view the burning of the Tarlys as evidence that Daenerys has begun her descent into madness?

Similarly, early in the penultimate episode, "The Bells," Daenerys also acts in a way consistent within the ethical frame of Westeros. After learning that one of her advisors, Varys, is scheming to put Jon Snow on the throne after learning of his Targaryen parentage, Daenerys orders Varys to be executed for treason (0:08:47-0:12:28). Before he is burned to death, Varys repeats his fears of Daenerys's madness to Tyrion, saying: "I hope I deserve this, truly I do. I hope I'm wrong" (0:10:45-0:10:56). This scene is meant to serve as a bookend with the burning of King's Landing later, where Daenerys's madness becomes manifest, and she proves Varys's prediction correct. However, this scene does not work for fans as intended by the showrunners. As previously mentioned, so far, Daenerys has not committed any action outside of the morally gray framework from previous seasons. Even her execution of Varys is morally gray at worst, especially when considering the previous "good" characters who have executed their own men for treason—as previously mentioned, Ned Stark executes a man who abandoned his post only after an attack from magical monsters—as well as the morally gray characters who have committed worse individual actions—again, as previously mentioned, Arya Stark murders the entirety of the male line of a noble house in revenge for the murders of her mother and brother, after making them unknowingly eat their own kinsmen. Yet, none of these scenes are used to justify the inherent madness or evil within Ned nor Arya; Arya, in particular, maintained her status as a fan favorite throughout the series run. So again, why would an action that is justified within the world of Westeros serve to foreshadow Daenerys's evil actions later in the episode?

These scenes, amongst others, within the final two seasons are why many fans felt blindsided by Daenerys's final actions in "The Bells."

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Despite hearing bells ring to indicate that the reigning monarch has surrendered, the show zooms in on Daenerys's face. With this closeup, the audience sees rage and grief as she contemplates the castle. She then takes to the air on her dragon, towards the castle, and burns the citizens in her path (0:40:54-0:49:03). These actions are not morally gray. In burning King's Landing, Daenerys chooses to become the "Queen of Ashes," something she had vowed not to become the season prior ("Stormborn" 0:20:36-0:20:40). The cruel violence against the citizens of King's Landing cannot be described as anything other than evil. In comparison, the "evil" characters mentioned earlier, while committing individually more depraved actions, have never committed slaughter on this scale.<sup>6</sup> However, fans saw this action as completely inconsistent with Daenerys's actions previously, because it was. Even as Benioff and Weiss were trying to communicate that murdering the Tarlys was "bad," they did so within a moral framework that not only justified, but celebrated Daenerys burning her supposed enemies. Why would the showrunners expect the burning of the Tarlys to be read any differently from the burning of a Meereenese noble, a "badass moment" for fans? Simply because Tyrion (a character who likewise led armies and murdered his own father) is there to call it wrong?

For the most part, fans reacted extremely negatively to the narrative decision to have Daenerys burn King's Landing. The final two episodes, "The Bells" and "The Iron Throne"—which feature Daenerys giving a Nazi-esque speech in the ruins of the city as well as her being murdered by Jon Snow—are consistently the lowest rated episodes by fans. According to Rotten Tomatoes, the lowest rated episode is the series finale with a 47% rating, followed closely by "The Bells" with 49%. Similarly, according to Internet Movie Database (IMDB), "The Iron Throne," is the lowest-rated episode by fans with a 4.0/10 rating. "The Bells" is the third lowest-rated episode with a 5.9/10 rating.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the final season is an outlier with only an average rating of 6.4/10, while the series overall averages 9.2/10. In fact, only one episode outside of season eight has a rating lower than 8.0,<sup>8</sup> while none of the final season episodes are above 8.0/10 (IMDB, "Game of Thrones Ratings"). Furthermore, "The Iron Throne" is considered one of the most controversial series finales of all time (Chilton; Rosenstock).

Individual fan responses also reflect this negative response. Twitter featured an outpouring of anger, disgust, and sadness at Daenerys's actions. User @ohmytargaryen expressed their dissatisfaction: "I'm so sad because I feel that despite everything that you have had to go through all the seasons, we will lose you in the next episode. In someway [sic] we lost you already. This was not who you really are #GameofThrones." The claim that Daenerys's actions in "The Bells" were not indicative

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of her true nature is reiterated by user @sordidjoy, who claims: “This ‘mad queen’ plot twist wasn’t earned at all. Like at all.” Multiple online publications posted articles containing unhappy fan responses on Twitter, including *Vogue* (Allaire). Online critics also refused to believe that burning King’s Landing was consistent with Daenerys’s character. In his episode review for *The Ringer*, Riley McAtee argues that “It’s one thing to be ruthless, as Daenerys has always been; it’s another to be truly cruel and evil. Daenerys’s actions in ‘The Bells’ were the latter.” McAtee tries to provide context for her decision, referencing that “Daenerys recently lost two of her dragons in Rhaegal and Viserion, two of her closest friends in Jorah and Missandei, and Jon’s affections.” However, he still argues that:

If [Daenerys] had caused so much collateral damage as a by-product of her quest for the throne, her heel turn would at least have been consistent with her character. Instead, she blindly kills thousands with no clear goal in mind. Say what you will about [Daenerys’s] inherent tyrannical tendencies, but murdering innocent children and families in their homes has never been who she is. The broad strokes may have been suggested earlier, but the specifics came out of nowhere. (McAtee)

Here we see the complex moral system fans of the series understand. Yes, Daenerys commits brutal, even “tyrannical” actions, but it is always with a clear goal: creating a more just world as she sees it. Even the most unjust actions taken by Daenerys in her quest to liberate the slaves of Essos and take the Iron Throne had never included truly evil actions, like murdering innocents.

However, the negative backlash to Daenerys’s decision to burn King’s Landing was not unanimous. There were positive fan reactions and attempts to contextualize Daenerys’s decisions. For example, in his article “Daenerys Was Right: King’s Landing Had to Burn” for *Vox*, Matthew Yglesias argues that since “no option of a modern constitutional regime was on the table at any point during the series” and was in fact “laughed out of bounds by the high lords of the Seven Kingdoms” in the series finale, Daenerys took the necessary steps to ensure her rule. He further argues that: “Making an example of King’s Landing was a harsh decision. It was a cruel decision. And it’s certainly a decision whose morality one could question. But it wasn’t a ‘crazy’ decision or the act of a Mad Queen — it was a rational calculation based on a clear-eyed assessment of the strategic situation” (Yglesias). This representative response places her actions within Westeros’s moral frame-

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work, which allows brutality for the sake of one person's perception of justice. However, as previously noted, mass death and destruction of this scale has only been proposed by characters considered "evil," making this reading flawed.

### What Went Wrong?

In fan and online critical discussions of the Mad Queen, most blame has been placed squarely on the showrunners and writers, most notably Benioff and Weiss. The Change.org petition referenced at the start of the article to remake the final season with "competent" writers has 1.8 million signatures and states that: "David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have proven themselves to be woefully incompetent writers when they have no source material (i.e. the books) to fall back on." This accusation is also expressed vehemently in comments on the *Game of Thrones* subreddit. Many blamed the decision to make the final seasons only seven and six episodes respectively, in comparison to the ten episode long first six seasons. A comment by a now-deleted user on a subreddit post discussing "The Bells" states: "My only issue is it all felt so rushed. I think you even addressed it. D&D should have just taken more time." This sentiment is seconded by user u/LowlandLightening: "Agree with this- the last two seasons clearly should have remained at 10. [ . . . ] I am happy with most of the actual plot but the decision to shorten the last two seasons was just wrong" (u/Zog8). Fans speculated that the final two seasons were rushed because Benioff and Weiss were intent to move onto future projects, which at the time included a *Star Wars* film and another HBO series, an alternate reality drama in which the Confederacy won the American Civil War (Hibbard). Regardless of whether Benioff and Weiss rushed the final seasons—despite originally planning for approximately seven seasons (Hibbard)—the fan backlash placed the blame on the showrunners.

However, others argued that it wasn't poor writing from the showrunners, but poor adaptation. In her article for *Vanity Fair*, Joanna Robinson claims that through "an informal poll of book readers" she believes that book-readers are processing the narrative decision to make Daenerys the "Mad Queen" better than show-only fans. She claims that "the HBO series stumbled big time in translating Martin's version of Daenerys to the screen, particularly when it came to turning her into the 'Mad Queen Daenerys' who torched the innocents of Kings Landing" largely due to the adaptation's inability to reveal Daenerys's internal monologue (Robinson). Similarly, Shiloh Carroll points out that as the television series surpassed the books, Benioff and Weiss

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refused to acknowledge their own part in the adaptation, continuing to place blame for all controversial decisions on upcoming “plot points that Martin had revealed to them” (134). She argues that this “tendency of Benioff and Weiss to ‘pass the buck’ to Martin can be interpreted as a reluctance to take responsibility for their choices or to accept criticism for them” (135). Benioff and Weiss undoubtedly share a portion of the blame, but the blame might not solely be on their inability to adapt George R.R. Martin’s material. Instead, comments from the showrunners imply a high level of dysfunction and disagreement within the show, which likely caused significant issues.

In the “Inside the Episode” featurette that aired immediately after “The Bells,” the two showrunners cannot seem to agree with themselves whether Daenerys’s decision to burn King’s Landing was foreshadowed or spontaneous. Weiss claims that Daenerys’s actions—and her madness—were spontaneous: “I don’t think she decided ahead of time that she was going to do what she did. [. . .] It’s in that moment, on the walls of King’s Landing [. . .] when she makes the decision to—to make this personal” (HBO, “Inside the Episode” 0:03:21-0:03:47). Benioff, however, argues that hints of Daenerys’s madness date back to the show’s first season:

Even when you look back to season one, when Khal Drogo gives the golden crown to Viserys [Daenerys’s brother], and her reaction of watching her brother’s head melted off [. . .] and he was a terrible brother, [. . .] but there is something kind of chilling about the way that [Daenerys] has responded to the death of her enemies. (0:02:47-0:03:05)

This statement is missing key context. Yes, Daenerys acts coldly after watching her brother killed in front of her; however, Viserys is repeatedly abusive towards Daenerys. This abuse is clearly shown in the episode “Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things” when Viserys throws clothing and jewelry at Daenerys before striking her to the ground. Daenerys fights Viserys off and warns him that the “next time you raise a hand to me will be the last time you have hands” (0:37:15-0:38:33). Daenerys’s words imply that Viserys previously abused her; additionally, Khal Drogo kills Viserys in the scene because he threatens to cut out their unborn child (“A Golden Crown” 0:47:56-0:51:24). It is completely unfair to demand compassion or grief from Daenerys in this scene. Not only is Viserys’s death the first major death Daenerys has witnessed in the series, which could cause shock, it is cruel to demand a certain reaction from a victim after the death of her life-long abuser. This clear misunderstanding behind Daenerys’s actions demonstrates a broader

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misunderstanding of her character. She was always considered a morally gray character, in line with the ethical framework of Westeros, as indicated by Robbinson, who argues that while Daenerys was called “a ‘conqueror’ in Season 6 and, true, she burned some who betrayed her. But, hey, Tyrion throttled his old lover Shae in rather cold blood in Season 4 and he’s still seemingly humming along on a hero’s path.” Why are some characters allowed to perform morally dubious actions and still be considered “heroes,” but Daenerys is not?

These scenes, when analyzed together, clearly demonstrate that the showrunners had a misunderstanding with the fan community. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins considers another television series with a controversial final season: CBS’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1987-1990).<sup>9</sup> In this section, he explores “how it is possible to remain a fan of a program while militantly rejecting producer actions that run contrary to one’s own conception of the narrative” (“It’s Not” 132). Like *Game of Thrones*, the final season of *Beauty and the Beast* saw “tensions between fans and producers [erupt] publicly” (151). Although a high level of online fan interaction from *Game of Thrones* fans was common and expected—such as the much publicized #ForTheThrone marketing campaign on Twitter prior to the final season (Hughes)—the high levels of dissatisfaction were largely new. Instead of shock at a major character death or minor gripes about an unfulfilling plot line, the creators dealt with an outpouring of rage. Even worse, fans were resigned to the decline of their beloved series. User u/Rushdownsouth, on a subreddit thread on “The Bells,” rejects the interpretation of the episode as brilliant, stating that “people are putting more thought and effort into explaining why they liked the show than D&D put into making the show.” This opinion is supported by another comment from a now-deleted user, who writes: “This sub just can’t admit bad writing is bad. I wish it don’t be like it is either, but it do [sic]. [Daenerys’s] madness was ham fisted and completely out of character” (u/Zog8). Ultimately, fan responses to the end of *Game of Thrones* echo fans of *Beauty and the Beast*, which Jenkins argues “wanted something from *Beauty and the Beast* its producers were unable or unwilling to deliver” (“It’s Not” 146).

## Where Do We Go from Here?

Throughout eight seasons, *Game of Thrones* was a collaborative project that adapted George R.R. Martin and brought his writings to a mainstream audience. The show was financially successful and still maintains cultural relevance through mobile games and two prequel

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television series: *House of the Dragon*, which debuted in 2022 and the upcoming *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms*, which will debut in 2025. Notably, *House of the Dragon* has already experienced its own fan backlash despite only running for two seasons. In a now-deleted post on his blog, Martin railed against the creative decision to remove a character, warning of “future repercussions” within the adaptation (Cain). This authorial response came in addition to a disappointing fan response to the second season’s finale (Sorenson). In an online world, where fan communities are playing an increasingly participatory role, it is more important than ever to analyze why fans were so angry and divided over the final two seasons of *Game of Thrones*. From the first book’s publication, fans have utilized online forums for theories and community. The television series recognized these online spaces, including online marking initiatives that accelerated its popularity (Hughes). However, this online participatory fan culture ended up exacerbating a split fan community. In the end, it is only through analyzing “what fan interpretation contributes in the process of appropriating these programs for their own uses” that fans, critics, and showrunners can produce successful and popular media texts (Jenkins, Conclusion 284).

For six seasons, the audience cheered, laughed, and cried at the story of Daenerys Targaryen. However, the final two seasons—particularly the final two episodes—brought the show to a largely unsatisfying conclusion for many fans. Ultimately, it was the inconsistency in the representation of Daenerys that led to so much confusion and backlash about her character development in the final season—inconsistency within the moral framework of the world created by the television series, inconsistency within the writers’ room, and inconsistency with participatory fan culture. This discrepancy led to the destruction and death of Daenerys Targaryen. And according to the fans, Benioff and Weiss may have been able to correctly answer, “Who is Jon Snow’s mother?” but they were unable to answer, “Who is Daenerys Targaryen?”

## Notes

1. Within this article, I will be pulling fan responses primarily from the *r/gameofthrones* subreddit, with just a few examples pulled from the website formerly known as Twitter.
2. There have been numerous critical analyses of Daenerys as fulfilling the trope of the white savior due to her narrative journey, liberating the slaves from Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen. The conquest of these cities within Essos falls

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squarably within the white savior trope, as Carolyne Larrington points out, because “it takes a white Westerner, a liberal, relatively free-thinking if self-dramatizing woman, to give the slaves of the three cities in Essos the freedom that they cannot achieve for themselves” (197). For more discussions of Daenerys as white savior please also see Carroll, Emig, Frankel, Hardy, and Hartnett.

3. In fact, it is revealed later that this insurgency group was funded by the slave masters of Astapor and Yunkai with the assistance of the city of Volantis, not the noble families of Meereen (“Oathbreaker” 0:27:48-0:28:06). Many Meereenese nobles are killed by this group in the attack on Daenerys at the fighting pits (“The Dance of the Dragons” 0:44:10-0:46:28).

4. Beyond the brutality of this scene, Daenerys’s comparison between the Meereenese nobles and her young dragons demonstrates both paternalism and animalization of the men she is threatening. Most of the men in the catacombs are older than her, but by their culture (and race) she views them as children who must be disciplined.

5. As identified by Young, the continent of Westeros is “a much identified analogue of medieval England” (66). Therefore, these misguided interpretations of Daenerys’s actions clearly demonstrate the pervasive nature of the white savior myth and the continued significance of Eurocentrism by a (largely) Western audience.

6. In fact, it was the threat of burning King’s Landing to the ground that the series uses to justify the murder and deposing of Daenerys’s father, the “Mad King” Aerys. The closest actions the series has demonstrated to the burning of King’s Landing is Cersei’s decision to destroy the Great Sept in “The Winds of Winter.” In destroying the Sept with explosive wildfire, Cersei kills her enemies within the Sept, but the destruction is shown to have a wider reaching effect, destroying the buildings in an estimated half mile radius, including at least six innocent civilians (“The Winds of Winter” 0:17:08-0:17:49). However, this brutality pales in comparison to the destruction wrought by Daenerys. Furthermore, the character of Cersei is a primary antagonist of the series, though I would hesitate to call her “evil.”

7. The second lowest rated episode, according to IMDB, is the fourth episode from the final season, “The Last of the Starks” (“Game of Thrones Ratings”).

8. Season 5, Episode 6, “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken” is rated 7.9/10, likely due to several controversial decisions such as the rape of Sansa Stark by Ramsay Bolton and the introduction of the adapted versions of the Dornish Sand Snakes (IMDB, “Game of Thrones Ratings”).

9. Ironically, George R.R. Martin was a writer on the *Beauty and the Beast* television series. He wrote fourteen episodes over the three seasons of the show, including three episodes in the controversial final season (IMDB, “George R.R. Martin”).

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# The Neu Game of Fandom: Neurodivergence, Representation, and the Mask of the Great Detective

*Kristopher Mecholsky*

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In 2023, Reddit user u/killing-the-cuckoo struck out to explore twin fascinations: fandom and mental health. Often discussed in connection (see Zubernis; Hrebenak; Trollsareboring; Poe), fandom and mental health have become polarizing in recent years, with divisions stemming from a question of power. In a fraught sociopolitical and economic climate—not only in the United States but worldwide—with widespread inequalities, the very definition of privilege is in contest. Of course, the notion of “privilege” remains constant: a reservation of power, of enjoyed benefits, for select persons. But in a time since the popular success of the Frankfurt School’s critique of power and advocacy for emancipation from oppressive ideologies—with increased, if hazy, awareness of inequalities and power dynamics—few wish to admit they exist in a privileged class actively dominating others. And yet—at present and for the near future—privileged classes will continue to exist. Of interest here is whether they acknowledge it, outwardly or inwardly, and what they do with that privilege. The intersection of mental health and fandom, especially in online spaces, plays a revealing role in negotiating privilege’s visibility.

Polarization may be growing, but discussion has always been central in fandom, and the Sherlock Holmes fandom has always been particularly intense. Although I have found no evidence to confirm, a rumor has long circulated that some contemporary fans in 1893 wore black armbands of mourning for weeks following Sherlock Holmes’s (mutual) fight to the death with a hastily conceived arch-nemesis. Even if the rumor cannot be confirmed, its continued persistence is indicative of the Sherlock fandom’s zeal, further exemplified by one premise to the rumor: some fans believed Holmes was real. And, well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a sizable group of people have continued to share that belief (Rule).

What is clear is that even those who did not believe Holmes was real enjoyed pretending he might be. As the Sherlock fandom grew, so did this fantasy that John Watson and Sherlock Holmes were real

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friends and adventurers. In the wake of fan studies, Henry Jenkins defines this “critically engaged” fan activity in opposition to the more well-known “active” or “creative” fandoms characterized by convention attendance or fanfiction (“Introduction” 1). These exercises for the Sherlock fandom came to be known collectively as “the Game”: a shared, make-believe presumption that permits imaginative play and indulges in clarifying canonical information to account for “apparent” textual discrepancies (e.g., When did Watson’s first wife die? When did he remarry? How many times did he remarry?). The Game flourished amongst early fans, and the famed Baker Street Irregulars in 1934 perfected such fan engagement with their *Baker Street Journal* and annual meetings, both of which continue today. In recent years, a new game (or “Neu” Game) has taken its place: a thorough and intense attempt to diagnose the potential neurodivergence of Sherlock Holmes. The Game’s stakes are decidedly higher since fans engage broader online discourse, helping to define public consciousness and the practice of socio-political power. For the practitioners themselves, often they feel their very identities are at stake.<sup>1</sup>

Neurodivergence has become a common identifier online, but, as I will emphasize, equivocal and slippery usage of crucial terms undergirds much of the polarization in fandom and mental health discussions. To clarify, neurodivergence is a non-medical paradigm that suggests certain neurological conditions, especially neurodevelopmental ones (classified as disorders by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM), are not necessarily disorders but are reflections of neurodiversity: the natural variations in minds. They are divergences from what is “neurotypical,” or “having a brain and way of thinking that is more frequent and amenable to how society is currently set up” (Love). The original concepts of neurodivergence and neurodiversity are disputed, but strong evidence suggests neurodiversity was popularized collectively in the 1990s by autistic activists, such as Jim Sinclair, in groups such as the Independent Living email list and the Autism Network International; it later found broader use after solidification in work by Harvey Blume, Judy Singer, and others (Botha et al.). The term “neurodivergence” itself seems to have been coined by autistic activist Kassiane Asasumasu to denote “any kind of divergence from dominant cultural norms of neurocognitive functioning” (Botha et al.; Love). Pronounced segments of the neurodivergence movement have achieved some success in advocating that some DSM-classified disorders are instead signifiers of identity that require better understanding, appreciation, and acceptance by the neurotypical mainstream and indeed by other neurodivergent people.

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With such successes, however, neurodivergence has shifted and expanded as questions remain. Is psychosis neurodivergent? Depression? Addiction? If so, when should neurodivergence be treated and when should it be accepted? What norms guide that decision-making? Some critics and even former advocates of neurodiversity, Judy Singer most prominently, have disputed its recent usage, arguing that it has adopted a “Pollyanna Pangloss’ ideology that fails to acknowledge the significant differences between those who mildly struggle being autistic and those who have profound impairments” (AU-TI Media Staff). As Neu Game fans consider Holmes depictions, armed with individual understandings, they seek representations of their ideas of neurodivergence. Therefore, significant disciplinary power is in dispute.

Further, a major difference from the old Game is that Neu Game participants draw more from media adaptations of Holmes, especially the BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010–2017) and CBS’s *Elementary* (2012–2019). Even when self-declared canonical Sherlockians indulge in the Neu Game, they inevitably reference contemporary adaptations. Thus, while identifying possible historical antecedents of neurodivergence and evidence of what is now called autism or ADHD is an impulse behind the Neu Game, clearly of greater import and discord are contemporary portrayals of neurodivergence and their lasting social awareness. Additionally, the Neu Game largely plays out over social media, though it does thrive in in-person conversations amongst fans. For this investigation, I focus on evidence of the former.<sup>2</sup> Online spaces are the widest-ranging space contesting social discourse on mental health and its potential social power, and the Sherlock fandom is a lightning rod in that storm.<sup>3</sup>

### Critical Context: “Beset by Stereotypes”

I want first to situate how scholars have understood fans’ intense interest in Holmes’s neurodiversity before turning to the Neu Game proper. Scholarly attention is relatively scant, given its popular prevalence. Still, especially in the past twenty years with the rise of fan studies and disability studies, increasing numbers of academics are tackling the question of Holmes’s relationship to neurodivergence. Most commonly, however, that neurodivergence is only autism. As with the reality of neurodiversity, the possibility of diagnosing Holmes with autism has been around for some time. Uta Frith’s groundbreaking *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* in 1989 seems to be the first print suggestion that Holmes could be diagnosed with autism. Sporadically after that, well into the twenty-first century, references connecting Holmes and autism pepper academic and popular writing, sometimes with an eye

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for diagnosis (see Berger; Sanders) and sometimes with a caution against diagnosing any literary figure (see McDonagh 100). Still, during that time, other scholars did not notice a connection at all (see, for instance, Redmond 220).

Aside from brief or informal ruminations (including a 1994 address by A. Michael Maher to the Baltimore Holmes fan group “The Six Napoleons”), the first sustained meditations on the topic primarily occurred around 2014. Roughly six major essays came out between 2013 and 2016, and they can be grouped into two main categories: those sharply critiquing the implications for diagnosing Holmes, and those who laud the public value of a widely known, and variously depicted, neurodivergent Holmes.<sup>4</sup> Of these, I will evaluate four—Sonya Freeman Loftis’s “The Autistic Detective: Sherlock Holmes and His Legacy”; Mat Greenfield’s “We Shouldn’t View Sherlock as an Autistic Savant”; Scott Folsom’s “Sherlock, Autism, and the Cultural Politics of Representation”; and Paul Howell’s “From *Rain Man* to *Sherlock*: Theological Reflections on Metaphor and ASD.” All four publications coincided with the airing of *Sherlock* and *Elementary*.

Loftis and Greenfield take diverging views from Folsom and Howell on the relationship between Holmes and autism. Loftis suggests a long history connecting Holmes and autism but provides no citation before Frith. Like Patrick McDonagh, who briefly mentions Frith’s suggestion in his 2007 essay “Autism and Modernism,” Loftis maintains that diagnosing a fictional character is problematic and perpetuates stereotypes. Further, she argues that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s depiction of Holmes through an apparently neurotypical narrator, Watson—who describes Holmes as machine-like, emotionless, and exhibiting traits often associated with autism, such as intense interests, social awkwardness, and unusual body language—reinforces perceptions of autistic individuals as mysterious, puzzling, and difficult to understand. Watson, Loftis asserts, often connects Holmes to criminals, such as Moriarty, linking them through cognitive difference (i.e., neurodivergence). She shares this observation with Tobin Siebers in *Disability Theory*, specifically the idea that the able norm seeks a “‘pathology of superiority,’ the linkage of gift and disorder” (113) that provides reassurance for exceptional ability and disability as beyond customary. Both are Othered and weird. In all, Loftis concludes, although the autistic coding of Holmes’s canonical depiction as well as later depictions heavily influenced by him (e.g., *Criminal Minds*, *Bones*, *Numb3rs*, *House*, and *Monk*) may appear positive, the lasting effect perpetuates harmful, dehumanizing stereotypes of autistic people (39, 48). Like Loftis and McDonagh, Greenfield discourages audiences from diagnosing fictional characters. Focusing on the BBC’s *Sherlock*, Greenfield observes that audiences see

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Holmes as autistic and, in doing so, view an “over-simplified, romanticised, distinctly pop-culture version of ASD.” While this can have positive outcomes, such as raising awareness, Greenfield concludes that such outsized representation “minimises the full range of behaviours that people with ASD exhibit,” leading audiences to expect autistic people to be “geniuses with a quirky forthrightness unencumbered by social inhibition.” Such erroneous understanding “risks turning a very serious condition into something vogue.”

Folsom and Howell have more optimistic views of autism representation, both directed at influencing a neurotypical world to be more open to autism. Folsom’s essay addresses the relationship between neurodivergence and fans in terms of fan creation—Jenkins’s creative fandom. Specifically, Folsom explores how fanfiction writers use Holmes to generate representation for autistic people, combating over-simplified media tropes (as Loftis and Greenfield highlight) and exploring complex autistic experiences. By engaging in the *Neu Game*, which fans called “Autistic!Sherlock” headcanon, Folsom suggests they diversify public understanding and destabilize harmful representations, particularly regarding what Folsom sees as mass media’s “enforced asexuality” of autistic people. Howell’s essay discusses the BBC’s *Sherlock* in connection with other popular depictions of autism to postulate a popular metaphor for autism, namely the humanized computer. Howell demonstrates that metaphors for disorders and illnesses, though sometimes constricting, can offer hope and liberation to individuals with said conditions (151).

Finally, after decreased critical attention, Christina Wilkins’s “Diagnosing the Detective: Sherlock Holmes and Autism in Contemporary Television” appeared in *Autism in Film and Television: On the Island* in 2022. Like Loftis, McDonagh, and Greenfield before her, Wilkins rejects the diagnosis of fictional creations, particularly at such a temporal remove as the canonical Holmes, but she acknowledges that “audiences have seemed to need to categorize and diagnose [him] as autistic” (99). Unlike previous scholars, Wilkins addresses *Elementary*’s evolving treatment of Holmes’s potential autism and demonstrates how that evolution occurs in relation to *Sherlock*. *Elementary*, Wilkins argues, introduces an explicitly diagnosed autistic character, Fiona Helbron, to “reduce Sherlock’s characterization to one of eccentricity or quirkiness” for the purposes of satisfying genre conditions for the television police procedural (105). Through Fiona’s introduction, Holmes is affirmed as “not-Other in the way of neurological differences . . . [and in doing so reaffirms] a reductive view of autism. . . . beset by stereotypes” (102–03).

## The Comorbid Detective

Since Wilkins, few literary scholars (see Gullo in 2022 and Cho in 2023) have examined Holmes and neurodivergence. Nevertheless, neurodivergence and autism have pervaded the current zeitgeist, perhaps most extensively on social media. So, what kind of neurodivergence is contested in the Neu Game on social media? Across Reddit, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, fans diagnose Holmes and adaptations of him with (at least) the following disorders:

- Neurodevelopmental Disorders
- Bipolar and Related Disorders
- Depressive Disorders
- Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders
- Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders
- Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders
- Personality Disorders

As Gary Gintner summarizes, “disorders” are defined by the current DSM (DSM-5-TR; or DSM, Fifth Edition, Text Revision, published in 2022) as “[patterns] of symptoms that [cause] significant disturbance . . . apparent in an individual’s behaviors, emotions, or cognitions” (146). Since the Sherlock fandom is large and diverse, the above list cannot be exhaustive. Additionally, only some fans speak with reference to the DSM, whereas nearly all fans refer to mental health diagnoses through their informal usage: autistic, ADHD, bipolar, manic, depressed, OCD, PTSD, addict. And so, with informal usage comes informal meaning.

Particularly concerning autism, terminology is diffuse and contested. Fans discussing the DSM’s Neurodevelopmental Disorders might refer to those living with autism; or to those “on the spectrum”; or to those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (or ASD, the term used in the DSM-5-TR); or to those with Autism Spectrum Condition (or ASC); or to autistic people; and more. Quite frequently, too, social media users will use intentionally informal language disassociated from the mental health professions, such as “my autistic ass” or “NT,” to refer to a so-called neurotypical person (u/inkelfe; SontaranGaming). Thus, language tends to be identity-first, though individual use may not have a permanent understanding.

At the crux of terminology disagreements, particularly with reference to autism, power once again resurfaces. Terminology disagreements seem to merge around a question of “person-first” language or “identity-first” language, as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network

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(ASAN) suggests. The ASAN, founded by Ari Ne’eman and Scott Michael Robertson, argues that autistic people generally prefer identity-first language (such as “autistic” or “autistic person”), like identifiers for race, religion, sexual identity and nationality (Brown). Such designations denote the condition as inherent to an individual’s identity. The ASAN suggests that family and caretakers of autistic people historically have tended to push for “person-first” language (e.g., a person with autism) that emphasizes autism as a condition that does not fully identify an individual. The ASAN ultimately encourages identity-first language, in contrast to most mental health professionals, arguing that autism is not a condition that can be “cured” or separated from an individual: it is an inherent part of identity to be accepted. This critical discussion of nomenclature within autistic communities further highlights the deciding stakeholders involved in the Neu Game: those with disabilities and disability advocates. The threefold question relevant to this issue is 1) whether a neurodevelopmental condition is an inherent marker of identity; 2) who decides how that identity is applied to individuals; and 3) who should advocate for members of an identity or for those with a disability. The broader power struggle lies not as much within the social spheres of those with disabilities but rather in broader arenas such as identity limitations on the one hand and perceived power and its social employment on the other.

The diagnosis of a fictional character might seem minor—playful, even. But in contesting Holmes’s perceived neurodivergence, fans are trying to articulate *their own* neurodivergence. When they feel non-normative—ostracized, different, excluded, weird, odd—and they recognize *how they see themselves* in a fictional character with whom others love or identify, they find validation and belonging. This process is somewhat natural in fandom; fans explore the ways they feel othered and bond with those who feel similarly. As Jenkins observes, “Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups . . . to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations” (“*Star Trek*” 40). In fervently discussing Holmes’s potential neurodivergence, fans are often trying to identify his neurodivergence as *their* particular neurodivergence. Holmes offers fans two things simultaneously: a feeling of empowerment when experiencing difference, difficulty, even disenfranchisement, and a socially powerful token to identify oneself. After all, within his storyworlds, Holmes impresses the mainstream (the neurotypical) and wields power, even while outside the norm. Moreover, Holmes is special: he’s one of the most adapted figures ever, beloved and almost universally known, even by a single object, name, or silhouette. Frankly, a lot of cultural power is tied up in what disability identity can claim him most effectively. His simultaneous situation

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outside of society along with his undeniable power within that society is enticing to those who feel marginalized. This is why, despite most scholars disavowing the diagnosis of fictional characters, in popular publications like *The New York Times* or *The Guardian*, individuals (like physician and inspiration-behind-*House* Lisa Sanders) and organizations (like the National Autistic Society) proudly diagnose Holmes (Sanders; Dixon).

The personal stakes for fans have been high, but recent gains in public knowledge of mental diagnoses have driven even more engagement within the Neu Game. Further, mental health crises in the world, certainly in the United States and Great Britain where the Sherlock fandom has long been dominant, have been mounting in recent decades, greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Insel). At present, the Sherlock fandom is markedly intertwined with the establishment of identity and community in socially powerful ways.

### “I Played the Game for All it Was Worth”

Individuals engaging in the Neu Game tend to self-organize into four main categories:

- self-identified as “neurotypical” (i.e., not neurodivergent)
- self-identified neurodivergent people
- close relatives/friends of neurodivergent people
- mental health professionals

Vanishingly few who comment in online spaces self-identify as “neurotypical” (i.e., not neurodivergent). In fact, I have not found one instance in which someone identifies as neurotypical in this context; instead, they say something like “I am not neurodivergent myself...” while suggesting their own possible neurodivergence and acknowledging they have not been diagnosed. Though the impetus behind initial Neu Game discussion varies widely—interest in specific characters, episodes, scenes, cross-series conversations, canonical references, self-diagnosis, and so on—discussion usually condenses into: 1) diagnosis gatekeeping, 2) terminology debates, and 3) ableism concerns. Together, these scenarios indicate a desire to locate a determined neurodivergence situated against an ableist world.

Given familiarity with terms and concepts like ableism, diagnosis, markers of diagnosis, and neurodivergence, participants in the Neu Game overall are likely more privileged compared to much of

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the population. Studies over the past decade have found that, while mental health literacy (MHL) is generally rising, it remains at low or moderate levels (“Mental Health Literacy”; Tay et al.; Nobre et al.). While its definition, exploration, and explanation in the mental health sciences is still evolving, indications are that MHL is tied to several markers of privilege, including socioeconomic status, education levels, and race—though younger people, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women also tend to have higher levels of MHL (Aljassim and Ostini; “Mental Health Literacy”). Thus, while some assumptions can be made regarding tendencies in background, high-MHL individuals are by no means a monolithic group.

Regarding gatekeeping, discussion participants tend to align by either categorical rejection of a mental disorder or categorical affirmation of a mental disorder (by personal knowledge, reference to the DSM-5-TR, or both). Many gatekeepers affirm a diagnosable condition for Holmes, and they often state so emphatically and authoritatively: “I have analyzed him from a DSM perspective and got to the conclusion of: -ASD -ADHD -BPD -selective empathy (BBC Sherlock)” or “Personally I think it’s more NPD with BPD traits” (Ztaarzz; u/raynavives). Oppositionally, some fans state that he has no particular neurodivergence, that he does not need a label, he’s “just a little quirky” (Comment on “Sherlock mentality”).

Unexpectedly, perhaps, most diagnosis-deniers come not from a position of devaluing mental health issues but fervent desire for proper treatment. For instance, Reddit user u/Throwaway-shot argues, “[Greg] House doesn’t have ASD. If anything, he’s a high-functioning sociopath,” interestingly utilizing a phrase from the BBC’s *Sherlock*. As expected, however, the diagnosing gatekeepers clash and swirl around each other. Thus, Reddit user u/bluecrowned responded to Throwaway-shot with the highest up-voted comment, writing,

I was shocked to see that House understanding social cues and choosing to ignore them is part of your reasoning. Myself and many other autistic people I have spoken to have a deeper understanding of social cues than many or most NTs because we meticulously learned them as children and young adults to try and navigate the world without being continuously traumatized. If anything, that’s a point in \*favor\* of House being autistic.

As u/bluecrowned’s statement reveals, many gatekeepers rely on personal experience. User u/C-McGuire writes elsewhere on Reddit, for instance, “Well I’M autistic and even canon Holmes seems to be neu-

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rodivergent, probably autistic”; u/Tweetthebirdy says, “I read him as having ADHD + Autism, because I also have both lol.... I don’t personally see him as being bipolar, but whatever he is, this funky dude is definitely neurodivergent”; and still elsewhere, u/Astro\_Penguin writes, “I think of him as both autistic & ADHD. (source: I’m both haha).”

Yet gatekeepers wishing to keep fans from diagnosing Holmes cite personal experience perhaps even more fervently. A since-deleted user writes, “No portrayal of Holmes is autistic. My wife works with people with autism [. . .] I see a lot of misrepresentation of autistic people since meeting my wife, and personally, as someone with ADHD, I don’t like seeing people slapping serious mental health and developmental delay and disorders to fictional characters” (Comment on “Sherlock Holmes and autism”). Indeed, such gatekeepers also cite professional experience, as indicated by the Tumblr account Wellingtongoose posting, “Sherlock Does Not Have Asperger’s or Autism, Thanks - From 4 Psychiatrists,” wherein the self-declared “4 Psychiatrists” detail their professional experience as distinct from representations within the BBC’s *Sherlock*. Moreover, they argue, identifying Holmes with autism perpetuates incorrect and harmful stereotypes. The post was passionately discussed, most often by self-declared neurodivergent people who frequently protested the mental health professions’ general treatment. Clearly, many participants in the Neu Game recognize the importance of, and personal and professional interest in, identifying Holmes’s neurodivergence.

The second type of dialogue considers specific symptoms or traits fans identify in Sherlockian characters and narratives. They argue over their proper application, and gatekeepers’ discussions often morph into debate, as evidenced by u/bluecrowned’s response to Throwaway-shot. The dispute considers that, while “understanding social cues and choosing to ignore them is . . . reasoning” for identifying Holmes as neurotypical, instead it could mirror core traits of autistic people. More often amongst the terminology debate conversations, however, participants seem gleeful to have new ideas potentially challenging their diagnoses. For instance, I previously mentioned Reddit user u/killing-the-cuckoo. They collected different responses to Holmes’s perceived neurodivergence, with others noticing traits “symptomatic of both autism . . . and ADHD” or “bipolar disorder (specifically bipolar II) . . . [with] his method of self-medicating through recreational drug use . . . [suggesting] some kind of comorbidity with depression or low-mood.”

The last type of conversation regards ableism. Sometimes, fans raise ableism concerns because they have noticed other fans playing the Neu Game. For example, a Facebook user of the *Elementary* Fans group

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writes, “I remember there being a controversy over JLM Sherlock being much more ‘human.’ Apparently people felt that using the word in that context was ableist because BBCsherlock! [sic] is portrayed certainly having some autistic qualities.” More often, ableism is raised explicitly, as u/half-metal-scientist notes in an autism subreddit, sounding off about the BBC’s *Sherlock*:

Come to find out the reason I always connected with him so strongly is because-- surprise surprise!-- he is literally so neurodivergent. [... In my honest opinion], the showrunners are awful people...seeing an obviously autistic person called a freak and treated like he’s some alien makes me very upset. Getting called names like ‘dictionary’ really impacted me as a child, and seeing it so casually done in a show that is only 12 years old makes me sad.

u/half-metal-scientist’s comment is common. Many fans describe an elated feeling when they realize identification with Holmes because they feel that he shares their neurodivergence. Such fans also relate that identification and solidarity grew from feelings of difference, non-normativity, or exclusion; fandom and identification offer belonging and community in the face of ostracization.

At the heart of Neu Gamers’ fervent participation is a collective desire for common ground over increasingly contested and consequential social issues. While outwardly Neu Gamers argue over disorders and disabilities, with the social and individual empowerment that follows a claimed diagnosis, I suggest they are also raising deeper questions about culture in terms of *understanding* disorder vs. difference and disability vs. difficulty, as well as *labeling* disorder vs. difference and disability vs. difficulty.

## The Mask of the Great Detective: Gentrification of Mental Disability

Somewhat self-conscious of the previously discussed usage of critically engaged fandom to disrupt dominant culture (Jenkins, “*Star Trek*” 40), Neu Game fans have also inherited terminology about mental health disciplines for online commentary. The polarization that has swept fandom, mental health discourse, and the Neu Game—which is to say, the polarization that has swept across relatively high MHL populations—certainly seems to be encroaching into more online interactions. With their relatively privileged awareness of MHL, Neu Game

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participants are shaping broader understanding of disorder and disability, potentially shifting political discourse and power.

Into this intellectual climate, regardless of received biases, individuals in the mental health disciplines have been trying to make advances in helping people: identifying symptoms and problems, developing treatments, and raising awareness amongst affected populations. The mental health disciplines developed terminology to denote problems that individuals endured. They have been defining a mental disorder as “a defined set of symptoms that significantly disturb an individual’s cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning” (American Psychiatric Association). In doing so, of course, they have relied on ideologically influenced norms to define “appropriate” behavior, regulation, and so on. Broadly, though, society is—and more specifically, communities and social networks are—often actually interested in genuinely helping people overcome real mental health issues that might disrupt their lives. So, the DSM-5-TR, while not perfect, takes pains to note that not all socially deviant behavior is a mental disorder: it’s a disorder only if it disrupts the diagnosed person’s life, often by their own definition of distress or disability (as in, they suggest they cannot do something). Mental health professionals tend to stress to their patients that they exhibit *features* of, say, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, to prompt the question: “what can we do to help you move forward in your life in a way you find productive?” In this scenario, diagnosis informs treatment, not identification: “a diagnosis describes a disorder a person *has*, not who a person *is*” (Gintner 136, emphasis original).

But if disorders are socially defined, they nevertheless remain prone to ideological inflection. So, while mental health professionals have been successful in many ways, their success has occurred while a lay, indistinct Foucauldian critique has become ingrained amongst high-MHL individuals. Increasingly aware of new mental health challenges and treatments, but also aware of their complicity in ideological replication of institutionalized social dominance, Neu Gamers are incentivized. They may see few ways out of reproducing ideology and social domination, but simultaneously they are more aware of mental health challenges and difficulties that they or people they know face, and they hope to find resources and help.

This predicament explains the strains and variability in Neu Game discussion. As detailed above, it usually condenses into diagnosis gate-keeping, terminology debates, and ableism concerns. Caught between combatting ideology—and thus distrusting most official avenues of diagnosis—and seeking genuine resources tangled in that ideology, the

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high-MHL Neu Game participants fiercely contest Holmes's diagnosis, concerned their disabilities are invisible or dismissed by an ableist society. They are motivated to locate and define the limits of diagnoses and symptoms for practical treatment.

To understand how the collision of ideological concern and desire for recognition underpin the Neu Game, I want to return to a previous example: u/Throwaway-shot's post arguing that "Greg House doesn't have ASD, and that matters." Several features distinguish this post and its comments from others and reveal it as a distinctive exemplar. First, it was posted in an autism subreddit, by a self-declared autistic adult, as opposed to a specific fan subreddit like SherlockHolmes (for the Canon), Elementary, or Sherlock (for the BBC show), indicating the degree to which fandoms influence other online spaces. Second, the post implicitly ties together two different Holmes adaptations: *House*, which the original poster recognizes as "loosely based on Sherlock Holmes," and the BBC's *Sherlock*, which u/Throwaway-shot references by arguing that House is a "high-functioning sociopath" as an allusion to the episode "A Study in Pink." Third, u/Throwaway-shot's post combines all forms of the Neu Game: gatekeeping a diagnosis for a Holmes depiction (i.e., forbidding ASD as a diagnosis); questioning the terminology for a diagnosis (i.e., he is a particular kind of sociopath with specific, detailed symptoms); and expressing concern for a misplaced diagnosis as perpetuating ableism against autistic individuals. In the interest of discussion, I want to emphasize a portion of Throwaway-shot's post:

From a superficial level, I can understand why someone might think House has ASD: he's blunt, he sometimes ignores social cues, he has special interests, and he often fidgets in a way that appears similar to stimming.

But House doesn't have ASD. If anything, he's a high-functioning sociopath. The main difference is that House *does* understand social cues, he *chooses* to ignore them. He understands social norms far more clearly than even most NTs and he abuses that knowledge to manipulate people around him for his own gain or amusement. [. . .]

People with ASD display the traits we do because of a lack of understanding of social cues, or due to the emotional exhaustion we frequently experience in trying to keep up with them. People with antisocial personality disorder understand social cues . . . they just don't care. This is a huge difference, and any

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suggestion that people with ASD are somehow also “antisocial” should be forcefully rebutted.

The purpose behind u/Throwaway\_shot’s post on a Holmes proxy is 1) to articulate what they see as society’s misunderstanding of autism (“blunt . . . [ignoring] social cues . . . [with] special interests . . . often [fidgeting]”); 2) to revise it (i.e., traits of autism stem from a “lack of understanding of social cues or . . . emotional exhaustion”); and 3) to label what society thinks of as autism (those who “understand social norms . . . and [abuse] that knowledge to manipulate . . . for . . . gain or amusement”) as a separate diagnosis. In this case, the original poster—a self-identified “person with autism” who says they exhibit traits of autism consistent with what they argue it is—has a vested interest to use a popular cultural figure to dispel ableist myths regarding autism and define for others what it *is*. Yet, many of the top, up-voted comments to u/Throwaway\_shot’s post echoed what self-described “autistic person” u/bluecrowned stated: “I was shocked to see . . . your reasoning. Myself and many other autistic people I have spoken to have a deeper understanding of social cues than many or most NTs because we meticulously learned them.” In both cases, the posters are generalizing about neurodivergence with responses reflective of individual experience (the first with person-first language, the second with identity-first language). In challenging ideological assumptions and simultaneously seeking accommodation from a normative world, the collision of apparently authentic worldviews muddies understanding of how neurodivergent people operate and how society should respond.

Into this same quagmire of ideology, rebellion, vulnerability, and demand, neurodiversity emerged and confused any assured, collective certainty on mental health. When diagnoses were questioned, it became possible to see autism, ADHD, OCD, anxiety, depression, addiction, and more, on one spectrum of difference. The distinction between someone with a mental disability—a significantly socially stigmatized disability at one time—and someone with an invisible mental health difficulty was one of degree rather than stark dissimilarity. In this frame, the “disability/difference conundrum” has been acknowledged in disability studies for some time. In his groundbreaking work in the edited collection *Autism and Representation*, Mark Osteen notes the slippery terminology involved in the demarcation of disabilities, concluding, “disabilities are not either physical facts or discursive constructs, but both” (2). Indeed, Christina Wilkins and Sonya Freeman Loftis both cite Osteen as influences on their work on Holmes and autism. Of this conundrum, Osteen writes, “[. . .] because autism self-advocacy is dominated by those who can communicate well, those

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who can't speak or write, or who are severely antisocial or intellectually impaired, are often left out in the cold. Who speaks for them?" (7). This observation articulates precisely the polarizing problem underlying the Neu Game and many other mental health discourses into the 2020s. Through a genuine desire to eradicate ideological oppression and elevate broader understanding, a sliding scale of normativity materializes, shifting popular understanding across difference and marginalization to difficulty and disorder and disability.

As fans recognize personal reflections of differences and difficulties within their beloved franchises, they find the warmth of community and validation in fan groups who offer the solace of identity and shared grievance—all natural and important processes for those experiencing marginalization or disability. Yet, some disability advocates are angry. Incentivized to find commonality with the marginalized, Neu Gamers find identity in neurodivergence; but who distinguishes amongst those experiencing difference, difficulty, disorder, or disability? Official areas are suspected ideologically, and neurodivergence can tend to be lumped together into a single, cloudy category on the strength of any individual's own declared experience. Which autistic experience triumphs as "standard?" u/Throwaway\_shot's or u/bluecrowned's? Hidden behind social media masks, much is unknown, and the standard bearers of diagnosis—the mental health professions—are often jettisoned in favor of incoherent disarray. But complex systems settle into stable equilibria at some point.

In an influential essay in 2022 on Substack, Freddie deBoer describes what he calls the "gentrification of disability." Given his experience working with individuals with what sociologist Amy Lutz has recently called "severe autism," and frustrated by waves of articles where he saw autism glamorized "as a newer, perhaps better way of thinking," . . . [but] always, always, always . . . fixated relentlessly on the highest-functioning people with autism," deBoer asks who is speaking for those suffering and who cannot speak. deBoer echoes Osteen's own question and argues that "the very concept of disability depends on the notion that disabilities are inherently negative. If they are not in some sense disabling . . . the entire moral and legal logic that underpins the concept of reasonable accommodation . . . depends on the idea that these things are both unchosen and harmful." DeBoer worries that a kind of solipsism will take over if "disability" (i.e., what perhaps used to be considered only a difference or difficulty) is perceived as a status symbol: socially powerful and desirable.

Again, this is not to say that individuals self-diagnosing are wrong to do so, or even that they are always wrong *when* doing so. Indeed, in a July 2024 episode of their podcast *Blocked and Reported*, journal-

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ists Katie Herzog and Jesse Singal discuss what they sardonically call the hottest trend of 2024: autism. In doing so, Herzog acknowledges that “for people who self-diagnose based on what they saw on TikTok, this [label of autism] might provide an immediate community.” Singal adds that “it also might prevent them from . . . making the changes in their life that would allow them to have a more robust in-person community and more productive personal relationship.” By capitulating to self-diagnosis, participants in the Neu Game are still potentially capitulating to ideologically constrained understandings of mental health. Moreover, clearly there are social benefits to a mental health disorder diagnosis. Herzog, Lutz, and deBoer all suggest that individuals like Neu Gamers are responding to social incentives when trying to figure out their identity. Neu Gamers face difficulty and suffering, and they seek comfort and help, yet commentary from Herzog and deBoer continues to recognize the importance of formed communities led by those most marginalized, which may not always be recognized in fan spaces.

The trouble comes down to clarifying two ideas for the more privileged classes who can tend to dominate discourse (what deBoer wryly calls the “chattering classes”): broader discourse on the difficulty–disability continuum and nuance of representation. The fact is life is difficult, frustrating, marginalizing, Othering. Fans are looking for community to understand themselves, to feel validation, to find resources and help, but the critiques from many critics and scholars mentioned here must be interpolated. When Neu Gamers make Holmes the mask of autism, public discourse and policy shifts. Resources are maneuvered toward the icon, the mask. Autism becomes associated with Holmes’s extraordinary brilliance, eminently useful to society and tolerated by any “mediocre neural prune job earthling [npcs],” to quote a social media user (Joiner). When we make static the spectrum of difficulties, differences, disorders, and disabilities of neurodiversity, we do disservice to the whole range of human experience.

Across recent popular books on mental health, a discourse is emerging on disorder that is distinctly empowering. In their 2021 *ADHD 2.0*, for instance, Edward Hallowell and John J. Ratey conclude “[. . .] what a liberating message it is for us all to know that no brain is the best, and each of us has the magnificent, lifelong chance to find our own brain’s special way” (132). Gary Trosclai, writing in 2020’s *The Healthy Compulsive*, suggests that “there is a reason that some of us are compulsive. Nature ‘wants’ to grow and expand so that it can adapt and thrive, and it needs different sorts of people to do that [. . .] Finding and living our unique, individual role [. . .] is the most healing action we can take” (179). And Andrea Petersen confesses in 2017’s *On Edge*:

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*A Journey through Anxiety*: “I certainly don’t see . . . [my anxiety] as a gift [. . . yet] Take my struggles with anxiety away and I’m someone else. Anxiety has been good to me, too [. . . it] means I’m simply not mellow enough to take things for granted. And that has made my life all the richer” (260). While I am sympathetic to neurodiversity movements that embrace it as a reflection of basic difference, I draw heavily from the intellectual tradition of ideology-critique. As such, the privileged “chattering classes” engaged in disability conversations regarding mental health need to recognize that ideologically fraught diagnostic heuristics, cut free from the meaning of their discipline of origin, are an invitation to unwieldy power employment. Based only in individual experience, exclusionary labels (like anxious, autistic, and so on) become socially powerful identities. They are enticing with the sense of belonging and validation they provide, especially free of constraining norms. But free of norms, they permit exclusionary policing in the name of social justice: that group is part of the oppressive ideological hegemony, this group is not. That kind of framing sections off human populations into ideologically determined groups (like neurotypicals and neuroatypicals) in “socially and politically porous” environments (Mullen 3).

As a prominently visible intersection of marginalization and popular consciousness, fandom is clearly a significant site in the contest over how social groups understand mental health. Insofar as fandoms can also reflect positive and inclusive forms of social construction and definition, as opposed to exclusionary and constricting, they provide a possible space for disputing the solipsism of individual, unjustified, socially antagonistic experience as humanity develops its conception of the nature of the human mind. As the Great Detective himself exclaims in *The Sign of the Four*: “How small we feel with our petty ambitions and strivings in the presence of the great elemental forces of nature!” (Doyle 133).

## Notes

1. It is vital to understand at the outset that although some individuals view diagnoses as markers of identity, the current view of the mental health profession mainly argues instead for “person-first language,” wherein the purpose of diagnosis is to inform treatment, despite associated risks: “the very process of naming something can lead to labeling the person . . . rather than designating a disorder. . . . [and] many diagnoses, such as schizophrenia, are associated with stigma” (Gintner 136). At the same time, mental health professionals ac-

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knowledge that “person-first language is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Some within the disability community oppose person-first language. They believe that if language is needed to separate them from a trait of theirs, it suggests that the trait is negative. They may prefer to use identity-first language because they feel the trait is a core component of their identity” (Wooldridge).

2. In this essay, I have focused almost exclusively on evidence from the website Reddit. This is not because it was my only avenue for research but because its discussion is broadly reflective of discussions in other social media and is textual instead of audiovisual.

3. The Sherlock fandom is an open system, consisting of fans of the Arthur Conan Doyle Canon, as well as the numerous media adaptations of the Great Detective (e.g., the Warner Bros. Sherlock Holmes films, the BBC’s *Sherlock*, CBS’s *Elementary*, or the films and episodes starring actors such as Basil Rathbone, Jeremy Brett, Vasily Livanov, Christopher Lee, Ronald Howard, Rupert Everett, Nicol Williamson, Ian McKellen, and many more), and which include acknowledged derivations of Holmes, such as *House*, *Monk*, and Spock from *Star Trek*. In addition, at times, some fans believe characters (e.g., Temperance Brennan from *Bones*) are based on Holmes without overt attribution.

4. The following are the additional two articles: Eric Altschuler’s 2013 note in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, briefly suggesting a diagnosis for Holmes’s entire family, and Carol-Ann Farkas’s “What’s the Difference? Pathologizing Genius and Neurodiversity in Popular Television Series,” a 2015 essay that considers pathology across a variety of television series.

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# Not So Elementary After All: The Construction of Audience Expectations, the BBC's *Sherlock*, and CBS's *Elementary*

Kathryn J. McClain

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As adaptation scholar Thomas Leitch argues, Sherlock Holmes the character is often adapted from not just so-called original content by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle but from numerous texts as a “uniquely seamless blend [. . .] that has no close analogue in any other fictional franchise” (208, 212). Due to this inherent simultaneity via an amalgamation of short stories, illustrations, films and television, narratives on Holmes create “hybrid adaptations that depart from their putative originals at any number of points, often choosing instead to remain faithful to unauthorized later versions” (208, 213)—a reality that allows various Holmes representations to concurrently exist as material for later adaptations in the eyes of adaptors as well as fans. In other words, writers and viewers of Holmes stories ultimately do not seek fidelity to “any particular members” within diverse narratives, nor do they consider certain traits as tied to the “canon” franchise; instead, these adaptations are crafted “to become canonical members of the franchise themselves, as definitive as the progenitor texts they take as their point of departure” (230). Such adaptations thus seek viability as future Holmes “canon.”

Accordingly, an intense pressure for adaptors develops within the Holmes narrative realm. How can an adaptation maintain fan expectations of diverse storyworlds from previous Holmes narratives while still finding a foothold within “canon”? What elements may be considered unchangeable when no clear attribution remains (as truly exists for all simultaneous adaptations, yet more pointedly exists for the Holmes franchise), and what traits must remain? And more curiously, how can initial rejection build to “canon” acceptance from fans? In this article, I join this conversation on franchise expectations and audience responses for two Holmes adaptations: the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-2017) and CBS's *Elementary* (2012-2019).<sup>1</sup> The BBC's *Sherlock* is a contemporary Holmes adaptation set in London, with an abrasive Sherlock (Benedict Cumberbatch) and a war veteran turned blogger John Watson (Martin

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Freeman). Conversely, CBS's *Elementary* follows a Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) released from rehab alongside his sober companion Joan (Lucy Liu); over time, Joan and Sherlock solve crimes with the NYPD. These two adaptations, released and set during the 2010s, both expand into new areas of the imaginary through their concurrent Holmes and Watson characters.<sup>2</sup> Yet, one show seemingly kept its core promise as a proposed adaptation while the other derailed without maintaining expectations set for viewers within the narrative itself. This distinction interestingly flips fan (as well as critical) commentary, with *Sherlock* initially praised and *Elementary* scorned at their premieres but *Elementary* elevated and *Sherlock* maligned by their finales.

The reason for this shifted perception is, in fact, elementary: *Elementary* kept its promise as a Holmes adaptation to fans based on “collective intelligence”—what fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins describes as a site of fan production to “pool knowledge, build on each other’s expertise, and trade insights within networked communities” (Jenkins and Scott xxiv-xxv)—while *Sherlock* dismissed expectations set within their narrative for fans to prioritize “canon” entry. This focus on collective intelligence over “canon” ultimately demonstrated the influence of each fandom’s “collective sense of the program,” demonstrative of Jenkins’s previous studies on fan reactions to disparate interests between fans and showrunners (122):<sup>3</sup> *Sherlock*’s eager acceptance by fans turned to active resistance and *Elementary*’s adverse reception transformed to convinced favor. Most keenly, this shift related to representations of the Holmes-Watson relationship. In this article, I therefore argue that *Sherlock* released as the presumed new entry into the diverse Holmes “canon,” yet *Elementary* succeeded as the actual addition for most fans primarily due to fan reception of the Holmes-Watson dynamic. Fans of these shows generally did not make demands outside parameters set within the established storyworlds; they engaged with materials based on creator-set expectations, which therefore altered reception for each series. Despite claims at direct adaptation, the BBC series played with expectations of a romantic relationship between Sherlock and John for certain fans while also dismissing investment in the partnership—either romantic or platonic—within the series itself. *Elementary*, on the other hand, launched with “genderbending” concerns in relation to a romantic relationship between Holmes and Watson; however, the series evolved its Holmes-Watson relationship into a strong, platonic love story as promised from the show’s first episode. In essence, *Elementary* fans learned to trust clues provided by the show in connection with Holmes and Watson. *Sherlock* fans rather learned to doubt.

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## A Scandal on Television: The Clash of Two Holmes Adaptations

Two years into the release of the BBC's *Sherlock*, and arguably at the height of its popularity, the British show seemed practically guaranteed in its status as the next "canon" Holmes narrative. Reviews for the second series—both professional and fan-based—praised the show for its impeccable writing, skillful acting, and mysterious fun: "*Sherlock* is a Rolls-Royce of a popular entertainment," wrote a reviewer for the *Independent*, "beautifully engineered and beautifully finished. The doors close with a perfect thunk every time and a loose thread is unthinkable" (Sutcliffe); and "The more successful *Sherlock* becomes, the more effective the later developments," claimed an active society member from *The Sherlock Holmes Society of London* in an associated blog, "[...] Freeman's fine performance shines [...] alongside] Sherlock's quiet agony performed by ever-amazing Cumberbatch" (Sato). As a contemporary adaptation, *Sherlock* had the struggle of adapting a Holmes series to the present day yet the flexibility for change due to conventional updates. Creators and executive producers Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat could avoid the pitfalls of expected accuracy—fluidly adding a dominatrix and a military experiment to fan-favorite Doyle stories—and still maintain the "driving seat" despite potential difficulties with fan standards or complaints (Poore 164). Viewers in 2012 were along for the ride and ready for expansions via the conventions crafted within *Sherlock*.

At this moment of success, CBS also decided to offer a contemporary Holmes narrative, with their target less focused on canonization per se and more intent on simple fan acceptance. Nevertheless, *Elementary* was quickly met with claims of imitation. Legal fights and entertainment rumors swirled, and the BBC both subtly intimated in official interviews as well as bluntly stated in unofficial quotations that CBS endeavored to rip-off their success. One source claimed off the record that "BBC bosses" believed *Elementary* was a "blatant attempt to copy and cash in" on *Sherlock*'s success ("US Plan"). More explicitly, Sue Vertue, executive producer for the BBC's *Sherlock*, signified that she would "take action" if the CBS show was too comparable ("CBS is Warned"):

We understand that CBS are doing their own version of an updated Sherlock Holmes. It's interesting, as they approached us a while back about remaking our show. At the time, they made great assurances about their integrity, so we have to assume that their modernised Sherlock Holmes *doesn't resemble ours*

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in any way, as that would be extremely worrying . . . (Gardner, emphasis added)

This response distinctly demonstrates the prestige of the BBC series at this moment in time. An executive producer felt confident enough to confront another major corporation for potential resemblances to their successful series, even as both shows must inherently resemble previous Holmes franchise entries within adaptation expectations held by fans. *Sherlock* was unquestionably the contemporary Holmes content for the early 2010s—and even CBS and *Elementary* affiliates did not try to dispute this status.

Responses from *Elementary* associates instead sought to build space for another contemporary Holmes adaptation, not one just like *Sherlock* but one still invested in the classic characters. Despite accusations linking the show to previous adaptations within recent memory, like a *New York Times* review alleging that Miller's Holmes showed "Frankenstein-like origins: a piece of Adrian Monk here, a piece of Gregory House there" (Hale), the show's actors and creators sought to distinguish their adaptation even as the narrative connections via franchise associations remained. Creator and executive producer Robert Doherty differentiated *Elementary*'s protagonist from *Sherlock*'s via divergent character descriptions such as "high-functioning sociopath," a famous line from the BBC's detective about himself during his first appearance ("A Study" 58:11-58:15); Doherty instead claimed, "Our Sherlock has emerged with I think at his core just a tiny kernel of self-doubt where one never existed . . . I don't see him as a sociopath. I see him as someone who's driven to do the right thing, to help people" (Bianco). More directly at a Comic-Con interview, Doherty complimented *Sherlock* as "incredible" and "brilliant" but additionally emphasized that Holmes the character had been rewritten by "many hands" (Roberts). His show simply wanted the same opportunity. Actor Miller similarly repudiated comparisons to other Holmes works as limiting to *Elementary*'s prospects: "I just have confidence in our differences [. . .] And at the end of the day, the world's big enough for various interpretations of a bit of fiction" (Lawless). In a complimentary vein about the consistent multiplicity of Holmes narratives, CBS correspondingly countered the BBC's accusations about potential resemblances and copyright concerns. As an official response to Vertue, for example, they claimed, "Our project is a contemporary take on Sherlock Holmes that will be based on Holmes, Watson, and other characters in the public domain, as well as original characters. We are, of course, respectful of all copyright laws and will not infringe on any stories or works that may still be protected" (Gardner).

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These responses all strive to separate *Elementary* from *Sherlock* for both legal and narrative reasons; vitally, they also do not back down from potential space in the Holmes fandom for multiplicity via adaptation, especially not the possibility of acceptance within the Holmes franchise in particular. Eventually, *Elementary* did find space despite critical and fan-related concerns that “*Elementary* was going to be a cheap rip-off of *Sherlock*”; in fact, as *Nerdophiles* contributor Kristie Haruta claimed as a “fan of both shows” in 2013, “*Elementary* had surpassed [their collective] expectations [at the collaborative fan blog site], and even dethroned *Sherlock* as [their] favorite interpretation of the Conan Doyle stories,” a striking claim to hear from any fans within a year of *Elementary*’s release in comparison with responses from just a year prior. Yet this recognized tension between contemporary Holmes shows does not yet address the most intense response to *Elementary* and its changes to the Holmes “canon,” the element that left viewers “skeptical of the show’s creators early on” (Haruta). Like all franchise entries, this Holmes work must have a Watson—and she became the most contentious adaptational change.

### The Adventure of Two Watsons: The Blogger and the Sober Companion

*Elementary* caught significant attention after casting Lucy Liu as Joan Watson, an idea originally conceived to avoid copyright concerns (Baker 150),<sup>4</sup> and one that drew complaints “before *Elementary* even aired” (Welch 139). Initial interviews with creator Doherty and actors Miller and Liu constantly circled back to fan and critical concerns about this adaptational change, as well as the implicit romantic potential between the two attractive leads. Such commentary lingered throughout the show’s run: Miller claimed that “Holmes and Watson’s relationship is sacred [. . .] The fact that one’s a man and one’s a woman is irrelevant [. . .] The original Holmes and Watson were not romantically involved and, therefore, neither should we” (Starr); Liu argued that their show had “a much more interesting dynamic than actually having intercourse and a postcoital scene. [. . .] There are some things that have to be sacred, and right now, where we are is where we need to be” (“Why Watson”); and Doherty persistently detailed the lack of romance for his plans, emphasizing that such a possibility remained “completely off the table” due to his “very simple plan to not write that” (Lyons). In his most wearied response, Doherty even asked forgiveness for his repetitive answers, declaring “I feel like a broken record, so forgive me, but it’s just not what we set out to do” (“Why Watson”).

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And yet, concerns remained about this adaptation's Watson, with even international promo content advertising the duo as a potential romantic pairing (Baker 153).<sup>5</sup> The case of the two Watsons was afoot, and *Elementary* struggled with presumptions about a Joan Watson character—both because some fans assumed that Joan was a method to separate from the BBC and because other fans rejected the idea of a non-white and non-masculine Watson as too significant a change.<sup>6</sup>

Joan as a character represents an interesting fandom practice. "Genderbending," a fan act meant to critique or subvert gender expectations and cultural norms via presumptions about traditional gender representation, imposes an altered gender identity on a narrative's character. This process is most often a shift from men/masculine-presenting characters to women/feminine-presenting characters in order to comment on social justice concerns and political contexts (Seymour). In this vein, *Elementary*'s Joan reinterprets expectations for other versions of the John Watson character, as well as expectations for television media overall (Baker 146).<sup>7</sup> Despite significant concerns from both fans as well as critics (Welch 135; Haruta), *Elementary* ultimately maintains a Sherlock who embraces his friendship with Watson and emphasizes her as his "true partner—professionally, intellectually, domestically, and emotionally" without any indication of romantic interest. Their close bond remains distant from expectations of a "stereotypical heterosexual romance but instead becomes the glue that binds them together as friends, peers, and consulting partners" (Kang and Patterson 140). Linked back to the expectations set by the show's creators and actors, Joan is never romantically nor sexually engaged with Sherlock; she instead forms a "very intimate platonic friendship" with her partner (135), and this friendship bolsters the emotional connection presented to viewers. *Elementary*'s consistency—an effort to build fan trust over time—engendered acceptance of Joan and Sherlock as strong companions just as promised. As a review titled "*Elementary* Spoilers: Did Sherlock and Joan End Up Together in the Series Finale?" demonstrates, audiences still wondered if the last episode would break that confidence. Yet, that same article also positively reviewed *Elementary* for the emotional bond without sexual tension: "Sherlock and Joan may be one of the most touching and unique love stories on television, but it wasn't a romance. They ended up together as friends and family and loved ones, just not as lovers" (Hurley).<sup>8</sup> *Elementary* promised a strong platonic Holmes-Watson bond; they delivered on a strong Holmes-Watson bond, with numerous other mysteries and subversions outside this bond maintaining audience engagement from start to finish. Because of these narrative commitments, the Sherlock fandom surprisingly did not have many criticisms because the con-

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sensus between fans and creators aligned despite initial concerns about romance—a reality that did not exist with *Sherlock* and its John Watson in the slightest.

To clarify, *Sherlock* had significant concerns in connection to mystery and plot expectations by the final series, a tangible change that caused fans' previous interpretations of characters and plotlines to disintegrate. Similar to Jenkins's study on fandom and a shift toward active resistance, *Sherlock* fans rejected the series' finale in particular because, as Jenkins's previous research on other fandoms has shown, any explanations "crumbled in the face of progressively more 'teasing' and exploitation" by the creators (146)—to the point that many online posts from fans wondered at the potential for a secret fourth episode to dismiss broadcasted content as a bizarre dream sequence (Tyler). Viewership dropped significantly by the fourth series, plot holes pulled focus over mysteries, and plot twists were rejected by audiences as bad spy thriller narratives or superhero origin stories with "improbable powers" over "wry detective drama" ("*Sherlock* Series"; Gilbert). As a review from the *Atlantic* declared, "it's easier [for viewers] to say goodbye than it might have been a month ago. [ . . . ] *Sherlock*, at its best, was unlike anything else on air; a celebration of a hero whose primary motivation was simply thinking things through" (Gilbert). But as an even stronger dismissal of the fandom's "collective sense of the program" as well as the fans' expectations for characters as recognized by Jenkins for previous fan communities (122), *Sherlock's* fans were intensely critical of the Sherlock-John relationship—either in the light of a friendship or a potential romantic relationship—alongside dismissal of general fan expectations. Because the Watson-Holmes relationship remains a cornerstone of franchise expectations, the faltering of this bond centered fan discussion and interpretation for the series overall. Unfortunately for *Sherlock*, this relationship deteriorated over time, a direct contrast to the strengthening of such a connection between Joan and Sherlock in *Elementary*.

Of course, fans have had distinct and unique expectations for the Holmes-Watson friendship throughout the franchise's history. Likewise, all fan communities vary in opinions and judgements (Jenkins 132). However, just as significant discussion on *Elementary's* success revolved around expectations for a Holmes-Watson connection (and the emotional weight of that connection as interpreted by fans), *Sherlock* had significant support from fans due to the strong link portrayed between the two men, with some fans invested in romance and others in platonic friendship. As Stephen Greer argues about the BBC's *Sherlock*, series creators Moffat and Gatiss consistently presented "flirtation with the possibility of same-sex desire between men" even as they "[refused]

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to give its audience a straight answer about the sexuality of its central characters” (50). Throughout the series, Sherlock and John’s relationship is presumed romantic by multiple characters across writers and directors, with their close bond read within “the binary opposition of heteronormativity and homosexuality: they are either straight *or* gay” (57, 66, emphasis original). This expectation within the storyworld—not a definite establishment of either character’s sexuality but a consistent “misapprehended” inference instead (59)—bled into audience assumptions as detailed by Greer. I argue this set of presumptions led to disparate narrative expectations between creators and viewers as well. For example, Moffat addressed such inquiries in an interview for the second series—in other words, at the height of *Sherlock’s* international success—after dominatrix Irene Adler explicitly labelled John and Sherlock as a “couple” during the episode “A Scandal in Belgravia”:

It’s always definitely a love story. I don’t see why that means that sex has to be involved. What a weirdly sexualized world we live in where you insist they [must] be having sex as well. Why would they? John isn’t wired that way, whatever Sherlock is. [. . .] Sex is not really the issue among any of these people. Love is. Infatuation is. I think John Watson is infatuated with and fascinated by Sherlock Holmes. I think Sherlock Holmes absolutely relies completely and utterly on John Watson and is devoted to him. [. . .] Who says any of them [John, Sherlock, or Irene] are having sex with each other? (Rosenberg)

Moffat’s language here appears almost deliberately unclear. While he assumes sex as a distinction between different types of character relationships, he does not distinguish definitively between romantic interest and deep platonic friendship, as the *Elementary* creators do. Moffat instead bounces between diction such as love, infatuation, fascination, and devotion—concepts that all can indicate strong platonic bonds but also can read as romantic interest outside sexuality. These references within the storyworld remain even as the show progresses into the third and fourth series, as John marries superspy Mary Morstan and Sherlock drifts back to an isolated and drug-addicted lifestyle. Sherlock and John were written to save each other in the BBC series; that element fell apart as the show became a “superhero” showdown of intelligence outside of their core relationship.

While *Sherlock* was far from the first Holmes adaptation to have fans questioning the status of the Holmes-Watson relationship (Seymour), it was a show consistently followed by such questions from start to finish. Importantly for reception, however, the show’s start had fans

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willing to search for answers and, as Jenkins similarly claims about another fandom transitioned from “eager acceptance toward active resistance” (122, 137), the end had fans tired of this search for promised answers; they instead renounced complete episodes as the show reshaped toward storylines seemingly outside previous narrative elements. *Sherlock* claimed that Sherlock and John’s relationship was the bond they both needed to find their humanity. By the final episode, their relationship has fractured, and a quick montage only implies repair. Any version of the relationship—sexual, romantic, platonic—has ceased as presented by the series itself.

And so, the *Sherlock* fandom resisted the series at its end, and the *Elementary* fandom celebrated its kept promise on the Holmes-Watson dynamic. *Sherlock* viewers questioned the importance of the core relationship—“At this point, does anyone even really care if Sherlock and John are in love? [. . .] If this is friendship, it’s darkly co-dependent; if it’s true love, it’s a tragedy” (Romano)—and *Elementary* viewers specifically praised the consistent exploration of Joan and Sherlock’s dedicated bond—“But for seven seasons, CBS’s *Elementary* has bucked the trend, proving that platonic love can be just as compelling” (Fraser). These fans within the same “canon” franchise, just like other fan communities, had always existed in a duality of fascination and frustration, a split between acceptance and resistance. All fandoms experience such a duality from different fans at different times (Jenkins 132). But this particular set of adaptations seemingly flipped from start to finish, and the expectations set by creators for audiences—with Watson’s relationship to Holmes at both cores—ultimately shifted expectations for each work.

### The Sign of Two (Beginnings and Endings): Set Expectations within Sherlockian Narratives

To further explore expectations set by each show, I will next consider the first and last narratives for each partnership within their storyworlds—the pilot episodes and finale episodes of *Sherlock* and *Elementary*. Each series has additional content to craft audience expectations, such as the framing of Irene Adler alongside the Holmes-Watson relationship previously discussed. However, the opening and concluding episodes share striking similarities, such as both openings including “deduction” scenes from a Watson perspective and both closing scenes portraying “family” with a Watson child; more importantly, these episodes demonstrate most accurately the initial promise from each show to viewers for adapted character dynamics as well as eventual fulfillment

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of expectations—in other words, acceptance and rejection from fans based on promises and expectations.

The *Sherlock* pilot “A Study in Pink” begins with a Watson in need of a Holmes. John returns from war, and his single room is empty of life (00:01-01:34). His therapist encourages him to write a personal blog, but, as he tells her, “nothing happens” to him (01:35-02:10). When Sherlock and John eventually meet, Sherlock quickly deduces John’s military service, medical background, distant family relationships, and psychosomatic limp (09:50-12:04). Sherlock later continues texting John about his work and website (12:22-12:36). These two encounters spur John into a second meeting at the famous 221B, where he is enticed toward a case at the assurance of “violent deaths” and “trouble” (12:50-13:06, 17:00-17:23). Once John joins, Sherlock triumphantly declares that “the game [. . .] is on” (17:40-17:46).

Initially, this John is distant and uncertain, even as he remains desperate for change. John’s interest is confirmed later by his positive response to Sherlock’s elaboration about his deductions (18:40-21:51), and his protective nature concretizes with his sniper-like efforts to save Sherlock by the episode’s end (1:19:23-1:21:09). Sherlock, conversely, initiates their relationship with deductions and maintains positive contact. During the investigation, for example, Sherlock genuinely smiles when John realizes he does not need a cane for his limp, just as Sherlock deduced (56:00-56:41). The audience has been generally promised an aloof but interested Sherlock alongside a despondent without adventure John. The two clearly need each other, even if that need sprouts from varied incentives (31:22-32:35). The game—and the relationship—has stakes. Sherlock saves John from despair; John saves Sherlock from boredom, a most desperate state for the detective.

As previously discussed, remarks about their budding relationship—romantic or otherwise—also begin within this episode. When the two men look around 221B together, Mrs. Hudson questions if they need a second bedroom, to John’s confusion (14:29-14:44). A restaurant owner named Angelo, a client from a previous case, says everything is free for Sherlock and his “date”; he then offers a candle for a “more romantic” table despite John’s rejections (49:45-50:23). Later in the same scene, John himself asks Sherlock about his romantic status, and Sherlock dismisses the idea of a girlfriend or a boyfriend, as he is married to his work. John agrees and clarifies, “it’s all fine,” even as he continues to spurn his status as Sherlock’s date (50:57-51:51). This scene relates importantly to Moffat’s claim about Sherlock and John’s relationship. The two men fascinate each other and attract each other. They are not necessarily interested in sex with each other, even as the storyworld around them implies romantic potential. The show therefore creates

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an uncertainty for fans, a misrecognition of budding friendship “read as sexual partnership [which] suggests the difficulty of accounting for straight male intimacies [. . .] without conflating that desire with gay identity” (Greer 59). But because that uncertainty seems to be recognized by writers, primary characters, and storyworld inhabitants, it translates into an ambiguous message for fans to consider. An unclear promise has accordingly been established via the creators’ narrative. With that said, either interpretation—a focus on romantic potential or established compatibility as partners—designates the bond between Sherlock and John as vital to *Sherlock* as a series with this start.

In contrast, the last BBC episode “The Final Problem” emphasizes familial connections and legendary importance over Sherlock and John’s bond. The first two scenes highlight Sherlock’s tense relationships with his siblings, Mycroft (Mark Gatiss) and Eurus (Sian Brooke), via childhood home movies and threatening messages (00:01-07:47).<sup>9</sup> Sherlock and John do appear reunited in their investigative efforts, a rarity for the fourth series after Mary’s dramatic death, with Sherlock vehemently insisting John stay when Mycroft demands privacy for family (09:38-09:52); yet the case still remains focused on the Holmes family, with John as an added assistant and Sherlock as the emotional center. For example, Sherlock tries to protect John from emotional harm, and John encourages Sherlock to continue as allied “soldiers” (44:12-47:37, 51:52-55:50, 1:04:26-1:05:00): strikingly, these moments primarily tie to John remembering his dead wife or Sherlock following Eurus’s orders during her games. The pair might have an emotional connection, but their relationship and its expectations are rarely the focal point. John is quickly removed from his memories back to Eurus’s games, and Sherlock must manage his family members once again. Likewise, one of the most emotional moments, a test from Eurus for Sherlock to pick between “family or friend,” has Mycroft willing to die in place of John, with Sherlock turning the weapon on himself instead (1:05:07-1:09:56). This moment initially represents assumptions that Sherlock would pick John but ultimately transforms into focus on his care for his brother. Even to save John from drowning, Sherlock must emotionally connect with Eurus first (1:20:33-1:23:05). The intention may be to represent John as an included family member from Sherlock’s perspective, but it showcases John as drawn into Holmes family drama more than accepted into the unit and likewise vital to the episode itself.

The episode’s final monologue shifts from John and Sherlock’s specific bond within *Sherlock* even further. As the partners repair their destroyed flat (Eurus previously sent a bomb), a montage shows Sherlock playing violin with his sister as well as John receiving a video from Mary. Mary’s recording from beyond the grave floats over the extended

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montage of John and Sherlock with friends, Holmes's kin, clients, and John's young daughter without significant recognition, as Mary delivers the series' final lines:

[. . .] Because I know who you really are. A junkie who solves crimes to get high. And the doctor who never came home from the war. Will you listen to me? Who you really are, it doesn't really matter. It's all about the legend, the stories, the adventures. [. . .] When all else fails, there are two men sitting, arguing in a scruffy flat, like they've always been there, and they always will. The best and wisest men I have ever known—my Baker Street boys. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. (1:26:20-1:28:47)

At first glance, this speech returns to the creators' initial promise of a developed friendship as focus. Swiftly, that return is then dismissed. Who these characters are does not matter, as Mary states; what these characters are, their legendary status within the larger Holmes "canon," matters. Yet because fans were pitched a show about Sherlock and John's personal bond over their status within the larger world, the provided content seemingly redirects and even dismisses previous expectations from fans. Sherlock and John still care for each other, but the show's narrative no longer prioritizes their relationship. They are meant for others now—to connect with others and even save others in dramatic, super-heroic fashions. The show's initial promise from creators to fans therefore breaks because that concept "doesn't really matter" anymore.

With this analysis of *Sherlock* in mind, *Elementary* and its promise to fans showcases a disparate set of expectations, especially because, as fans of *Sherlock* worried at the CBS procedural's debut, "apparent copying" by the American program initially distanced prospective viewers (Behr).<sup>10</sup> *Elementary's* "Pilot" episode similarly starts from a Watson perspective, and Sherlock deduces Joan's personal history easily. Their first scene introduces a slight twist, however; it immediately confronts concerns about a romantic connection via Sherlock's first lines: "Do you believe in love at first sight? [. . .] I have never loved anyone as I do you right now in this moment" (02:15-03:41). This dialogue is comedically a memory test for Sherlock as he practices his perception skills, not the audience's worst fears realized, and he quickly tells Joan that he rejects emotional attachments. He explains his deduction skills, similar to *Sherlock*, but his deductions are intended to scare Joan away from work as his sober companion, not entice her into partnership as a flat mate (13:38-14:40, 18:01-18:59). His attachment to Joan changes over the course of their first case, and he later admits that she helps

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to make him “faster” (31:58-32:35). Joan eventually reverses their dynamic with several deductions about Sherlock, realizing his emotional distance is due to a broken heart, and she ruptures his façade: “You’re trying too hard. [ . . . ] You can connect to people. It just frightens you” (37:41-38:31). Sherlock must then acknowledge her skill as well as his own emotional state, while Joan demonstrates her grasp of the British detective.

This pilot episode sets up three important dynamics for the Watson-Holmes relationship within *Elementary* for fans—one similar to *Sherlock* and two incredibly different. Similarly, Joan and Sherlock grow to trust one another throughout the episode, clearly balancing each other as a team. Sherlock might initially want Joan gone as his sober companion, but he quickly shifts to see her as an asset. Joan, likewise, finds herself invested in the intricacies of deduction, and she uses her knowledge as a surgeon to support Sherlock’s claims.<sup>11</sup> The pair need one another. On the other hand, *Elementary*’s narrative has major differences as well. John in *Sherlock* might support his detective by saving his life, but he does not assist Sherlock with the mystery in the same way. Joan from the start represents, as described by the *Baker Street Babes* fan website, an “effortless” Watson who earns Holmes’s respect quickly. The fan group, a community featured on the *Today Show* and the *New York Times* who are interested in both “canon” Holmes narratives and adaptations, were initially skeptical of *Elementary* as *Sherlock* fans; however, they shifted perspective when they realized that “for the first time that [the writer] can recall Watson was treated as Holmes’ equal, someone competent with talents worth developing and worthy of his respect.” For example, in the pilot, Joan notices a victim’s allergy that Sherlock does not, and he gives her credit to the police (“Pilot,” 41:10-41:45). Joan is capable of Sherlock’s same skill—right at the first episode—and Sherlock knows that truth. Finally, the third difference relates to romantic implications. While *Sherlock* has numerous discussions from other characters about romantic potential, *Elementary* dismisses such a notion right away via the protagonists. Sherlock’s first lines to Joan are the audience’s worst fears, and they are quickly dismissed. Sherlock is implied to have a lost love—later revealed as Irene Adler/Jamie Moriarty (Natalie Dormer)—and Joan remains his partner without sexual or romantic attachment.

For the finale, *Elementary* oddly has two options: “Whatever Remains, However Improbable” from season six and “Their Last Bow” from season seven, because creators initially believed that the sixth season would be the last (Ng). Regardless, both endings emphasize the incorruptible bond between Sherlock and Joan as built across years of adventures. During “Whatever Remains, However Improbable,” Joan is

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wrongly accused of murder. Sherlock defends Joan without question, confesses to the murder as cover, and proclaims that he had been “dying when [they] first met.” Joan saved him, which made them “better” than partners: “We’re two people that love each other. We always have been” (37:15-38:45). Several years within the storyworld later during “Their Last Bow,” Sherlock has disappeared, this time presumed murdered. Joan works with the NYPD on her own, raising her son in New York with limited contact from her partner due to Sherlock’s disappearance. Although they appear to have flourished without one another (Sherlock truthfully stayed away after a relapse to protect Joan’s son), Sherlock unequivocally stays once he discovers Joan has cancer (34:47-39:00). After a year of chemo and no cases, Sherlock and Joan return to the NYPD together as a team in the show’s finale. As the final line of the show, Sherlock calms Joan’s nerves about their future with the following: “As long as we’re together, what does it matter?” (42:02-42:09).

Within this episode, *Elementary* unconditionally escapes fears of “love at first sight” and instead represents a love grown from commitment and adventure within the adaptation. Sherlock and Joan do not represent a “conventional” bond as reviewers note but a clear continuation of emotional care and investigative efforts, with the finale making it “a little bit easier to say goodbye” for audiences (Fraser, Hurley)—an interesting reversal from previous *Sherlock* reviews. Vitality for the perception of *Elementary* as well, showrunner Doherty agreed wholeheartedly with the needs for the show’s ending. As he shared about the final season:

I wanted them to ride off into the sunset together. I didn’t want fans to come out of the final episode feeling like they thought, ‘It’s good [Sherlock and Joan have] been apart.’ [. . .] Especially for Sherlock, he sees what’s really important, understanding that his partner, his greatest friend and virtual family member needs help. [. . .] Nothing is more important, at the end of the day, than Sherlock and Joan’s relationship. (Ng)

Doherty here emphasizes two key elements for the success of the show’s ending in the minds of fans. As a writer, he clearly considers fan expectations as his priority, with the fan element considered most vital as the representation of Joan and Sherlock’s relationship. Nothing, he states, is more important than that relationship, a demonstration of fandom and industry in agreement based on the content within the text itself. Additionally, Doherty references Joan as Sherlock’s family member, a status reasserted within the storyworld by other characters; for example, close friend Captain Thomas Gregson (Aidan Quinn) reminds

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Sherlock during “Their Last Bow” that “there’s exactly one person that you really love in this world,” with no question that Joan is his closest bond (35:00-35:10). In essence, the promises to fans have been met, the intentions broadcasted by creators via their crafted storyworld have been upheld, and the care about fan expectations has been recognized. *Elementary* ultimately ends happily—for the characters, the producers/creators, and the fans.

### Their Last Bows: Concluding Thoughts on Creator Promises and Fandom Expectations

*Sherlock* and *Elementary* are a fascinating case study in the expectations set for fans as well as the reception of similar adaptations over time, with the shifting narratives from creators importantly framed alongside the generally stable expectations of fans. Holmes as an adapted protagonist maintains a “vigorous afterlife” because adaptors “use him and his franchise in ways that, for all their various pretenses of fidelity, are often remote from the purposes of Conan Doyle” (Leitch 209, 218). And yet, that afterlife is full of “canon” entry opportunities and fan expectations, with the most explicit audience expectations primarily remaining tied to representations of the Holmes-Watson bond. The characterizations are set and even somewhat sacred, even if associated conceptions are remote from Conan Doyle as Leitch claims. As shown by these two Holmes adaptations from the 2010s specifically, as long as creators remain aware of contexts presented within their narratives for fans, the success of the Holmes franchise will continue due to the fan “devotion to the text and manipulation of it and expansion from it [which] has kept the story going” (Baker 147). Adaptors need to consider fan promises as just as significant as “canon” potential within the franchise because Holmes narratives can only extend their afterlife with dedicated fans invested and engaged. The promises, set by the creators and then anticipated by the fans, remain inherently elementary to such success.

### Notes

1. This article recognizes Robert Downey Jr.’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) as influential Holmes narratives for the 2010s. Yet, *Sherlock* and *Elementary* remain the focus for two reasons. First, the films are period pieces, not contemporary adaptations. Second, and

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more importantly, the two films are blockbuster film releases, not television with prolonged release dates and fan engagement over multiple series/seasons. Interestingly, rumors have spread about a spinoff from HBO Max for the two films (Andreeva and White); this shift to television/streaming could extend this research in the future.

2. In *Textual Poachers*, a preeminent text within fan studies, Henry Jenkins discusses his research into the CBS television drama *Beauty and the Beast* (1987-1990); more specifically, he details negative fan responses to the show's developments when producers shifted from a romance-type narrative to an action-adventure format. The original fans, in this case, simply wanted content "its producers were unable or unwilling to deliver" by the end of the series (122, 146). I use this article as a solid basis for understanding fan responses to television over time, most particularly when fans feel a show has shifted due to producer/showrunner interests. Like Jenkins, I also emphasize that this focus does not represent all fans for any series, as fandom is never universal in its opinions nor investments (132).

3. This claim recognizes Benjamin Poore's argument about fandom expansion via Holmesian fan works: "[. . . yet] as the case of Holmes and Watson demonstrates, given enough time, the 'universes' of fan fiction—as if responding to laws of motion or evolution—will expand into new areas of the imaginary until even the original stories are dwarfed by the industrial-paced productivity of their derivatives" (159). Fan works undoubtedly expand even more than the included adaptations, but the adaptations also show the variety possible within the "industry-paced" spaces as well.

4. In another interview, Doherty also indicates that the casting decision was a "joke" to impact *Elementary's* Sherlock: "I thought to myself, 'What would make Holmes crazier than taking the figurative rock he has in Watson and making him a woman?' I scribbled it down and then went back to my research. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to try it" (Gardner and Rose).

5. Australian TV network Channel 10 released promotional material for *Elementary's* first season with a romantic plot in mind. The promo, formatted almost like a fanvid for a romance, reframed scenes from the first five episodes to create "the illusion of sexual tension" between Holmes and Watson (Baker 153).

6. Importantly, Lucy Liu's casting also adapted the historically expected race for the Watson character—John Watson is typically cast as a white British man, and Liu is a Chinese American actress. While some fans discussed Liu's race in conjunction with character expectations (Behr, Tu), Liu's race was less emphatically discussed by critics and fans at the time of *Elementary's* run. This distance was echoed by Doherty: "*Elementary* [was] not going to be teaching cultural differences to the audience," and race-related casting "was irrelevant and incidental" beyond finding the best Holmes and (woman) Watson (Radish). With that said, audiences responded positively to Joan, and her representation outside of gender, racial, and ethnic stereotypes showcased "a truthful portrayal of the Asian American experience" for viewers (Tu). And so, even as this article

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considers the impact of “genderbending” for fan reception primarily, it does not dismiss the importance of diverse representation and diverse perspectives on intersectional identities within adaptations.

7. *Elementary* puts Sherlock in a romantic and sexual relationship with a different franchise character via “genderbending”—Jamie Moriarty. This article remains focused on fan reactions to the Joan Watson character for two primary reasons. First, the creators never made similar promises to fans about character relationships between Jamie and Sherlock; no expectations were therefore broken by this decision. Second, *Elementary*’s Moriarty blends with the character of Irene Adler, which shifts audience expectations for the character as well.

8. Doherty also notes that “a section of the fan base” hoped for Joan and Sherlock to enter a romantic relationship (Hurley). This commentary importantly relates back to Jenkins’s note on fandom: fandom does not universally agree on interests and expectations (132), and *Elementary*’s fandom is no different. However, this article considers the general response to the show’s ending for its argument.

9. The opening scene establishes the final episode’s escalation, a reality that influenced fan desires for a “secret episode” to “fix” the narrative. For example, Sherlock creates fake ghosts to scare the secretive Mycroft, such as a sword-wielding phantom clown (“The Final Problem”).

10. Behr calls herself the “oldest *Sherlock* fangirl in the world” in her article “*Sherlock* Versus *Elementary*—Homage or Rip-Off?” She details several perceived overlaps between the shows in 2013 beyond adaptational similarities: title screens, antagonistic familial relationships, London shooting locations, camera shots, perceptions of police, messy kitchens, and paper scrap-filled bulletin boards.

11. Joan was previously a surgeon, but she left the field when a man died during surgery. She then becomes a sober companion instead (“Pilot”).

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# Charles Darwin's Colors: Science, Subjectivity, and Representation

Josh Doty

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The neighbourhood of Porto Praya, viewed from the sea, wears a desolate aspect. The volcanic fires of a past age, and the scorching heat of a tropical sun, have in most places rendered the soil unfit for vegetation. The country rises in successive steps of table-land, interspersed with some truncate conical hills, and the horizon is bounded by an irregular chain of more lofty mountains. The scene, as beheld through the hazy atmosphere of this climate, is one of great interest; if, indeed, a person, fresh from sea, and who has just walked, for the first time, in a grove of cocoa-nut trees, can be a judge of anything but his own happiness. (*Journal of Researches* 1)

The first entry in Charles Darwin's *Journal of Researches* (1839), a diaristic account of his five-year voyage on the *Beagle* as the ship's geologist, might surprise readers expecting him to bring a detached, scientific perspective to his surroundings.<sup>1</sup> Using descriptive language that frames the "desolate aspect" of Cape Verde's Praia (or "Praya") as a scene "of great interest," Darwin seems committed not to recording objective observations but rather to documenting the personal, affective resonances of the scene, particularly the "happiness" it appears to inspire in the observer (1). He writes with a touch of feeling unexpected in the work of a scientist. We find a similarly lyric mode in his description of an octopus changing its color, written in January 1832, the same month as the first entry: "These changes were effected in such a manner, that clouds, varying in tint between a hyacinth red and a chestnut brown, were continually passing over the body" (1). Hyacinth red, chestnut brown: the colors Darwin brings to bear in his description are rich, even poetic. Literary critics and historians such as Gillian Beer, George Levine, and Richard Holmes view such descriptions as evidence of Darwin being a naturalist steeped in a Romantic, subjective approach to scientific method—Beer attending to his "romantic materialism," Levine to his "awe" at nature, Holmes to the ways wonder animated his scientific thought (Beer 37, Levine 6, Holmes xvi). These

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interpretations posit Darwin as bringing an intuitive, idiosyncratic, even sentimental perspective to his scientific practices.

In this essay I argue that this manner of reading Darwin misses a crucial historical detail. Specifically, the language he uses to describe color is more prosaic than it first appears: he draws terms such as “hyacinth red” from botanical illustrator Patrick Syme’s *Werner’s Nomenclature of Colours*, a taxonomy of color intended to lend objectivity to descriptions of color in natural philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Syme’s work, published first in 1814 and in a second edition in 1821, updates geologist Abraham Werner’s 1774 *Von den äusserlichen Kennzeichen der Fossilien* (*On the External Characteristics of Fossils*), a taxonomy of color for use in mineralogy, for general scientific use (Dolan 291). The full title of Syme’s *Nomenclature* extends its remit from mineralogy alone to the “Arts and Sciences, Particularly Zoology, Botany, Chemistry, Mineralogy, and Morbid Anatomy,” giving it applicability to the full spectrum of natural philosophy. Syme describes the utility of his nomenclature thus: “In describing an object, to specify its colours is always useful; but where colour forms a character, it becomes absolutely necessary. How defective, therefore, must description be when the terms used are ambiguous; and where there is no regular standard to refer to” (1-2). The purpose of his book is to provide a “regular standard” of color to aid the description of natural objects. For Syme, color charts allow naturalists to avoid ambiguity in their descriptions of objects: in the absence of a “regular standard” of color, he reasons, one person’s garnet might be another’s crimson. He claims that “Description without figure is generally difficult to be comprehended; description and figure are in many instances still defective,” which is to say that words and images alone may not well represent an object.” However, he concludes, “description, figure, and colour combined form the most perfect representation, and are next to seeing the object itself” (1-2). Darwin’s descriptions of color, as personal and aesthetically alive as they seem, constitute an attempt at objective, standardized notation. Working with Darwin’s *Journal of Researches* and his *Beagle* specimen notebooks, this essay examines the successes, failures, and complications of his attempts to render the subjective objective with Syme’s chart. I claim that Darwin’s use of the chart unfolds the contested nature of representation in both his own work and in early nineteenth-century biological science more generally. I also claim that Darwin’s early writings disclose creative ways of describing color that mark an original contribution to contemporary debates on communicating color in science. Understanding these debates, and Darwin’s location within them, grants literary critics a better understanding of how his scientific practices intersect with color theory, representation, and aesthetics.

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My argument addresses both Darwin's writerly practices and the broader representative and conceptual issues that color posed for naturalists of his time. Is it possible to objectively communicate color? How does one convey one's perceptions in a manner suitable for the practice of science? What is the role of subjectivity in scientific observation? What role, if any, does aesthetic judgment play in perceiving and communicating color? Ultimately, early nineteenth-century attempts to standardize and systematize color fail to completely render it objective, despite the best efforts of Syme and others. Despite such attempts, color retains its subjective (personal, aesthetic, affective) qualities. The methods by which early nineteenth-century color science organizes, catalogues, and describes color are tools for achieving objectivity that are themselves suffused with artistry and creativity. Here, I focus on Syme's chart and chemist George Field's 1817 schematics of "harmonic color" as emblematic of contemporary attempts to schematize color. When Darwin draws on Syme to write of the "hyacinth red" of an octopus, likewise, he wishes to provide an objective, communicable sense of the animal's color, but in the process of doing so he fails to escape the subjective qualities inherent to what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison call "the irredeemable privacy of sensation" (275). The private, aesthetic experience of color perception, then, is simultaneously an epistemological problem Darwin and his contemporaries sought to circumvent and an integral part of the methods by which that circumvention is attempted. This friction asks us to rethink how Darwin treats the knotty problem of objective representation of natural phenomena. This problem has significant implications for how we understand Darwin's relationship to representation and aesthetics.

The relationship between Darwin and the humanities has in the past three decades grown tighter and more complex: a raft of Darwinian approaches to the humanities has come to constitute a cottage industry in literary research and teaching. Such approaches are embodied in both literary Darwinians' framing of stories and storytelling as evolutionary adaptations and in historicist readings of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers' appropriation of Darwinian concepts.<sup>3</sup> Although critics such as Raymond Tallis argue that Darwinian approaches to the humanities seek to reduce all qualitative facets of humanity to their correspondent evolutionary elements, literary scholars tend to view Darwin not as an arbiter of materialism but rather as a Romantic scientist in the Coleridgean vein, one driven in his studies by a love for and appreciation of the natural world.<sup>4</sup> He is not alone: works such as Richard Sha's *Imagination and Science in Romanticism* studies Romanticism's impact on such seminal figures as Alexander von Humboldt and Humphry Davy. These studies frame Romantic sci-

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ence as a reaction to materialistic Enlightenment science, replacing mathematical analysis and mechanistic explanations of nature with a new emphasis on subjective experience, the exercise of the imagination, and the continuity between humans and nature. Gillian Beer notes that Darwin read Wordsworth and Byron, and never left behind his copy of Milton when he went on his several overland trips during the *Beagle* voyage: literature, Beer contends, contributed “imaginative substance” to nurture Darwin’s scientific ideas (27, 29). In her analysis, Darwin’s famous “tree of life” portraying the way that species branch out and die off finds an analogue in the “expressive rather than rigorous” language of the first edition of *The Origin of Species*, which is “is less interested in singleness than in mobility” (33). Robert Richards argues that “Darwin’s conception of nature derived, from various channels, in significant measures from the German Romantic movement, and that, consequently, his theory functioned not to suck values out of nature but rather to recover them for a de-theologized nature” (516). For Richards, Darwin owes much of his thinking to Friedrich Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* and its insistence on the confluence of humanity and the nonhuman world (518). George Levine argues that Darwin’s purported Romanticism “is one of the critical facts of Darwin’s science, of his art, and of his writerly virtues” (6). He asserts that “[h]ow the Romanticism works with the science would seem to be a problem, but it was not at all” (6). It is not a problem, he continues, because both Romanticism and Darwin’s science were infused with a sense of wonder; he finds evidence for this conclusion in Darwin’s writings, “generated by something extra-scientific, by his pre-*Beagle* passion for the tropics, for example, but also by his naturalist’s enthusiasm for bugs, birds, dogs, and ants, and worms, and by the awe he feels as he observes the abundance and complexity and ultimately sublime energy of nature . . .” (6). Darwin’s “passion,” his “enthusiasm,” for Levine, makes him Romantic. As a Romantic scientist, Darwin’s voice “is not yet fully disguised in the uniform of professional distance that working scientists must wear today” (6).

However, framing early nineteenth-century developments in the theory, practice, and documentation of science solely in terms of the intellectual transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism obscures important facets of Darwin’s scientific method. This is especially the case for Darwin’s early career, including his *Beagle* voyage, when he was seeking to establish his reputation as a naturalist during a period of intense upheaval in scientific circles. This period marked a transition not only from the Enlightenment to Romanticism but from Baconian induction to Herschel’s principles that carved out intel-

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lectual space for the nineteenth century's most far-reaching scientific theories, including the theory of evolution.

As Henry Cowles notes, "Darwin was a careful student of scientific methodology" throughout his life, but especially early in his career ("Origin" 1082). As a student at Cambridge University, he studied with botanist John Stevens Henslow and geologist Adam Sedgwick, who equipped him with an education in contemporary scientific methods (Cowles, *The Scientific Method* 62-63). These methods, in turn, charted a developing movement in natural philosophy away from the strict induction of Francis Bacon, which prioritized the accumulation of facts over the generation of theory. Baconian method emphasized a certain humility in scientific theory: any generalizations from a set of facts were to be limited to those facts alone, with little to no intellectual room for extrapolation or informed speculation. In 1830, astronomer and chemist John F. W. Herschel's *A Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* helped to usher in a new framework for hypothesis, speculation, and theorizing in scientific method that, in turn, shepherded novel connections between fact, observation, and scientific theory. That Darwin dined with Herschel during the *Beagle's* stop in Cape Town, where Herschel was studying views of celestial objects in the Southern hemisphere, speaks to the older man's impact on the young naturalist (Sponsel 109). Partially through Herschel's work and influence, Darwin gained license to combine seemingly disparate facts, such as the different shapes of finches' beaks, into generalized theories.

Yet the question of how to document facts about color haunts early nineteenth-century developments in scientific practice. The shape of a finch's beak is one thing; the exact color of the beak is another. The most empirically strict Baconian and the most speculative Herschelian alike lacked foolproof methods of identifying specific instances of color in a way that was universally communicable. Darwin, too, contended with this problem. Beer writes of Darwin's approach to natural science as enabling "a sensuously grounded response to the world of forms and life, not an excluding or purely abstracting force," and indeed this idea is consistent with his midlife efforts to reform the concepts of species, based in part on the personal observations he made aboard the *Beagle* (37). However, such an approach must contend with an epistemological complication: how does one communicate one's "sensuously grounded response[s]" to the natural world to others? This is the problem that Syme seeks to solve: his chart allows naturalists to attempt to render color intelligible and communicable while acknowledging the fact that color perception is subjective. The chart, equipped with color chips, allows a naturalist far from Porto Praya to feel and

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experience the same hyacinth red and French gray Darwin feels and experiences. Though both Darwin and his reader alike remain grounded in subjective sensory experience, Darwin uses Syme's chart to provide a putatively objective means by which those experiences can intersect.

By attending to the ways Darwin uses Syme's color chart to attempt to surmount the privacy of color perception, we can come to better understand what his work means for our understanding of subjectivity, objectivity, and nature's aesthetic qualities—foundational topics for those interested in the intersection of science, language, and representation, but ones that have not been adequately explored in Darwin's early career.

### Charting Color

In a letter sent in 1839 to Leonard Jenyns, a naturalist and expert on fish, Darwin writes that he records the colors of specimens “with Pat. Syme's nomenclature book in hand”; his method of using it would be to find a color chip corresponding to the color of a specimen and to mark Syme's name for that color in his notes. For example, in *Zoology Notes and Specimen Lists from H.M.S. Beagle*, Darwin notes that a sea-squirt found on the ship's anchor is colored “‘Lemon. with little wax Yellow’. section shows the individual animals to be of bright ‘sulphur yellow’.— On cutting the specimen into two parts. I noticed in many of the animals (strong difference with Zoophytes) a collection from 10 to 15 pale ‘auricular purple ovules’” (190). Each of these colors—lemon yellow, wax yellow, sulphur yellow, auricular purple—are drawn from Syme's chart. A fellow naturalist reading Darwin's notes could, using his or her own copy of the chart, find a given color's name, look at its corresponding chip, and thus know that color subjectively. A scientific illustrator seeking to draw a preserved specimen could consult Syme's chart and have a sense of what paints to mix to color his or her drawing.

Darwin's use of Syme's chart connected him to vigorous contemporary debates about the nature of color. Theorists of color in the decades leading to the *Beagle* voyage disagreed about what color is, how it might be measured, and even whether it can properly be said to exist. From these debates emerged two camps. One described color as a mathematically measurable quality of light that exists outside of our perception of it. The other asserted that color exists only insofar as it is perceived by an observer. The former is exemplified by Newton's experiments with white light and prisms in *Optiks* (1704), which remained the scientific standard in Darwin's time, and the latter by Goethe's characteristic description of color as “belong[ing] . . . to

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the *subject*—to the eye itself” in *Zur Farbenlehre*, or *Theory of Colors*, published in German in 1810 and translated into English in 1840 (1). Goethe, unlike Newton and like-minded nineteenth-century thinkers such as physicist Thomas Young, understands colors as coterminous with their psychological effects, so that “every color produces a distinct impression on the mind, and thus addresses at once the mind and feelings” (350). Color charts, in seeking objective standardization of color, necessarily mediate between these two poles, drawing the hope of conclusive standardization from the idea of color as something extrinsic to subjective perception while understanding the stubborn fact that subjective perception is the only way individuals experience color.

As Jiří Paclt observes, the first color charts made use of one of two methods to depict color (393). One method was to stencil color directly onto the paper of the chart; the other, by mounting hand-stenciled chips of color into the chart (393). Syme used the latter method. The earliest known color chart that includes color samples is Richard Waller’s *Catalogue of simple and mixt Colours* (1686), which uses different mixtures of twenty-one pigments to create its hues (Paclt 394-95). The *Catalogue*, like the color charts produced in the succeeding centuries, is intended as a directory and taxonomy of color as such, without much of a concern for practical application. However, as Brian Dolan has shown, the last decades of the eighteenth century saw a British Empire increasingly aware of the commercial value of its colonies’ mineralogical resources (275). Given the profit to be gained by extracting these resources, it became important to find ways to quickly and cheaply identify valuable minerals. It is at this time that color charts began to be used as guides to the colors of the natural world.

Abraham Werner’s *Von den äusserlichen Kennzeichen der Fossilien* focuses on the value and use of minerals to “the miner, smelter, physician, chemist, natural philosopher, &c” (13). He sought to standardize the observation of the “external characters” of minerals to facilitate their “recognition” in the field without time-consuming chemical analysis (13). His treatise foregrounds external characters such as form, luster, smell, and taste, but his primary interest is in standardizing the classification of color, “one of the most certain characters, serving as a principal distinguishing mark of most ores, inflammable substances, and salts” (41-42). Drawing on Newton, he defines color as “that property of a mineral which, by reason of the figure, or association, of its molecules, causes a different refraction of the incident rays of light, producing a different sensation in the eye” (43). For Werner, all colors are combinations of the eight primary colors: “white, grey, black, blue, green, yellow, red, and brown”; it is to these colors that he gives “a *determinate* and *systematic* denomination” (43). In determin-




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ing the names he will give to colors, he simply combines two primary colors (greenish-white), gives the name of a metal for a metallic color (iron-black, lead-grey), borrows the name from “ordinary substances” (milk-white, liver-brown), or gives the name of a pigment (indigo-blue, ochre-yellow). Werner also provides a description of each color that makes use of representative examples, such as grass-green being “a pure clean green, in which yellow however, already predominates. The denomination of this color is derived from the fresh grass of spring. In the mineral kingdom we find it in chrysoprase and some green lead ores” (52).

In 1814, Patrick Syme, a botanical painter for the Edinburgh Wernerian and Horticultural Societies, attempted to refine Werner’s system in *Werner’s Nomenclature of Colours*, expanding its utility from mineralogy alone to “zoology, botany, chemistry, mineralogy, and morbid anatomy.” He published a second edition in 1821: this is the one Darwin used on the *Beagle* voyage. Syme praises Werner’s efforts at constructing a nomenclature of colors but notes that while “these [Werner’s colors] may answer for the description of most minerals, they would be found defective when applied to general science”; he therefore expands Werner’s seventy-nine tints into one hundred and ten (9). He also establishes purple and orange as colors in their own right, a change from Werner’s description of them as shades of blue and yellow, respectively (11). Like Werner, Syme includes verbal descriptions of his colors, such as when he describes “chocolate red” as “veinous [*sic*] blood red mixed with a little brownish red” (44). The most distinctive element of Syme’s color chart, however, is the table of color chips contained in the back of the book. Each of the ten primary colors Syme identifies—Werner’s eight plus orange and purple—is listed in all its constituent shades, and each shade is accompanied by a hand-stenciled color chip and representative examples from the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds (see fig. 1). “Wax Yellow,” for example, is found in the “Larva [*sic*] of large Water Beetle” (animal), the “Greenish Parts of Nonpareil Apple” (vegetable), and “Semi Opal” (mineral). He also strove to produce high-quality color chips: “neither time nor pains has [*sic*] been spared to render it as perfect as possible; and it being also of the first importance, that the colours should neither change nor fade . . . the author has ascertained that his method of mixing and laying on colours will ensure their remaining constant” (14). The hues of his color chips are intended to remain just as unchanging as the ink and letterforms comprising their verbal descriptions. In theory, this means that two different copies of his chart will ideally have the exact same hues on their color chips.

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Y E L L O W S.

No.	Names	Colours	ANIMAL	VEGETABLE	MINERAL
62	<i>Sulphur Yellow.</i>		<i>Yellow Parts of large Dragon Fly.</i>	<i>Various Coloured Snap dragon.</i>	<i>Sulphur</i>
63	<i>Primrose Yellow.</i>		<i>Pale Canary Bird.</i>	<i>Wild Primrose</i>	<i>Pale coloured Sulphur.</i>
64	<i>Wax Yellow.</i>		<i>Larva of large Water Beetle.</i>	<i>Greenish Parts of various Apples.</i>	<i>Semi opal.</i>

**Fig. 1**

Werner's *Nomenclature of Colours*, between pp. 38 and 39.

Color charts were especially useful for naturalists because preserved specimens often lost the color they had in life. The preservation of specimens was a central topic of discussion among naturalists of the early nineteenth century, particularly because many specimens were gathered in locations far from the nearest museum or taxidermist. Preservative technologies included drying and packing eviscerated specimens in jars of wine or diluted gin, as Darwin often found himself doing on the *Beagle*. These methods can destroy soft tissue, allow insects to infest leftover viscera, shrink and distort form, and drain color. This is why, in an 1846 letter to J. D. Hooker, Darwin mentions that he had “brought home a very few plants in Spirits of Wine (with the colours noted)”; without careful notation, the plants’ color would be lost. Aside from its immediate practical purposes for Darwin’s work, however, Syme’s chart offers a look at the ways that Darwin’s early career was marked by both the methodological tensions between Bacon and Herschel and the epistemological tensions between the then-new terms of subjectivity and objectivity.

### Objectivity and Sensation

As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have shown, the now-familiar concepts of subjectivity and objectivity have a history, one rooted in the reception of Kant’s philosophy among European thinkers in the early nineteenth century (30). Figures such as Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge rearticulated Kant’s original

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distinction between the objective and the subjective (that it corresponded to the distinction between the universal and the particular) in a way that became common by midcentury: this rearticulation defined the objective as external, not-self, and the subjective as internal, self (30-31). The new concept of objectivity became an integral part of scientific work by 1850, embodied in practices such as “the keeping of a lab notebook with real-time entries, the discipline of grid-guided drawing . . . [and] the training of voluntary attention” (Daston and Galison 36-38). Darwin’s *Beagle* voyage (1831-1836) falls squarely in the middle of the period in which post-Kantian thinkers were at the height of their influence, inflecting the thought of not only scientists but also philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker.

Color proved a challenging subject for naturalists striving for objectivity. Darwin’s contemporaries understood the need for terminology that could communicate color without relying on common but unspecific color words such as red, purple, or brown. The science of color in the early nineteenth century “pioneered the use of the newfangled Kantian terminology of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ to describe both content and subject matter,” transitioning away from its prevailing Lockean emphasis on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (277). It is possible that color science was at the *avant-garde* of the new objectivity because contemporary sensory physiologists such as Johannes Peter Müller and Hermann von Helmholtz were finding that color was especially problematic in their experimental attempts at communicating sensory experience (Daston and Galison 277). Out of two observers of the same shade of blue, one might find it purely blue; her companion might see blue slightly tinted with yellow. Even trained observers found themselves unable to agree on how to describe the colors they were seeing (277).

Syme’s chart, published roughly two decades before Müller and von Helmholtz were at their most active, anticipates these difficulties. Syme seeks to “establish a standard that may be useful in general science” because “[a]n object may be described of such a colour by one person, and perhaps mistaken by another for quite a different tint” (2-3). This means that if “a color chart is meant to be the orderly arrangement of a universe of sensations,” as art historian Charles Riley argues, then Syme’s is meant to not only order those sensations but also to standardize them (Riley 8). He wishes to both delineate “China Blue” in relation to its fellows “Prussian Blue” and “Azure Blue” and to definitively establish links between those names and the color chips attached to them. His efforts at standardization extend to disagreements with Werner about what shade of a color is the “characteristic” version of that color. For Werner, “carmine red” is the characteristic red; Syme,

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however, determines that “carmine red” is in fact “lake red with a little arterial blood red” (39). For Syme, “arterial blood red,” not “carmine red,” is characteristic of redness (38).

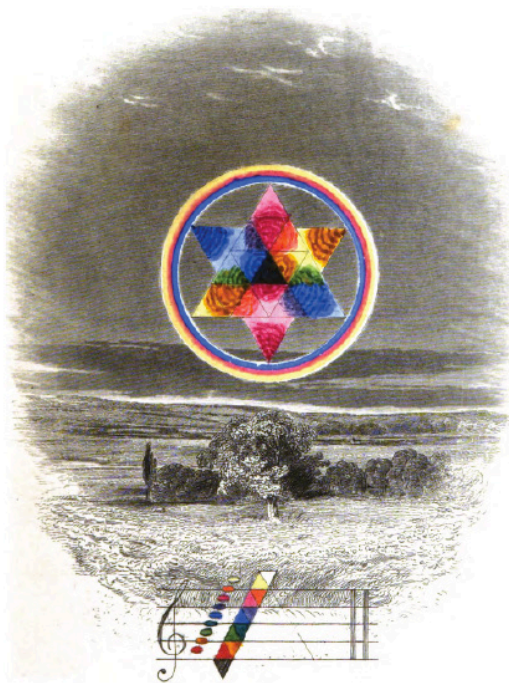
Darwin’s use of Syme’s chart suggests that he does not fit comfortably with prevailing characterizations of him as a subjective Romanticist, characterizations that perhaps overcorrect in their pushback against others’ tendency to label him as an amoral materialist. Darwin might love us, as the title of one of Levine’s books states, but he was no sentimentalist. Rather, his early-career work situates him within the tension between subjectivity and objectivity, tensions that were relatively new when he was learning his profession: although he acknowledges the affective qualities of the natural world, the ostensibly objective “hyacinth red” of his octopus means that he also stops short of making those qualities the ends to which he directs his work. This conception of Darwin invites humanities scholars to reconsider him not just in his cultural context—his love of Milton, his Romantic appreciation of nature—but also in his professional and scientific context. On the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin was a man in his late twenties, seeking to prove his worth as a naturalist to the wide range of scientific contacts he had cultivated in Britain. Botanist John Henslow, Darwin’s professor and mentor in the practice of science, wrote him a letter informing him that he had recommended him as a candidate for the *Beagle*’s naturalist; Henslow writes that he based the recommendation “not on the supposition of y<sup>r</sup>. being a *finished* Naturalist, but as amply qualified for collecting, observing, & noting any thing worthy to be noted in Natural History.” It is important to remember, when thinking about Darwin’s early career, that Darwin planned to become a “*finished*” naturalist on the *Beagle* voyage and would have kept the methodologies and practices of his profession in mind as he sought to develop his reputation.

If Darwin’s relationship to the debates surrounding subjectivity and objectivity is more nuanced than it first appears, so is his use of Syme’s chart. Although the chart constitutes an attempt to render the subjective communicable as a fact, it is just that: an attempt. It matters that the attempt is made because of what that means for Darwin’s approach to the natural world, but the ways that the attempt fails bears on both early nineteenth-century color theory and Darwin’s scientific practices. In what follows I argue that color science contemporary to Darwin, including Syme’s chart, does not escape color’s affective and aesthetic qualities. Darwin’s efforts to objectively communicate color are not totally successful: although he channels his perception of color through the medium of Syme’s chart to scrub that perception of his subjectivity, the chart itself is aesthetic and affecting.

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Some contemporary works of color science openly acknowledge the aesthetic and sensory facets of color and indeed make those facets the object of their inquiry, especially Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810) and George Field's *Chromatics* (1817). Like Goethe, Field sees color science as "aesthetical or sensible"; he seeks to show how colors correspond to musical tones, so that, like musical chords, groups of colors can harmonize (xii). He also sees colors as having the psychological effects of being warm (red, orange) or cold (blue), a conclusion now standard in Western color psychology (69). Surprisingly given his interest in the subjective effects of color, he writes that the book's diagrams are meant not to be artistically appealing: "we have preferred the symmetrical regularities of science to the picturesque representations of art, which, however flattering to the eye, would be inadequate symbols of a theory addressed to the understanding" (xiii).

Ex. XV.



Ex. XVI.

Fig. 2  
*Chromatics* 44.

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One such diagram (see fig. 2) displays “the second general relation or harmony of colours,” that “of the primaries with their secondaries and elementary principles” (44). Despite Field’s protestations to the contrary, the diagram is both “picturesque” and “flattering to the eye.” A polychromatic, six-pointed star is comprised of two interlocking triangles, one of which represents the primary colors of red, blue, and yellow, and the other, divided into yet smaller triangles, those colors’ interactions. Several bands of color ring the star, and below it sits a musical scale showing the correspondence of color to tone. The diagram sits atop a background showing a grayscale landscape picturing a lone tree in the middle of a field. A small grove of trees lies behind the meadow, and behind that grove the picture loses detail; it shows either a sea or the horizon. The figure gives the impression of the chromatic triangles hovering over the landscape, lending it a mystical, occult air; because the landscape is grayscale, one has the sense that the triangles represent something esoteric and extrinsic to everyday materiality. The diagram is, as Field wishes, symmetrical and regular, but here symmetry and regularity are themselves aesthetically pleasing: the many small triangles scale up into larger triangles, and from there into a larger triangle, itself part of a larger star-formation, the whole of which is banded by a circle. The figure is as much mystic symbol as diagram.

Though Field’s diagram perhaps exceeds his attempts to minimize its aesthetic qualities, it is ultimately consonant with his characterization of chromatics as an “aesthetical or sensible” science (xii). Syme, however, intended his chart to be unambiguous, a tool for the creation of facts, leaving as little as possible to the vicissitudes of subjective perception. He gives precise verbal descriptions of colors: “orpiment orange” is “about equal parts of gamboge yellow and arterial blood red” (42). If “about equal parts” seems approximate, that is true; however, it is less ambiguous than Field’s description of it in his *Chromatography* (1835) as “a brilliant orange color, inclining to yellow” (119). Even the chart itself (see fig. 1) is arranged in a businesslike manner. Unlike Goethe’s and Field’s diagrams, the colors are not arranged in a way that showcases the hues themselves; the relation of any color on the chart is as much along the horizontal axis (where it can be found in the natural world) as it is the vertical axis (its place in its color family). The shapes of the color chips are plain squares.

Yet even Syme does not completely purge color of its aesthetic, sensory qualities. Though his verbal descriptions of colors do, as I have indicated, attempt objectivity, his description of azure blue surprisingly contains subjective and sensory elements. The color is described as “Berlin blue, mixed with a little carmine red: it is a burning color” (31). Thus azure blue is not only the color characteristic of the “Breast of

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Emerald Crested Manakin,” the “Grape Hyacinth,” or of “Blue Copper Ore”; it is also a color with psychophysiological effects on the observer, particularly the sensation of burning. These effects do not change Syme’s core goal of objectivity, but they do call attention to the impossibility of separating color from qualia.

### Color and the *Beagle*

Darwin did not use Syme’s chart to deny himself the aesthetic elements of color. Rather, he used Syme’s chart to make what he saw objective so that it could be communicable. He certainly enjoyed the colors he encountered, but it is not that enjoyment he wishes to transmit through the color chart but rather the color itself. Darwin was neither a Goethean Romanticist nor a NASA rover, dispassionately collecting data to beam back to Earth. Rather, he was an early-career researcher hoping to make an impact on his field. Alistair Sponcel’s recent work on Darwin’s identity as a scientist suggests that during the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin “came to believe that he was developing *theories* rather than merely making observations and gathering specimens” (7). Part of this theory-making is a theory about the communication of color that Darwin develops through works he wrote in the years after the *Beagle* voyage, particularly his specimen notebooks, until recently unpublished, and his *Journal of Researches*, first published in 1839 as *Journal and Remarks*. This theory marks one of Darwin’s own contributions to contemporary conversations about the representation of color in science.

I will examine how Darwin’s specimen notebooks and the *Journal* describe the same animal—the aplysia, a sea slug encountered in Cape Verde—to elucidate how he sought to refract his subjectivity from his scientific observations using Syme’s chart. I will also examine the differences in the ways he describes color between the texts, and the manner in which he describes color within them, to elucidate his interventions in color theory. The analysis assumes that the specimen notes were intended for other naturalists because they correspond to his preserved specimens and that the *Journal of Researches* was meant for an educated but still general audience. I assert that the *Journal of Researches*, Darwin’s first book, was intended for general readership because of its relative lack of technical detail compared with the specimen notebooks and the later zoological and geological volumes. Its publication history also suggests as such. Originally, it was published as *Journal and Remarks*, the third volume of *Beagle* captain Robert Fitzroy’s *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty’s Ships*

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*Adventure and Beagle, between the Years 1826 and 1836, Describing their Examination of the Southern Shores of South America, and the Beagle's Circumnavigation of the Globe* (1839). Given that Darwin's volume was originally published as part of this travel narrative, it is unlikely that it was written for specialists. Only after this publication, but still during the year 1839, did Darwin publish his volume separately as *Journal of Researches*. Taken together, the specimen journal and the *Journal of Researches* bear the traces of a writer actively navigating the tensions between self and other, subjectivity and objectivity, and method and theory.

When Darwin examined a specimen, whether in its natural habitat or in dissection, he entered his observations into his specimen notebook. We know the contents of this notebook because it was transcribed, edited, and published by his great-grandson, Richard Darwin Keynes, as *Charles Darwin's Zoology Notes and Specimen Lists from H.M.S. Beagle* in 2000. Darwin's note on the aplysia, recorded January 1832, notes the sea slug's many colors:

Shell transparent, oval, slightly beaked, with one shoulder scalloped out.— length about 5 inches. of a dirty 'primrose yellow' traced with veins & rings of a purplish 'umber brown' colour; about 10 veins rings in number on each side, 2 on head.— Anterior feelers white.— Operculum purplish with purple descending fold, with a mark on centre. Foot of a darker yellow [. . .] Within Stomach contains a quantity of a delicate pink Fucus & small pebbles, which I suppose are used like those in birds gizzards; in the intestine, these appear to have been ground into sand. (18)

In a note appended to this entry, the date of which is unclear, he writes that aplysias produce "a great quantity of a 'Purplish red' fluid enough to stain the water for over a foot round"—this is a defense mechanism that produces a stinging sensation (18). Having taken a sample of this fluid by dipping paper into it, he also remarks that "Paper when stained with this beautiful color, after a few days changed into a dirty red" (18).

It is notable that, as expected, Darwin uses many of Syme's colors to describe the sea slug: primrose yellow, umber white, and purplish red are all drawn from Syme's chart. However, he also strays from the chart in interesting ways, such as when he modifies umber brown with "purplish" to describe the aplysia's rings. In Syme's chart, only two colors are termed purplish: purplish white, the white of the "White Geranium," and purplish red, the red of "Precious Garnet" (26, 42). By modifying "umber brown" with "purplish," Darwin identifies and names a

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color outside of Syme's chart. He also reaches outside the chart when he describes fucus, an algae, as "delicate pink": pink does not exist as a discrete color in the chart. It only appears as a type of red, such as "peach blossom red." He also describes the fluid the aplysia produces when threatened as "beautiful." He is at once a proficient user of Syme's chart and an observer with enough confidence to modify it when he sees fit. Moreover, these deviations, made on the basis of observed natural phenomena, mark an important act of theorization. Rather than attempt to fit what he saw within the confines of Syme's chart, he expands his scientific toolset by modifying the chart's language, in the case of "purplish 'umber brown,'" or by departing the language of the chart altogether for the word "pink." Sponsel notes that during the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin "recorded a series of objectives for his future career: he aimed to rewrite the geological history of South America and the natural history of zoophytes and to advance a theory of coral reef formation he had developed at Tahiti" (18). The language he used to describe color at the time likewise suggests a willingness, if not an ambition, to expand natural science's chromatic repertoire.

Darwin's description of the aplysia in the *Journal of Researches* is remarkably different. Note how Darwin describes the aplysia's color: "This sea-slug is about five inches long; and is of a dirty yellowish colour, veined with purple" (6). The specimen notebook states that the same animal is "of a dirty 'primrose yellow' traced with veins & rings of a purplish 'umber brown' colour" (18). Primrose yellow becomes "yellowish"; umber brown tinged with purple becomes simply "purple." Whereas the specimen notebook describes the aplysia's anterior feelers as white, here he only remarks that the upper feelers "resemble in shape the ears of a quadruped," which is why the aplysia is sometimes called a sea hare: it has bunny ears (6). Of the defensive fluid it emits, the "beautiful" "purplish red" color of the specimen notebook becomes "a very fine purplish-red" (6). Seemingly aware that his audience would expect a naturalist not to rhapsodize, Darwin's edit of "beautiful" to "very fine" denotes a more measured, restrained, formal, and objective aesthetic judgment. He makes no further comments on the animal's colors. Other differences between the passages indicate that the specimen notes are directed toward a more specialized, professional audience than the *Journal of Researches*: only the specimen notes detail the shell, the foot, and the "7 to 10 pyramidal bits of semitransparent horn or teeth," and these details are put in language more clinical and precise than that of the *Journal*.

As in Syme's chart and Field's *Chromatics*, the beautiful and the clinical, the subjective and the objective, interweave in both these texts despite their different compositional processes and different audiences.

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The specimen notes, which mix remarks on the beauty of a sea slug's secretions with painstakingly minute details of its anatomy, reveal a rapidly professionalizing naturalist committed both to experiencing the natural world and to using the tools of his trade to communicate his experience to distant colleagues. The *Journal of Researches*, edited for a general audience, discloses an awareness that Darwin's readership would be more interested in the aplysia's bunny ears than the exact shade of its rings.

As Darwin's work and that of color theorists attests, it was difficult if not impossible to escape the aesthetic elements of color in the nineteenth century. The diary Darwin kept on the *Beagle* voyage suggests as much. Although he does not explicitly discuss the aplysia in it, his entry for January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1832, written in the environs of Cape Verde, could have been written with it in mind:

Collected a great number of curious & beautiful animals from the little pools left by the tide. The colours of the sponges & corallines are extremely vivid & it is curious how all animated nature becomes more gaudy as it approaches the hotter countries. — Birds, fishes, plants, shells are familiar to every one. — but the colours in these marine animals will rival in brilliancy those of the higher classes. (30-31)

We see here that Darwin is less interested in delineating exactly what colors he finds to be "vivid," "gaudy," and "brilliant" than he is in expressing the pleasure and curiosity they provoke. Although Darwin's appreciation for the beauty of color is present, in varying degrees, in all his *Beagle* writings, it is not incompatible with the project of scientific objectivity. The complexities and failures of that project, in both Darwin's work and nineteenth-century color theory generally, alerts us to the difficulties of not only color but objectivity itself.

Darwin's use of Syme's chart illustrates the difficulties inherent in early nineteenth-century efforts to render subjective perceptions of color into objective, communicable facts. While the chart allowed Darwin to name and describe colors with some degree of precision, it could not fully resolve the tension between the private experience of color and the demands of scientific representation. Darwin's attempts to bridge this gap, including adopting Syme's nomenclature while departing from it where necessary, reflect his position as a naturalist working within the methodological and conceptual upheavals of his time. By examining Darwin's use of Syme's chart, we gain a more complicated picture of his contributions to science and representation. Darwin was neither the pure Romanticist literary critics have suggested

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nor a dispassionate collector of data. Instead, he was as a figure deeply engaged with the tools and practices of his discipline, but never wholly apart from the aesthetic and affective dimensions of the natural world he sought to describe. Darwin's attempts to systematize color reveal the challenges of communication at the heart of scientific practice.

### Notes

1. The full title of the text, which changed in later editions, is *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle, under the Command of Captain Fitzroy, R.N. From 1832 to 1836*. It was originally published as the third volume of *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty's Ships Adventure And Beagle, Between the Years 1826 and 1836, Describing their Examination of the Southern Shores of South America, And the Beagle's Circumnavigation of the Globe*, published in 1839 by Henry Colburn in London.
2. Darwin remarks in a footnote that his description of the octopus's colors is conducted "according to Pat[rick] Syme's nomenclature" (46).
3. I am thinking especially of Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*; Joseph Carroll, *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice*; and Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*.
4. For excellent overviews of Romantic science, see especially Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* and Andrew Cunningham, *Romanticism and the Sciences*.

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# Postsocialist Chinese Love and Pain in *Teeth of Love*

Sijia Yao

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Is pain only pain? While mental suffering has been a major topic in literature all over the world over the course of human history, bodily pain does not find center stage in literature or with critics. The topic of a purely bodily pain surprisingly occupies a rare place in the ocean of art with isolated exceptions, such as Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, both of which focus on pain to raise questions about humanity and tragedy in a secular existence. Their works project a desire to address a foundational and universal inquiry about human limitation because the nature of pain is closely related to death and an unfathomable mystery beyond the secular world. In the modern mind, pain is believed to be merely a medical issue, perhaps because of its implicit connection with disease. Perhaps it is commonly believed that pain is just a pure affect that inhibits thinking and meaning. Perhaps there is only silence or cries when one is experiencing pain with its inarticulate shareability. Yet, pain, to Elaine Scarry, should be studied first and foremost as bodily pain because bodily pain is used as a form of coercion in torture and war (27-157). She describes the way in which bodily pain is an instinctual affect that not only precedes any concept but takes a place of liminality in human existence. Scarry establishes her theory of pain by demonstrating the way in which pain has no object. Pain resulting from violence blots out all other immediate concerns and concepts while we are in its grip. It is a pure bodily sensation. On the other hand, imagination, as the opposite of pain, only consists of objects, but without any bodily reality. Scarry sees work as the mediation between pain and imagination that creates the artifacts of our world (161-80). In this sense, pain can only contribute to symbolic meaning to the extent that it is present in the work process.

While she is able to demonstrate the dynamics of a purely bodily pain, Scarry does not investigate bodily pain that is derived from passion. Such pain linked to passion seems so ordinary in everyday life that we are blind to its extraordinariness, in which it on the one hand defines humanity and its limitation on the ground but on the other hand reveals and conceals a transcendental mystery. Such a spiritually

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induced physical pain escapes human language but affectively mediates between the human and a metaphysical order beyond. Because of its bodily feature of experience, such pain also serves as a mediator between an individual and a historical, local reality. In this sense, David Morris effectively situates pain “at the intersection of bodies, minds, and cultures” to explore different cultural constructs of pain, mental and physical, within the scope of Western culture (3). Different from Scarry and Morris, who focus on Western history and culture, Michael Berry’s *A History of Pain* dwells on a metaphorical idea of pain in twentieth-century China. Despite the title “History of Pain,” hardships and traumas serve as a metaphor of pain undergone by China as a nation rather than the bodily pain of each individual. Pain, for Berry, is a literary representation of epic trauma.

At the end of the Maoist era, however, such politically motivated pain began to give way to a kind of personal pain that is linked to the development of personal love relationships. Strictly conforming with the doctrine that everything private should be crushed, Mao’s China denied personal love in cultural production and people’s daily life. In contrast, the idea of personal love became more and more prominent after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

We can trace this development in the history of Chinese film in this time. With the closure of Mao’s socialist era, the theme of love moved from absolute zero in films to becoming minor, significant, and then central over the course of the neoliberal era of Chinese history. Love was presented and represented in three main modes that all have deep relations with pain, whose meaning, however, varies and changes. The first mode can be detected most dominantly in 1980s films, such as *Romance on Lushan Mountain* (1980), *Life* (1984), and *Hibiscus Town* (1987). Inspired by “scar” literature, these films characterize individual love with an epic pain that was derived from the traumatic cultural revolution. The second mode (1990s-2000s) describes an absolutely private love as well as its concomitant pain, situated in a purer and more metaphysical context. This mode begins in the 1990s, when love films from Hong Kong such as *Red Rose White Rose* (1994) and *Eighteen Springs* (1997), as well as Chiung Yao’s (瓊瑤) films from Taiwan, became very popular in mainland China. Filmmakers in China also became prolific in producing films that address love in a highly private and metaphysical sense, for example, in *Spicy Love Soup* (1999), *Sigh* (2000), *I Love You* (2002), *Zhou Yu’s Train* (2002), and *Baober in Love* (2004). These films usually dwell on romantic love, desire, and subjectivity. The third mode features a shift in focus to a more realistic exploration of love in a neoliberal society. Such films include those made in the 2010s such as *Eternal Moment* (2011), *Feng Shui* (2012), and *Mountains May Depart*

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(2015). The questions the filmmakers address are the pain generated from the conflict between love and some external element in neoliberal China, such as temptations and difficulties in a more mobile and quickly transforming society.

The three modes do not necessarily follow each other chronologically, nor are they strictly divided by period. For instance, *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (1998) and *The Foliage* (2004) still belong to mode one, in which love carries a deep scar of the cultural revolution. Nevertheless, each period is dominated by one of the modes.

There have been barely any love films that could broadly (re)present all three modes or intensively comment on the three historical zeitgeists. One particular film, *Teeth of Love* (2007), stands out in the way that it reflects on the entire historical trajectory and thereby includes all three modes. Heavily influenced by major Western filmmakers and their ideas of love and pain, the film director Zhuang Yuxin (庄宇新) produced this film to describe the dramatic social transformation in which Mao's socialist ideas were collapsing while a Western neoliberal way of thinking and living was emerging and thriving. *Teeth of Love*, therefore, is significant in the way that it provides an overview of the three post-Mao modes of approaching love and fits them into a historical trajectory in which love and social change are intertwined in contemporary China.

Developing a theoretical approach to pain but also shedding light on history, Chinese particularity, and individual bodily pain, *Teeth of Love* provides a new interpretation of bodily pain that not only unveils a sophisticated transition in a local context but also supplements the theory of pain in general. The film depicts a historical shift from a socialist pain used as a form of violence for disciplining people to a self-inflicted pain that is an expression of a private passion. The film also explores the significance of bodily pain as a sign of love within the context of transformational events in postsocialist China.

*Teeth of Love* has been underrated and understudied in both academia and popular culture. It has been overlooked amongst other Chinese films in the United States perhaps because it might be recognized as not sufficiently "Chinese" to serve an ethnographical function, or because there is barely any scholarship endorsing its value and significance. It was not favored by the public because the love in the film frustrates, disturbs, and challenges audiences who are used to the sweet, melodramatic, and mainstream love films with happy endings. Yet, this is a very rare film that seriously centers pain in the narrative as the core subject for contemplation. It is not love but pain that first defines this film, and even the director believes that the film deals with no more than the topic of love (Rist 1-8). The pain breaks the predigested

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ideas of morality and happiness to invite the heroine, Qian Yehong, and also the audience, to see an invisible but important turning point in contemporary Chinese history.

Scarry points out the defining nature of pain as “objectlessness, the complete absence of referential content” (162). Consequently, for her pain is used as a way of enforcing a particular ideology. “It will gradually become apparent that at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief—that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population’s belief,” as Scarry observes, “the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” (14). According to this approach, bodily pain is used and exploited to maintain the waning central belief in socialist Maoism during the Cultural Revolution in China. Yet, this idea that violence can be used to create a sense of reality through pain may oversimplify the complicated meaning of pain as well as obscure the individual’s autonomy to interpret this pain.

For Michael Berry, pain is linked to ideas that define the specific historical moment. Pain, in this sense, becomes an index that examines and measures the cultural moment. According to Berry, who structures his argument with Bakhtin’s “centripetal” and “centrifugal” binary mode (6) and “the repeated trauma of violence” (1), pain, either from an outside imperialist invasion or a self-inflicted force, becomes the symbol of a century of wars and national coercions. Wars, revolutions, and political coercions, as the strongest defining features of the twentieth century, formed the backdrop for Mao’s China, when political persecution and purges compromised and eradicated countless flesh-and-blood bodies. Violent threats and acts culminated in the Cultural Revolution but also quickly encountered a crisis, leading to its collapse. Bodily pain, therefore, has been primarily a sign of politicized struggle and coercion.

In *Teeth of Love*, it becomes clear that pain is loaded with a meaning that arises out of the context of the pain. The objectlessness of pain does not merely create an opportunity for state violence to reinforce an ideology. It also allows pain to act as a dynamic sign of changing mental states. In this film, pain begins as the result of state violence in the mode that Scarry describes. Yet, after 1976, as the film reveals, the meaning of bodily pain encountered a dramatic transformation, from purely political loyalty to an awakening of private love.

## Nuclear Family: A Convergence of China and the West

The fall of a state-governed public life and meaning leaves sufficient space for the private to integrate itself to form a new public discourse based on the intensive personal love relationship and marriage as well as the nuclear family in postsocialist China. Such a shift is not surprising given China's dramatic change in national orientation from class struggle to economic development since 1978. The fact is that China has been quickly approximating to the West, both of which are experiencing a modern crisis, as well as the consequent overburdening, of the nuclear family system. In depicting the transformation of the female protagonist's personal feelings from commitment to a socialist ideal to a focus on pure love and then to the concentration on marriage, the film lays out a trajectory of changing structures of feeling toward the orientation around the nuclear family, similar to what one might find in Western societies. Zhuang, the film director, is inspired by Western films such as those of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, as he explicitly admits (Rist 1-8). Without a similar cultural context, a Chinese film director would not be inspired by a German filmmaker whose most famous films, such as *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, and *Love is Colder than Death*, heavily dwell on pain, love, and marriage. Although Zhuang himself does not directly acknowledge the influence from the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, the interviewer and film professor Peter Rist points out that *Teeth of Love* carries a birthmark of the idiosyncratic editing of redness from Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*, a film that deals with pain in a bourgeois family (3). Zhuang intends to symbolize the tooth pain as "the painful experience of being in love with somebody or not being in love with somebody, but being together with them" (Rist 5). Zhuang shares with the Western directors the concern with and concentration on problematic love and marriage in modern existence.

Christopher Lasch affirms the problem and crisis expressed by these twentieth-century filmmakers as a crucial theme in the West. According to Lasch, "the main features of the bourgeois family system were firmly established in Western Europe and the United States" by the "end of the eighteenth century" (*Haven in a Heartless World* 4). In this system, "marriage ideally rested on intimacy and love. The overthrow of arranged marriage took place in the name of romantic love and a new conception of the family as a refuge from the highly competitive and often brutal world of commerce and industry" (5). In other words, love and marriage, tightly yoked together as a private domain, function as a compensation and a refuge from the outside world. Such

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a balance could be easily broken with the increasing pressure from the outside to the point that the family exhausts its resources and capacities, thereby creating marriage crisis and divorce.

This process explicated by Lasch has lasted two centuries in the West but only several decades in China. The revolution of love and marriage started at the turn of the twentieth century when China began to be colonized by Western powers and simultaneously influenced by their ideas. In the era of the Republic of China, literary depictions of free love and marriage developed a new norm that undermined traditions by displacing arranged marriage (Lee 95-139). While Mao's absolute politicizing of the public sphere was a rupture in this development, the bourgeois marriage system returned after Mao's time and restored itself quickly in the Reform years when opportunities as well as risks fall on each individual in a neoliberal society like in the West. As Hui Faye Xiao has shown, the dramatic increase in the divorce rate at the turn of the twenty-first century in China has been a symptom of another revolution in love and marriage, in which interiority is restored in post-revolutionary China legally, psycho-historically, and culturally (15-20). At the same time, the focus on love, marriage, and family was a veiled continuation of the craze for Mao, in which the passion for a political idol is transferred to a husband or a wife. In this sense, the problems and crises in the Chinese nuclear family are stronger and more intense compared to its Western counterpart. In describing the shifting meaning of pain, *Teeth of Love* documents the way in which changes in government policy led to corresponding transformations in the affective economy of the protagonist.

### From Weapon to Love Confession: The Transformation of the Meaning of Pain

Pain transforms from a pure affect into a symbol of love that creates different meanings in the film. It illustrates the measures of meaning in the public and private spheres. All the three love stories the protagonist Qian experiences are defined by the pain, with differing meanings, that facilitates the audience's recognition of fluid meanings of existence in an era transitioning from Mao's China to a neoliberal age. The contradiction between love and pain converges with the contradiction between the public and the private. Initially, the psychological contradiction between love and pain introduces an existential contradiction between self and the public.

Tracing back to 1977 when she was a high-school teenager, and one year after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Qian appears as an un-

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feminine girl in the regular outfit of Mao's time, a military green jacket and blue pants with her school bag hanging in front, always leading a group of semi-red-guard girls to police misconduct and disgraceful deeds, including private romantic rendezvous between lovers. Qian follows the typical model of revolutionary/socialist women such as the genderless, romance-less Wu Qionghua in *Red Detachment of Women* (1961). With their socialist upbringing, Qian and her girls regard private feelings and love as illegal or indicative of a hooligan (耍流氓). Stigmatizing femininity and love, they detest and alienate one of their classmates, Lin Jie, because Lin is found dating a boy in another class. This use of bullying and threats, including the brandishing of a knife in one scene, functions as a form of socialist-oriented collective violence and discipline. While the film does not directly show any physical violence, the atmosphere of threats and tense confrontations exemplifies a mode of pain that revolved around a public collectivist agenda in socialist China.

The rest of the film depicts Qian's movement away from this socialist mode of existence toward a privately oriented meaning in which pain and violence are re-organized in relation to individual love rather than a socialist collective. This transformation takes place as an epochal change, in which China is moving away from the politicized socialist cause and reorienting toward a neoliberal society that starts to recognize the private. Such a historical transformation is projected in Qian's dramatic shift from a sexless, iron girl to a feminine woman in love. The change comes at the event of her initial experience of pain, which leads Qian in a new direction in her affective life. This change is in part due to Qian's own maturation but also allowed by the new political circumstances that permit such a re-orientation of meaning toward a private awakening.

Two key scenes depict the events of the shift in Qian's sense and sensibility. In the first scene, Qian reads aloud an anonymous love letter she received and mocks it in public. Her ignorance and contempt for personal love hurts one of her classmates, He Xuesong, who is actually the secret admirer and the love-letter writer. Humiliated and frustrated, He hits Qian's back with a red brick, causing the back pain that will plague Qian for the rest of her life. In this scene, Qian is continuing her previous policing of private sentiments, in which her mockery of the love letter finds a receptive audience in her socialist-oriented comrades, who join in laughter about the letter. In the scene after she is injured by He with the brick, Qian and her gang surround He and his companion on the street and demand that he publicly beg for her pardon, with one of the gang members holding the original brick as a threat of violence in case He should refuse her demand. However, He

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reacts by grabbing the brick and smashing his own foot with it. At this point, Qian also collapses in pain from her back.

Scarry points out that it is difficult, almost impossible, for us to describe bodily pain without referring to the external implement that could be imagined as the cause of the pain (16-19). For example, we speak of a burning pain, as if caused by fire, or a sharp pain, as if caused by a knife, or a dull pain, as if caused by the blow of a rock or, in this case, a brick. If one is familiar with Scarry's "pain-weapon-imagined object arrangement," or a "deconstructed form" of "the pain-weapon-power" (172), it is easy to understand the meaning of the brick as threat and violence when Qian is holding it to force He to offer an apology in order to guard the all-is-public socialist agenda. Of course, a brick is not typically a source of pain, and to distinguish the use of something like a brick as either a weapon or a tool, Scarry points out that the difference lies in "the surface on which they fall." If they fall on the "sentient surface," they are "the weapon," otherwise, they are "the tool" (173). Based on Scarry, the brick that is either used as a threat or falls on a girl's back is utterly a weapon. However, in the brick scenes, one can sense that the brick is a weapon while being held in that gang member's hand as a threat but loses its weapon status when He is hitting Qian's back as well as his own foot later because at these events, the brick functions as an impulsive passion of the young man and later ignites and creates a mutual love recognition. In this sense, the brick does not conform to either of the categories that Scarry lays out. Though He uses the brick against Qian's body and against his own, it is closer to the tool in Scarry's terms because it creates something new but not artifacts and works as Scarry anticipates. In He's hands, the brick generates a pain that is neither a pure destruction nor the creation of an artifact. Instead, He uses the brick to establish love, whose birth is similar to imagining and work but follows a distinctive logic and represents a different mode of existence.

The film explores the language of pain by presenting the viewer with the implements of pain, such as the brick in the case of He and the knife that is wielded by the socialist gang member. But the meaning of the pain does not exhaust itself with the description of the instruments, as Scarry would suggest. Rather, the primary difference is the one between the instrument used as threat and the instrument used as a means of self-inflicted pain. He's brick changes its meaning with each instance of its use against a human body. Beginning as an expression of He's rage when he uses it against Qian initially, it becomes a threat of violence used to enforce power in Qian's comrade's hands. The brick finally becomes an expression of love when He uses it against himself. The film explores this dichotomy between the public use of pain as a

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threat and the private use of pain as an expression of emotion. In his tough and intentional actions, He transforms the meaning of the brick and the pain it represents. Rather than being a threat used to enforce power in the previous socialist logic, He uses the brick to inflict pain on himself, demonstrating his refusal of the dynamic of power and his re-functionalizing of the brick as a sign of He's inner pain at Qian's refusal of his affection.

He's action is the key incident that leads to the transformation of Qian's attitude. When He throws the brick onto his own toes to express his anger and frustration about Qian's inability to understand and echo his love, his action becomes a radical form of love confession. Such a love confession expressed by a self-inflicted pain intensely stimulates Qian's senses and quickly triggers her feelings for He, and Qian starts to change afterwards. In the next scene, when Qian and He coincidentally meet at the health clinic, Qian tries to approach He, but He flees from her in anger. Another time, she offers He a ride when they encounter each other in the street. Later, she starts to look at herself in the mirror, thinking of dressing up in a more feminine way. The pain He inflicts upon Qian, and later himself, arouses Qian's personal feelings and begins a flame of love that is defined by pain. Love and pain at these two moments of sadistic violence and masochist shock are in conflict but also merge together. These two points of pain represent a turning point in the story because they are the first two moments of pain that she experiences that link pain and love together, shifting pain out of the political framework that was dominant in the Mao era and also the exclusive focus of Scarry's analysis.

The turning point reflects on the one hand a shift in Qian's personal attitudes and on the other hand a public shift away from Maoist politicization. When it comes to the origin of the pain, it is actually Qian who inflicts shame and angst upon He at the very beginning, and her act leads to the development of a series of acts of physical pain and death in sequence. The genderless, everything-is-public Qian immersed in a socialist upbringing loses sight of the private sphere that is affectionate and intimate. The blow to her back awakens her from the external orthodoxy in which everything is public including gender and love. The awakening pain allows her to discern the emptiness of the glamorous official narrative under which lies a deep reality and truthful private domain. The event of her pain becomes an event of truth. She distances herself from the previous girlfriends/comrades and quickly begins and maintains her friendship with Lin Jie, from whom she learns about feminine beauty and love relationships. Qian, for the first time, sees the reality of a dichotomy between the public and private and feels the urge to make a choice between the two. If love is the

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truth that underlines the pain in this story, both the love and the pain present for Qian a private dimension that undermines the falseness of the public narratives, leading to her inclination to always seek for intimate and private experience in later life. This shift is not just a personal one, though, as it is enabled by the shifting political climate that permits her to make this shift without any social consequences. Her prior comrades gradually disappear from her life, and they no longer have any power to enforce their mode of public discipline on her.

### Embodied Self-Sacrifice under the Administrative Power

Qian's experience establishes her absolutely private language of pain and love, which contrasts with the use of mental pain as a form of coercion in public life. After He is accidentally drowned in the river due to the broken foot, Qian loses her first love that has not even yet started. He's blow on Qian's back starts her lifelong back pain, which especially bothers her when it is raining. The back pain accompanies her for the rest of her life, reminding her of the first lost love and the everlasting regret. Such a pain of loss perpetuates and eternalizes the first love, forever young and unrequited. This bodily pain is transformed into a symbol of love, reminding her of He's sacrifice through a self-inflicted pain. On the contrary, the type of socialist discipline based on threats of pain retains the type of violence and repression that Scarry describes in terms of a pain that has no symbolic function but in fact suppresses any language.

The conflict between the public and private use of pain becomes more acute once Qian turns away from her socialist-oriented persona and begins to focus on private love. Leaving Beijing, Qian goes somewhere else to complete her college education. In her college junior year, she meets Meng Han, her first surgery patient, and becomes close to him while playing cards. The love starts with the shared secret codes they develop to win games when they play cards as partners. The secret codes on the card table quickly transform into a private intimacy. Although already knowing Meng is married, Qian still accepts Meng and loses herself to the secret love liaison. The love in the shadows intensifies the intimacy and sublimates the love to a pure form.

Immersing herself in such a pure love, Qian is the giver in this love affair. When she realizes that Meng is afraid to keep their child, Qian shoulders all the responsibility and plans an abortion. This act is both the result of public enforcement of morality and an expression of Qian's private love. In the early 1980s, hospitals demanded a marriage

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certificate before proceeding with an abortion, continuing a socialist policy of public disciplining of private morality. In order to carry out the abortion, Qian resolves to carry it out herself with the help of her lover. There are almost fifteen minutes allotted in the film to patiently following Qian and Meng as they quietly plot, proceed with, and complete the abortion on their own. The pain of the abortion is concentrated and lasts for three days. However, Qian expresses the intimacy and love as much as the pain she experiences. She happily smiles and talks to Meng, who is holding her hand, “right now I am as if really giving birth to your child.” The abortion reveals a strong sense of intimacy by reversing the usual depiction of abortion as miserable, hateful, and sad. Rather, the abortion is as celebrative as giving birth. Such a scene of abortion therefore is better to be interpreted as metaphorical than literal. For Qian, love is linked to pain. The truest love must bear the greatest pain. From the lasting and intense pain of abortion, Qian is experiencing love in its absolute form. She becomes an everlasting flame burning herself without shame but with joy.

But it is the public surveillance over private affairs that requires such a sacrifice, and the film reminds the viewers of this public apparatus of violence when the secret police discover the discarded fetus and trace it back to Meng. The subsequent series of official interrogations and forced confessions reveals the state-sponsored administrative structures that lie behind the painful abortion. In that time, adultery and abortion were considered as crimes rather than personal matters. The punishment is severe and merciless by the authorities and the people. In the face of such threats, Qian again takes the self-sacrificial role that was previously performed by He. While Meng shifts all the blames to Qian, Qian accepts sole responsibility to protect him. As a college student, she is now a disgrace to her college and she would naturally be expelled. No other college or decent work unit would take her. After being expelled, she is demoted to working in a pork factory in Beijing. Her personal transgression, like a scarlet letter, is publicly recorded on her resume, haunting her career and marriage in the future. Qian devotes everything she has for the man—her virginity, child, career, reputation, and social standing—for the sake of pure love in an absolutely private sense.

### Absolutely Private Love

Qian's incomprehensible choice and self-destruction demonstrate her absolute loyalty toward freedom and the private sphere. Her choices are not measured by calculating practical use, but by self-exploration.

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She has gained the experience from the first story that pain is linked to true love and for this reason is able to embrace pain in the second story. As a doctor, she abandons a doctor's duty to save life by killing her own child for the sake of pure intimacy. She embraces the pain at the cost of external values including her career, good social standing, even reputation as a woman.

Such a willful and resolute self-sacrifice is also her effort at redemption for the first love. Because she insisted on maintaining a socialist suppression of private love, she spurned He, which indirectly led to He's death. She redeems her mistake with He in her relationship with Meng by totally forsaking the public orthodox standards that prevented her from reciprocating He's love. This explains her inexplicable devotion to Meng. The blind passion is so intense and irrational because of her immeasurable guilt, derived from the misplaced loyalty to the socialist grand narrative about life and love. She denies her socialist belief and converts herself into an absolute believer in private love. In so doing, she is able to fulfill her first love through the redemption. In this sense, Meng, the second lover, is a surrogate for He, the first lover.

Yet, the development of her back pain during her relationship with Meng indicates that he cannot fulfill this role of being a private love. There are two moments when she mentions to Meng her back pain, a constant reminder of He, which reveals that Meng as a surrogate of He will fail to fulfill Qian's self-sacrificial love and be her redemption. The first moment is after her first lovemaking with Meng. Qian typically feels the back pain when it rains, and when she finds out it is raining, even though she feels no back pain, she is surprised. The passionate love frees Qian from the regret in the past because she redeems it by embracing an absolutely private love. The second moment is after Meng comes back from disposing of the fetus. Qian, lying in bed, laments, "It is unthinkable that killing a person is so easy." A close-up shot catches her sad eyes, a blank face, and her falling tears. In a while, she hurts again, but this time it is not because of the abortion but the back pain. "My back hurts again. It hasn't hurt for a long time. Don't know why." This is a turning point from the temporary ecstatic celebration of victorious freedom to a desolate, unredeemable moment of loss. The fact that she can still feel the back pain at this moment indicates that this new love affair will not fulfill her redemption or offer her happiness. Her passionate pure love quickly ends with the closure of abortion. Betraying the public, Qian thought she could redeem her previous mistake by celebrating a passionate love regardless of the high price she has to pay. Yet, the return of the back pain and the eventual loss of a new life indicate the failure of redemption through a surrogate love. The second love exhausts all of Qian's passion, life, and love,

which renders her later life numb and listless once she enters back in to another form of public life, marriage.

### Pain as an Antidote to a Common Modern Problem

While the first part of the film depicts the shift away from a socialist-oriented public morality toward a focus on private passion, and the second part of the film depicts the precariousness of this private passion when suppressed by public regulation and surveillance, the third part of the film attempts to establish a new kind of public life oriented around family, in which Qian might discover a balance between private love and public morality in marriage. The fading of socialist morality creates a new possibility in which a focus on the nuclear family replaces both the extended family and the socialist collectivism of earlier eras in China. Such a new mode of life in the third story approximates the modern culture of Western social production in which the nuclear family is overburdened with social problems.

The third story begins with a shockingly crude but also a metaphorical image of giant dismembered pork parts being dragged on the ground in a pork factory where Qian is expressionlessly dismembering dead pigs. Qian is demoted to the very bottom of the social ladder. Deprived of career and social standing, Qian loses her financial and social independence. Moreover, her attempt at a private passion is punished and defeated in the second love incident, although love and pain are pushed to their extremity. Her lover's betrayal disheartens Qian and renders her disillusioned about love. The closure of great love and pain is followed by an inner numbness that performs mechanically, without pain or love, and in fact Qian reveals in conversation with Lin Jie that, though her back pain has disappeared, she yearns for it. This abnormal yearning for pain unveils Qian's current hollow life and her persistence in seeking personal liberation when she is remembering the first love.

But if public pressure on Qian no longer comes from the Communist Party or the government as in the first two parts of the story, in this third part public intervention develops from Qian's friends and family. Lin Jie convinces a reluctant Qian to consider marriage by going on a blind date with Wei Yingqiu, who fits into the caring and reliable husband type. Moreover, Qian faces pressure from her mother, who makes her first appearance at this point of the film and convinces Qian to marry.

When Qian submits to this public expectation and finally marries Wei, the marriage lacks the kind of private passion that Qian experienced with Meng. To make up for the mistake and its consequenc-

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es from the second love incident, Qian needs a decent husband and family to save her from a tainted reputation as well as to improve her financial and social standing. Qian quickly marries Wei to reach a peace pact with external reality. They marry for the sake of marriage as an institutionalized social idea. Their marriage seems to be happy because it has all the signs of happiness based on practical calculation and rational measurement.

The focus on family seems at first to be a return to a more traditional notion of the public after the socialist orientation of the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, there is an important modernizing shift in family structure. The extreme mobility of late twentieth-century Chinese society attenuates extended family networks, placing emotional focus on the nuclear family. Qian's life has been full of moves for school and work, and this movement continues in the marriage. Wei is content with Qian because she does not mind the fact that he works out of town the entire year except for a twenty-day vacation. The long-distance marriage emancipates her from the conventional role of wife and mother, allowing her thereby to still maintain the freedom of her private self. Later on, the prospect of a job shift to Tibet allows Qian to contemplate a gradual separation and divorce from Wei due to this move. The reality of distant moves plays a large role in determining the structure of personal relationships in the film, both attenuating and intensifying them as the focus of life revolves around individuals' decisions of mobility.

At the same time, the mobility of Chinese society increases isolation and places greater demands on the couple relationship in the same manner as in the West. While the marriage functions properly as a public social institution, there is something missing for Qian on the private level, and this deficiency remains a problem. She likes Wei in the beginning, but the affection never develops into love. The first date of the two also predicts the potential conflict in their personalities and world views. When Wei suggests that they follow the regular dating routine by boating or walking in a flower garden, Qian in return makes an untimely proposal—she wants to have ice cream in late autumn. Wei's meticulous, predictable temperament conflicts with Qian's adventurous and intensive way of living. Qian compromises with the external reality by entering a marriage that does not awaken her private passion. But the numbness and thus lack of pain indicate a lack of true happiness. The feigned happiness of the marriage recalls the culture of narcissism that Lasch discusses, in which the happiness is fake because the pain has been eliminated (*Culture of Narcissism* 187-89).

Qian marries in order to establish a stable public life within the family rather than through the commitment to socialism, but her at-

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tempt to move back to a public meaning for her life is a failure until she attempts to integrate a private with a public meaning. The precarious balance is easily broken right after Wei permanently settles down in Beijing and they have to be husband and wife every day. More conflicts emerge and fail to be resolved in this loveless marriage. The husband tries hard to improve the household, to make plans for the family's future, and even to shoulder the wife's domestic housework; while the wife does not show the least care about the family, even the son. Most of the time, she is silent. They never even fight or quarrel, which implies a severe detachment and indifference. The lack of pain corresponds to the lack of love and passion in her marriage.

Qian's yearning for private passion is embodied in the figure of Meng in this part of the film, who returns in two scenes. In one scene, Qian thinks that she sees Meng while she is shopping with Wei. Clearly attracted by the thought of seeing Meng again, she immediately leaves Wei behind to follow the figure of Meng, but she loses sight of him. In another scene, after she has separated from Wei, she runs into Meng and they sit down to talk in a restaurant. However, on hearing that he is divorced and would like to rekindle their romance, she turns away from him and flees. While Qian romanticizes the figure of Meng as an idealized image of a private passion during her marriage, it seems that the thought of a marriage with Meng dispels from her the idea of realizing this idealized love once he is divorced and available to her. Meng becomes unattractive to her because the intimacy of sharing the secret passion only between them is gone and lost. This chance encounter suddenly enables her to realize that her persistence in seeking a passionate love that must be non-public has been destroying her marriage. In fact, this incident prompts Qian to ponder how to develop passion in her existing marriage to Wei, as she begins to wander around the city, visiting places she had been with Wei and perhaps seeking to find him.

## Teeth of Love

In the final scenes between Wei and Qian, they seek to develop private passion in their relationship through experiences of pain, echoing the scenes with He and the brick at the start of the film. Both Wei and Qian confess that they would forget each other quickly once they separate. After noting that they have never scolded or hit each other during their marriage, they begin to slap each other in order to trigger some kind of emotion through the pain, but do not succeed. In a move that could remind the audience of He's injuring of his foot with the brick in the

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first story, the meticulous and conventional husband surprisingly pulls out one of his canine teeth with pliers. Again, this self-inflicted pain, like the brick on He's foot, expresses an extremely strong passion and frustration, soliciting Qian's reciprocation of his passion and motivating her to experience the same pain of a tooth pulling. With blood flowing from his mouth, he slowly delivers the tooth to her and says, "don't you like this tooth? It's my gift for memory. Only pain can help me to remember you." This outsized tooth once received Qian's approval for its cuteness at their wedding day. The scene of tooth pulling is the climax of the film, echoing the title *Teeth of Love* and thrilling the audience with its shocking metaphor of blood and pain that contrast with the previous chilly calm and deathly desolation in the marriage. One could easily conclude that Wei loves Qian and this bloody self-sacrifice proves his profound love. When he pulls the tooth, he attempts to demonstrate his love through the pain as a gift that embodies his frustrated passion. She reacts by having her own canine tooth pulled without anesthetic to recover the private meaning. This final scene of the film is open-ended, in that it is not clear whether this clinically staged self-infliction of pain can rekindle a private passion or can only provide a simulacrum of such passion. Yet, there is an affirmation of Qian's agency in this last scene, in which she takes control of pain and accepts its importance as a sign of love that is crucial for reconciling the private with the public. The same pain of tooth pulling can attain new meanings based on the symbolic relationships it sets up. A key to the symbolic meaning is the way in which the pain is self-inflicted and thus, in the final teeth pulling scenes, a form of self-expression. But the performative aspect of the pain also means that it can no longer be held to be an unambiguous expression of love. By contrast, there is no ambiguity in the first part of the film when Qian sees He's self-inflicted pain with the brick or when she embraces such pain in the abortion in the second part. As a willful act, self-inflicted pain reveals itself by the end of the film to be a sign whose meaning can change based on context and interpretation.

### The Private Pain that Revises the Public: From State to Nuclear Family

The contradiction between Qian's self-exploration and the different external realities and problems creates a series of experiences of pain in the film. The absence of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution actually highlight their invisible influence upon the filmic narrative and the heroine's tragedy. Mao's socialist orthodoxy permeates the film

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through the technique of using a red-colored fade in and fade out as the transition from each love-pain segment to the next. The redness of the whole screen introduces the teenager Qian in 1977, the glorious socialist past when the residue of Mao's craze was still burning. This red start can be interpreted as a representative color of socialist passion. Later the scarlet editing also changes its meaning, with the color connoting youthful love, death, bodily pain, and eventually blood from abortion and tooth pulling. The youths were educated to stick with gender segregation and opposition. Adults are secretly and publicly regulated in their interpersonal relationships, so abortion and adultery are not personal matters but ethical crimes that are to be tabooed and eliminated. In the third story, although the socialist grand narrative is waning, the conventions and norms in culture take the primary role of instructing an individual's private matters, including marriage. The private sphere continues to be interrogated and regulated. It is impossible to live freely in any of the situations that Qian experiences. She is harshly punished for her subversion in challenging the authorities. Meanwhile, the aforementioned transformative events of pain release bodily pain from its natural domain of the tangible body to become a sign, an intangible public idea of love in which pain is not inflicted with a weapon but expresses a passion. The phenomenon of pain, in this way, is able to move out of the interiority of a single person and into the world, but not in Scarry's sense of the transformation of the world through work (169). Rather, pain becomes communicable as an expression of emotion.

The film itself serves as a strong defense for pain in this private sense. The back pain breaks the initial socialist simulacrum of the first story, but then the pain becomes itself the basis for Qian's love in the second story. By the third story, it is not clear whether the self-inflicted pain can lead to an intimate relationship within the marriage or has become itself a simulacrum of love rather than an index of true love. It is the pain that awakens, reminds, and invites Qian, as well as the audience, to see the real problems and deep realities, to experience humanity, and eventually to arrive at an alternative perspective or stance toward dominant discourses. The negative feelings humanize Qian and the male characters. He's contingent death, Meng's guilt and his impulse to cut his wrist with the broken glass after tossing away the aborted fetus, and Wei's self-abusive frustration when he pulls out the tooth show the saddest and most oppressive moments for the men: vulnerable but also very human. To live with pain demonstrates a very necessary vigilant stance, distancing, questioning, and challenging any simple, orthodox official narrative about history, social norms, and individual existence. In the end, Qian actively seeks pain in a world of inertia and

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detachment, instead of resorting to pleasure or escapism. She chooses to confront and to remember the painful experience, which is an assertion of a painful but fulfilling existence, rendering meaninglessness meaningful.

This meaning of pain changes in the course of the film. The pain in the back signifies an invisible wound that constantly reminds Qian of the blow that was necessary to break through the socialist past, the true love that, under the social circumstances, could only express itself through violence. Both He and Wei inflict pain on themselves due to their frustration with Qian. However, their frustrations differ. He's actions undermine the socialist-oriented threat of violence, turning it into his own expression of love through self-inflicted pain. Wei's frustration stems from Qian's and his own inability to explicitly experience passion and desire, and the self-inflicted pain becomes an attempt to overcome indifference and this inability to feel. If pain in the first story reveals the opposition between a socialist morality and a private passion, in the third story Wei's self-inflicted pain functions as an attempt to demonstrate private passion within the context of marriage. The pain of abortion, invisible but deep down in the womb, represents the private culmination of a passionate love that expresses itself in an embracing of pain but is quickly forced to terminate. The pain of pulling teeth is briefer but most intolerably sharp and concentrated. The self-execution of such a pain is a desperate effort to resist forgetting but also signifies an extreme yearning for love and connection. In contrast to He's and Wei's emotionally charged self-inflicted wounds that can be read as a true expression of passion, Qian's staging of her pain, both the abortion scene and the tooth extraction in the dentist's chair, is rational and planned. Such a willful use of pain undermines the notion of pain as a true expression of passion. Instead, self-inflicted pain becomes a performative act whose symbolic meaning is ambiguous. Although seemingly in the most control in these situations, Qian has always been the passive one who is waiting to be awakened by the three men and reacts, adjusts, and compromises with different historical times.

The integration of public belief and bodily pain reveals a profound connection or more precisely contradiction between the public and the private. The public takes different forms in different historical times: the socialist public sublimation in the first story, the continued socialist regulatory policing of everyday affairs in the second story, and the social convention that utilizes and normalizes marriage and family relationships in the third story. The unresolvable tension between public and private structures the ambiguity of the filmic narrative as well as its image of pain. The public official logic constantly intervenes and

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interrupts private matters while the private passion as a form of pain questions, resists, undermines, and revises the defining feature of the public.

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# In a Daughter's Voice: Life Writing as an Act of Care in Gwenaëlle Aubry's *Personne* and Martine de Rabaudy's *Électrochocs*

Adrienne Angelo

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## Introduction

In recent years, care ethics has gained significant attention in French literary studies, reflecting a broader engagement with pressing global challenges such as geopolitical conflicts, environmental crises, public health, and social justice. Drawing on the work of scholars and critics such as Alexandre Gefen, Pascale Molinier, Sandra Laugier, Sophie Bourgault, Julie Perreault, Fabienne Brugère, and Marie Garrau, to name just a few, this “care (re)turn”—to borrow the title of a 2020 special issue of the *Australian Journal of French Studies* on the topic—is evident across philosophical, sociological, and feminist perspectives.<sup>1</sup> While much of this discourse addresses care on systemic and societal levels, this article investigates a more intimate dimension of care ethics through the life-writing narratives of Gwenaëlle Aubry's *Personne* (*Nobody*) (2009) and Martine de Rabaudy's *Électrochocs* (*Electroshocks*) (2012). These works exemplify life writing as a form of care work, revealing how gender shapes caregiving practices and narrative authority, particularly in the context of mental illness and family dynamics. Through a composite narrative structure that alternates between past and present, and between patient and caregiver, both texts demonstrate how life writing can serve as a testimony to challenging care experiences and a means of reparative memory work. The writer-daughter navigates her identity through the lens of her parent's illness, reflecting on how the instability and absence caused by mental health challenges have informed her perceptions of family, memory, and belonging. This process underscores how memories of caregiving, loss, and vulnerability become integral to her own life story, positioning her self-narrative as intertwined with the complexities of her parent's experience. Through their dual roles as autobiographers and caregivers,

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Aubry and Rabaudy reveal how life writing—often criticized as introspective or narcissistic—can embody a unique mode of empathy and ethical attention to others' suffering.

While acts of care in this context may not necessarily result in healing or resolution, they do signify a commitment to respecting the autonomy and dignity of the other. As defined by Sandra Laugier, care is an ethical response situated in everyday life; it emphasizes practical actions attuned to the specific needs of others: “[. . .] le care propose de ramener l'éthique au niveau [. . .] de la vie quotidienne. Il est une réponse pratique à des besoins spécifiques qui sont toujours ceux d'autres” (“[. . .] care proposes to bring ethics back to the level [. . .] of daily life. It is a practical response to specific needs which are always those of others”; my trans; 32). Laugier's emphasis on care as oriented toward others' experiences serves to remind us that writing, too, can be a reparative act, aiming to acknowledge and protect the dignity of the vulnerable and the marginalized. This framework redirects attention toward those who are often neglected in everyday life: the elderly, the disabled, and the ill. The practice of care traverses a dual valence between action (the provision of care and assistance) and perception (a mindfulness of others' needs). In all cases, however, it entails “une redirection de l'attention vers ce qui est habituellement négligé” (“a redirection of attention to what is usually neglected”; my trans; Pachoud 154).

Writing about someone who can no longer respond necessarily raises questions about the rights of the deceased, especially when that individual faced challenges during their lifetime that might shape how they are remembered. Such a task compels us to ask: Whose life, and which aspects of it, are deemed worth remembering? How should one write about oneself while inevitably implicating others—especially those who have died and cannot respond? Or, as G. Thomas Couser asks, “Where does the right to express and represent oneself begin to infringe on another's right to privacy? How shall desires of the self be weighed against the demands of the other [. . .] Are auto/biographers obliged to ‘do good’—or at least do no harm—to those they represent?” (x-xi). At the same time, however, such care writing can serve as a reparative gesture—one that not only honors the memory of the other but also seeks to address and give voice to their experiences, which might otherwise remain unacknowledged.

By bringing together these two perspectives, this article considers how these texts respect the dignity of the deceased and create a space for empathetic understanding (Gefen, “Le projet thérapeutique” 420). How might it be conceivable for life writing to make reparations to, or to offer care for, a vulnerable family member who has lived in the

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shadow of the stigma of a mental illness? In what ways does the exercise of life writing allow the writer to come to the act of writing as a caregiver, thus seizing on an ethical opportunity to answer a call of the otherwise silenced patient/parent? Aubry's and Rabaudy's respective texts work through the complexities of their own inheritance: for Aubry, her father bequeaths to her (and the reader) his life story and first-person account of his illness; for Rabaudy, the memoir form grants a metaphoric surrogate memory to her mother who has lost her identity. The process of life writing enables these daughters to recuperate the shame and silence that their parents endured as they explored their selfhood. In doing so, they facilitate a degree of wholeness for their multigenerational family, which has been fractured by the stigma of mental illness.

Before turning to these two examples in depth, it is also important to note that women's writing has long been apt to adopt modes of life writing in order to anchor woman's self to others. In her introduction to *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction*, Janice Morgan notes that "female selfhood is far more concerned with various levels and intensities of connection *to* (rather than separation *from*) significant others" (7–8). This interconnectedness between the self and other suggests that an exploration of one's memories in this domain is inextricably linked to the history and memories of others who have lived alongside (or even prior to) the author. Whether as a family memoir, in which, as Paul John Eakin attests, "the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance to or more important than the life of the reporting self" (85), or as a filiation narrative, studied extensively by Laurent Demanze and Dominique Viart, the relational aspect of this dimension of autobiography foregrounds questions of heritage and transmission.<sup>2</sup> Writing alongside and connecting to (past) others can thus be read as a care-giving gesture. Despite the quest for self-knowledge (for the writer-narrator) that writing about one's past entails, through an investigation of ancestry and amputated transmission, the space of self-writing also creates a dialogic encounter between self and other.

### Writing a Father's Legacy

In addition to her philosophical essays, Gwenaëlle Aubry has also written a number of novels invested in acts of care in which the themes of solitude, isolation, and marginalization humanize the experience of unseen and unheard others. The characters she develops in fact align with those identified by Alexandre Gefen in the context of re-

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parative literary texts: “les moi blessés, désinscrits; les communautés manquantes, asservies, aveuglées, trouées; l’altérité, innommée, abandonnée; l’histoire trouée, occultée, banalisée; les corps souffrants, abandonnés, mourants; les drames et les êtres sans langage ni représentation” (“wounded selves, erased; missing communities, enslaved, blinded, riddled; otherness, nameless, abandoned; history punctured, concealed, trivialized; suffering bodies, abandoned, dying; dramas and beings without language or representation”; my trans; “Le projet thérapeutique” 421). Having been awarded the Prix Fémina in 2009, *Personne* remains Aubry’s most critically considered work to date. Although categorized as a novel, the text’s compelling pull toward life writing allows us to consider the fusional nature of writing the self. Specifically, given the allotment of textual space granted to her father’s voice and filtered by the daughter, it might be more accurate to consider *Personne* as a composite form of life writing—a filiation narrative that writes over and alongside a bequeathed memoir the narrator (and author) finds among her father’s belongings after his death.<sup>3</sup> In this text, Aubry assumes a dual role as family archivist and paternal scribe and thus faces two possible types of source material for embarking on the project of life writing. The first includes lists, notes, and photographs as one might find in the archives. The second is the father’s own unfinished autobiographical manuscript *Le Mouton noir mélancolique* (*The Melancholic Black Sheep*) discovered by the narrator with an unaddressed notation: “à romancer” (“to be turned into a story”; my trans; 16). The text’s fictional label may thus be considered Aubry’s nod to honoring her father’s posthumous call to *romancer* (or fictionalize) his life story. While the narrator’s identity is itself never explicitly revealed, two markers are offered that allow readers to make a link between the narrator and the author. These include her affirmation of lineage as the daughter of François-Xavier Aubry as well as references to her other, verifiable writings and autocitation of these works.

Given the emphasis placed on life writing in this text, however, the choice of title is a curious one; “nobody” reflects her father’s nihilistic notion of self and his emptiness and exclusion that speaks to his experience of living with bipolar disorder and the estranging effects that his illness had on those around him for whom he did not exist. The title’s first appearance in the text—“Personne ne nommait sa maladie” (“Nobody named his illness”; my trans; 29)—couches illness as a taboo subject, one that has no part in the bourgeois family and social stratum of which he (and the narrator) are nonetheless a part. As a derivative of *persona*, however, *personne* also refers to the idea of masking or of assuming other identities, and this, too plays an important role in the work for naming the numerous others who haunt her father’s wounded

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mind and for fleshing out the various social masks he wore throughout his life—personally and professionally—all the while struggling to articulate his own identity.

For Aubry, the encyclopedic structure of *Personne*, with chapter titles ranging from A (Antonin Artaud) to Z (Zelig), provides a means of organizing the chaotic legacy of her father's mental illness and her own fragmented memories. This structure does not impose a conventional narrative coherence; rather, it offers a loose framework that allows the author to approach painful recollections with a therapeutic, almost playful, detachment. By structuring her text in this way, Aubry enacts a form of care for herself as well as for her father's memory, striking a balance between the need for order and a respect for the disorder inherent in his experience. The structural order becomes an act of care, enabling her to revisit traumatic memories within a controlled framework, creating a space where difficult experiences can be explored without being overwhelming. Through this organizational choice, Aubry's writing performs a delicate act of care that allows for the expression and containment of grief and memory, one that respects the fragmented nature of her father's life while providing her with a means of processing and honoring it (Aubry, "La trace" 83). The choice of chapter titles serves to guide their alternating definitions of his fractured identity: how he sees himself and how she remembers him.

Véronique Montémont provides a careful study of several autobiographical works in contemporary French literature which are constructed through alphabetization—a modality of ordering (and sometimes disordering) that reflects the increasingly fragmentary nature of life writing projects. Alphabetic autobiographies, Montémont notes, offer "une façon de répondre à un impératif autobiographique perçu comme nécessaire et impossible tout à la fois" ("a way of responding to an autobiographical imperative perceived as both necessary and impossible at the same time"; my trans; 295). Rather than simple word play, the alphabet provides a way to write outside of the impasse or blockages that writing about self and others often entails (Montémont 306). In the case of *Personne*, as Montémont writes, the objective nature of the alphabetic structure "dans sa neutralité, était pour l'auteur un moyen d'accomplir la transformation apaisée du *Mouton noir mélancolique*" ("in its neutrality, was, for the author, a means of accomplishing the quieted transformation of *The Melancholic Black Sheep*"; my trans; 301). Beyond the daughter's curational self-care, however, it is important to consider the organizational task imparted to the reader in reading this singular experience of living with a mental illness. Montémont rightly notes that "L'alphabet fait du lecteur un partenaire de choix, à qui est laissé le soin de recomposer le tableau, chronologique et thé-

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matique, du récit d'une vie" ("The alphabet makes the reader a partner of choice, leaving them the task of recomposing the tableau, chronological and thematic, of the story of a life"; my trans; 306). The construction of the text thus generates a textual opening between author and reader that enacts empathy as the reader also takes part in piecing together the fragments of a fractured self.<sup>4</sup> This structure—organized alphabetically rather than chronologically—allows readers to navigate the book non-linearly, encouraging them to encounter the narrative in fragments rather than as a unified whole. This arrangement reinforces the experience of fragmentation and instability that defines the father's identity and the author-daughter's relationship to his memory. By allowing readers to open the text at any letter, Aubry further reflects the fractured, non-coherent nature of memory and mental illness, prompting the reader to actively participate in reconstructing meaning from disparate parts. This alphabetical order is crucial to the narrative structure because it provides a framework without imposing a traditional linear progression. It reflects the tension between part and whole, capturing how Aubry's memories of her father are both individual moments and pieces of a larger, complex portrait. In this way, the text's organization becomes a means of fostering empathetic engagement, as readers, too, experience the fragmented, non-linear process of remembering, understanding, and caring for a person whose life resists easy coherence.

What follows in the narrative plays out as a series of recollections of memories of the father addressing the issue of his mental illness, the gradual progression of which overlaps key moments in the narrator's life. That this example limns a portrait of a flawed, isolated, excluded (and now deceased) paternal figure, suggests that the first-person female narrator comes to occupy the sole position of authority and it is she whose memories provide the basis of narrative, and it is her choice to construct and to present the work as she does. For example, the author opens the work, in the chapter "Antonin Artaud" with biographical information about Artaud—notably his internment at various psychiatric institutions—as well as excerpts from his personal correspondence—in particular a letter, dated December 9, 1945—one day before her father's birth, she specifies. This information, along with the content of this expository chapter, addresses documentary aspects akin to biography and the nexus between madness and literary creation. This leads to the discovery that the author's father, at the time of his demise, was in the process of composing an autobiographical manuscript.

The first-person voice in this work is thus duplicated and divided between the "I" of the father's autobiography and the "I" of the daugh-

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ter's reworking of his autobiography, to which she adds her own memories and recollections of their parallel lives and estrangement (i.e., her father's periods of institutionalization and living with various people who were strangers to her). This narrative duality creates a tension that mirrors the complexities inherent in self-representation and responsibility toward others in the context of autobiographical writing. The clouded memories of the past and the instability of her childhood mirror the experiences of her father, whose inexplicable actions and absent or sporadic parenting (e.g., abandoning his children without explanation, returning unexpectedly and treating them to ice cream cones and pony rides in the park) are the result of his late-life diagnosis of bipolar disorder. The shifting narrative voice speaks to the ethical dimensions of autobiography, wherein the "I" of the father is not just his self-representation but also the daughter's act of memory and interpretation. This recursive process of reworking the father's story is not only an exploration of her own identity but also an ethical engagement with the representation of someone who can no longer articulate his own life narrative.

Aubry's text embodies a form of ethical self-revelation, one that is intimately intertwined with the responsibility of portraying the other—particularly someone so vulnerable and silenced by a mental illness. The daughter's dual role as the author of her own story and the editor of her father's narrative prompts the question of what it means to represent another person's life, particularly when that person's memories are fragmented or obscured by a mental illness. Aubry's consistent questioning of her recollections, exemplified in phrases like "I'm not sure" or "I forgot," underscores the challenges encountered when attempting to piece together a fractured memory. This hesitation and the ambiguity in the daughter's voice reflect the complex responsibilities involved in autobiographical writing, especially when the lives of others—particularly those silenced by mental health issues—are at stake. By exploring this dual voice and the responsibility it entails, we can deepen our understanding of autobiography as a personal journey and a collective act of care, where the boundaries between self and other are not clearly delineated. In this way, Aubry's text calls attention to the ethics of autobiographical writing, emphasizing that the author's responsibility to the other is not merely an afterthought but a central component of the narrative.

To give just one example of how the father's mental illness filters into the daughter's imagination, we will recall the memory of the narrator's discovery of the Napoléon du grand Nord (Napoleon of the Far North) figure. Following the dispersal of her father's ashes, the narrator experiences an overwhelming desire to establish a connection with

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him. She searches his name on Google and comes across the obituary of another François-Xavier Aubry (a celebrated nineteenth-century French Canadian trader and pioneer) who died a hero but has long been forgotten by historians. For the narrator there is an obvious link between this figure of North American legend and her father, especially regarding legacy—how others will remember (or forget) him. This memory carries over to another anecdote that recounts a family gathering on the first Christmas following his death. Recalling how her father was shunned by his family and had spent numerous previous holidays in shelters or on the streets living with homeless people, the narrator breaks from bourgeois decorum in a moment of solidarity with her father, the black sheep of the family, as she reclaims her mourning and his madness:

J'ai prononcé son nom à haute voix, François-Xavier Aubry, le Napoléon du Grand Nord. [Ils] m'ont crue folle, peut-être, ou maligne [. . .] pour les mettre mal à l'aise, pour les déranger, mais le deuil n'est pas folie ni la fidélité, les fous sont ceux qui oublient et se refusent à nommer, et font toujours, comme si de rien n'était . . . (119–20).

I said his name out loud, François-Xavier Aubry, the Napoleon of the Great North. [. . .] They thought I was crazy, perhaps, or malicious [. . .] to make them uncomfortable, to disturb them, but grief is neither madness nor disloyalty, the mad are those who forget and refuse to name, and always act as if nothing had happened . . . (my trans).

The unrealized curative potential of Aubry's father's story, *The Melancholic Black Sheep*, an autopathography of mental illness that he wrote to "rejoindre en lui celui que la maladie avait laissé intact" ("unite within him that which the illness had left intact"; my trans; 18) develops as an implicit complementary imperative to re-write his life. That mental illness serves as a backdrop to Aubry's textual tribute to her father suggests that this life-writing project allows for an overlap between father and daughter and between patient and autobiographical care giver. As a daughter processing the intimate, complex realities of her father's life and legacy and an autobiographical writer engaging with his mental illness, Aubry performs a dual act of care. This overlap becomes a space where their fragmented identities—his as a patient and hers as a grieving daughter—are reconstructed, allowing each to emerge in relation to the other. By weaving his words and her memories into a cohesive narrative, Aubry resists the societal erasure often

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experienced by those living with mental illness. Her textual tribute gives her father a form of permanence and dignity that contrasts with the instability and stigma he endured during his life. At the same time, this project allows her to grapple with the weight of inheritance—both the familial legacy of mental illness and the ethical burden of representing it truthfully yet compassionately. Through this overlap, Aubry redefines the boundaries between self and other, suggesting that caregiving is not confined to the physical realm but extends into the symbolic and textual. Writing becomes a site of encounter where the father's fragmented identity is honored and where the daughter finds a means of healing her own wounds, creating a shared space that bridges their individual experiences of suffering and love. This dynamic underscores the relational nature of autobiographical care, where the act of narrating another's story also facilitates the narrator's self-repair and continuity.

Faced with her father's death and the revelations of his wounded psyche that he recounts in his manuscript, she turns to writing as a way of processing grief and restoring his voice. She writes that “il fallait, d'une façon ou une autre, faire entendre ce texte, en extraire ce qui, en lui, sonnait ou résonnait plus fort, construire autour de lui une chambre d'échos [. . .]” (“it was necessary, in one way or another, to make this text heard, to extract from it what, within it, sounded or resonated louder, to build an echo chamber around it [. . .]”; my trans; “La trace” 84). The textual echo chamber allows for a mutual exchange of dialogue, and this renders possible the impossible: Aubry imagines a reversal of time and of their respective familial roles wherein she can protect and care for him: “[. . .] je voudrais . . . abolir le double espace de nos vies décalées, trouver dans sa mort cela qui annule le temps, passer à travers le mort pour retrouver l'enfant, rejoindre cet enfant au regard désespérant confiant, l'accompagner, le protéger” ([. . .] “I want to [. . .] abolish the double space of our out-of-sync lives, find in his death that which cancels time, pass through death to find the child, join that child with the desperately hopeful gaze, accompany them, protect them”; my trans; *Personne* 60).

Aubry's textual tribute confronts this ethical challenge head-on by integrating her father's own voice—through his manuscript—into her narrative. By doing so, she does not merely speak for him but engages in a dialogic act that preserves the integrity of his self-representation while also allowing space for her subjective experience as his daughter. This balancing act underscores the complexity of writing for and about the deceased: it is both an act of care and a potential act of appropriation. Aubry seems acutely aware of this risk. By structuring the text in a way that respects the disorder inherent in her father's mental illness

while also providing a framework for her grief, Aubry navigates the ethical terrain of representing the other without erasing their agency. The interplay between the “I” of the father and the “I” of the daughter creates a shared narrative space that complicates the boundaries between self and other, life and death, and memory and imagination.

## Reclaiming a Mother’s Memory

In 2011, four years after her father’s death and eight years after her mother’s passing, journalist Martine de Ribauby began writing her autobiography, *Électrochocs*, partly as a testimony to surviving what she describes as an unlivable childhood, shaped by the deep emotional and psychological wounds inflicted by caring for her mentally ill mother—wounds that would become central to her journey of healing and reflection. Such retrospective textual accounts of traumatic or stolen childhoods demonstrate the control and safety furnished by life writing as akin to resilience, a concept popularized in France by neuropsychiatrist and psychoanalyst Boris Cyrulnik. Building on attachment theory and psychoanalysis, Cyrulnik developed the concept of resilience to address not only surviving trauma but transforming it through narrative reconstruction. This framework gained particular resonance in France, where psychoanalytic approaches to trauma have historically dominated therapeutic discourse. This growing focus on resilience reflects broader societal shifts: the rise of trauma-informed approaches to mental health, increasing acceptance of discussing personal struggles publicly, and a move away from purely deficit-based models of trauma toward understanding how individuals actively navigate and potentially grow from difficult experiences.

Life writing, as exemplified by Ribauby’s work, embodies this resilient process by allowing the author to reconstruct and make meaning from difficult experiences while maintaining control over her narrative—a particularly significant act for those whose early lives were marked by unpredictability, instability, and powerlessness. While Ribauby concludes by articulating the liberating catharsis that penning this memoir provides, we should also consider the care taken to restore the wounded family bonds, and in particular the figure of her suffering mother, in this life account. Speaking alternatively from her position as caregiver (for her mother, for her father, and in the family) and as a patient (in psychoanalysis), Ribauby navigates her articulations and understandings of past-versus-present self to include her ambivalent relationship with her mother, the revelation of family secrets, and her father’s experience as a prisoner of war of which her

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family never spoke. As part of the author-daughter's healing, empathy toward her mother emerges in the text as Rabaudy denounces the dehumanizing medical practices and living conditions of care facilities and comes to understand her mother's suffering.

Moreover, as part of a literature of care, Rabaudy champions the role that bibliotherapy—the therapeutic use of literature to support mental health and personal growth—has played in her healing. This practice resonates with other contemporary French autobiographical works that explore reading as healing, such as Régine Detambel's *Les Livres prennent soin de nous (Books Take Care of Us)* (2015). For Rabaudy, reading provided both escape and understanding during her childhood, allowing her to find meaning in her experiences through literary encounters. As evident in her intercitational practices in writing this work, including direct quotations from doctors and psychiatrists (whose definitions, diagnoses, and clinical experiences in treating mental illnesses equip her with the tools necessary to understand her mother's condition), as well as well-known writers who themselves grappled with mental illness (e.g., Virginia Woolf, Louis Althusser, Sylvia Plath), those who were affected by the illness of a family member (e.g., Camus, Duras) and French women writers who have written about fraught mother-daughter relations (e.g., Colette, Ernaux), Rabaudy's memoir positions itself within a broader literary landscape intertwining mental illness, family trauma, and maternal relationships. Through this intertextual dialogue, she creates a polyphonic narrative that legitimizes her life experience while contextualizing her mother's illness within a varied cultural and medical framework. The incorporation of these varied voices also serves a therapeutic function akin to scriptotherapy—the practice of writing as healing as articulated by Suzette A. Henke in her seminal work *Shattered Subjects* (1999)—where the act of weaving together multiple perspectives allows the author to process her trauma while situating her personal experience within a broader community of writers and thinkers who have confronted similar challenges.

Rabaudy struggles to negotiate her fluctuating feelings of guilt and shame that living with her mother stirs. She describes the void that her mother's affective absence causes: “[. . .] sans être orpheline, j'avais été privée de mère” (“[. . .] without being an orphan, I was deprived of a mother”; my trans; 139). However it is clear that while her mother is a pathologized subject, Rabaudy does not hold her fully accountable for her erratic actions. Rather, throughout the work, PMD, known today as bi-polar disorder, is personified to reflect the menacing and active role this illness plays in destroying her mother's identity and family relationships. It is described alternatively as the fifth member of the family, an animal, a tyrant, a devil, and a cannibal. She evokes

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her mother's erratic mood swings, ranging from anger and violence to phases of complete withdrawal, both of which, for different reasons, terrified her. After one particularly frightening ordeal when the author is ten years old—after her mother attempts to strangle her—Rabaudy is sent to live in a boarding school. However, not fully aware of the reasons why she is separated from her family, she internalizes a sense of guilt for being responsible for her mother's manic episodes.

Within the family, Rabaudy finds that she is the only person able to offer appropriate care for her mother; or rather, she is called to act as caretaker and assumes this responsibility to the detriment of her own well-being. Her father lives in denial about his wife's condition and forbids the word "psychosis" from entering discussion, preferring to use a more socially polite term: "depression." He refuses to take his wife to treatment, claiming that he knows more than the medical staff. Her brother, whom her father chooses to protect from having to act as caregiver, moves away as soon as he is able to do so. For Rabaudy, when her mother is later admitted to a longer-stay facility, caregiving becomes a routine part of her day as she visits her, feeds her, bathes her, and for the first time talks to her—even if her mother does not (and cannot) respond. Talking to her aphasic mother helps Rabaudy to reconstruct for both of them the happier memories that they shared together: "L'accumulation des électrochocs, responsables en partie de la dissolution de sa mémoire, m'engagea à tenter une partielle reconstruction de nos souvenirs ensemble, en sélectionnant les seules séquences agréables" ("The numerous electroshocks, which had taken a toll on her memory, inspired me to attempt a partial reconstruction of our shared memories, choosing to remember only the positive experiences"; my trans; 139). She is surprised to find that she is able to recall so many peaceful events: afternoons spent with her mother listening to the radio, a vacation she spent alone with her mother in Dinard, a trip to Denmark that her father's company organized: "À ces évocations, elle réagissait avec un pâle sourire aussitôt éteint et refermait les paupières [. . .]. Je nourrissais l'espoir d'avoir comblé une infime partie de son abîme mental" ("Each time I mentioned these things, she would offer a weak smile before closing her eyes [. . .]. I clung to the hope that I was somehow easing her mental anguish"; my trans; 140).

Rabaudy's evolution from guilty and ashamed child to a compassionate adult agent of care leads to a new awareness about mental health and standards of patient treatment. With new eyes, she sees the living conditions in these care facilities (described as a chaotic jungle) and perceives a degree of harm that is caused by the available medical treatments in the name of curing rather than caring for patients. The author characterizes the hospital as having an atmosphere reminiscent

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of a prison and worries that this environment will harm rather than heal her mother. As she observes the interactions between medical staff and patients (and notes that doctors hardly ever see their patients), she perceives the disorganization and staffing issues and the carelessness with which they provide care to patients; importantly, she learns to speak to her mother in a way that humanizes rather than infantilizes her: “Maintenant que je l’avais en charge, je m’interdisais de reproduire ce que j’avais vu pratiquer et qui me choquait, l’infantilisation du malade par les bien-portants. Cette manière de parler de lui devant lui, comme s’il était absent ou transformé en meuble” (“Now that I was her caretaker, I vowed to avoid the patronizing attitude I’d seen others exhibit toward the sick. I would not treat her like a child or speak about her as if she wasn’t in the room”; my trans; 116–17).

Rabaudy recalls on numerous occasions the physical damage that treatment causes her mother. With old age, her mother’s memory lapses grow increasingly more frequent, most probably induced by her long-term electroshock therapy and her high doses of medication, one of which, lithium, began destroying her mother’s kidneys (in addition to stripping her mother of any and all emotions). However, stopping the lithium treatments means that her mother will have to succumb to further ECT sessions:

On la regonflait à la cadence maximale de trois électrochocs hebdomadaires comme pour une batterie de voiture, mais qui était trop usagée pour tenir la charge. D’admission en admission, elle paraissait plus apeurée, plus résignée, plus vulnérable. Hantée par son regard d’animal abandonné à la SPA, je la quittais chaque fois la mort dans l’âme, les larmes aux yeux, la peur au ventre. (119-20)

She was being subjected to a grueling regimen of three electroshock treatments per week, like trying to jump-start a car with a dying battery. Each time she was admitted, she seemed more frightened, more resigned, and more fragile. Her sad, lost eyes haunted me, and I would leave feeling devastated, tearful, and afraid. (my trans)

Beyond the lessons in interpersonal communication that caregiving provides, empathy also finds expression when the author adapts her mother’s point of view as a way to explain how her mother’s experience is silenced and misunderstood, which further isolates her from her family. Specifically, she sees how mentally ill patients are often shunned for being different and “difficult” and wrongfully accused of

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egocentrism. Her mother's family, for example, considers her spoiled and lazy. Rabaudy's act of narrating her mother's life—and her own experience within it—can be framed as an extension of her caregiving. Through her narrative, she gives voice to her mother's suffering and brings visibility to the broader systemic and societal failures that exacerbate mental health struggles. This process not only humanizes her mother but also situates Rabaudy as an emotional laborer, who, in reconstructing memories and reflecting on her past, performs a different kind of care: bearing witness to the unspoken and the silenced.

On the occasion of her father's funeral, Rabaudy's childhood guilt surfaces once again as she senses that she inadequately mourns the loss of her last-living parent. Her sentiments complicate traditional notions of care ethics by foregrounding the tension between duty and personal well-being. Her feelings of guilt, shame, and eventual liberation after her parents' deaths underscore the emotional toll of caregiving and the difficulty of navigating cultural expectations placed on daughters. Her evolution from reluctant caregiver to compassionate advocate mirrors the ethical dilemmas of care: balancing responsibility to others with care for oneself. In contrast to her brother, who delivers a eulogy in which he remembers their parents' happy and long marriage and his father's successful career, she can only think about the damage that their mother's illness caused their family.

Rabaudy's memoir illustrates the dual function of life writing: personal healing and generational repair. Her willingness to confront family secrets, from the roots of her mother's psychosis to her father's denial, suggests that life writing serves as a method for breaking cycles of silence and shame that perpetuate trauma. By documenting her mother's struggles and her own caregiving role, Rabaudy seeks to reframe these experiences not as failures but as opportunities for understanding and compassion. Finally, she accepts that her familial difference or estrangement stems from her desire to probe and to unveil the family secrets and shame, the silence of which might be its own contagion in this family's history:

Dans cette famille mutique, je m'étais toujours donné l'impression d'être une grenade dégoupillée qui voulait faire sauter les murs du silence. La mort de ma grand-mère, racine vénéneuse de la psychose de ma mère, la captivité de mon père, les suicides dissimulés. Cette quête de vérité m'avait poussée à ce récit. Ecrire sur soi sous-entendait un abus de pouvoir, s'annexer la vie des autres, vivants et morts. (177)

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I've always felt like an explosive device in my quiet family, yearning to break through the walls of silence. My grandmother's death, the poisonous source of my mother's mental illness, my father's captivity, and the family's hidden suicides—these dark secrets pushed me to write. But I also realized that writing about oneself is a form of control, a way of claiming the lives of others, both living and dead. (my trans)

In this passage, the author's reflections on her writing practices inform us that the gesture of life writing extends beyond stories of selfhood and may be a way to heal and to care for a fractured family. Rabaudy's attention to systemic shortcomings in mental health care—evident in her critiques of electroshock therapy, the infantilization of patients, and institutional neglect—positions her memoir as more than a personal life narrative; it becomes an act of advocacy. By chronicling her observations, she indirectly calls for more compassionate and effective care for mental health patients, highlighting the ethical and emotional dimensions of caregiving beyond the family unit. Rabaudy's ability to empathize with her mother, even as she critiques the societal and medical structures that failed her, underscores the transformative potential of empathy in life writing. By weaving her mother's story into her own, Rabaudy performs an act of radical empathy that resists pathologizing or dehumanizing her mother, instead situating her as biographical subject deserving of dignity and care.

## Conclusion

In *Réparer le monde (Healing the World)*, a title that evokes in part Joan Tranto's founding definition of the ethics of care,<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Gefen notes that literature serves to “réparer nos conditions de victimes, corriger ces traumatismes de la mémoire individuelle ou du tissu social” (“heal the wounds inflicted upon us as victims, and to mend the traumas that have scarred both individual memories and the collective consciousness”; my trans; 11). This empathetic drive in contemporary culture stems from a renewed interest in care ethics in literature and literary criticism, philosophy, social sciences, and medical fields, which allows us to rethink self-other relationships. In this article, we have connected the life-writing projects of two contemporary women writers in France—Gwenaëlle Aubry and Martine de Rabaudy—whose respective narratives address fragile and tumultuous child-parent relationships, mourning, and the largely silenced experience of living with a mental illness. In each case, the author-daughter's life narra-

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tive becomes its own marker of family history, serving as testimony to her parent's experience as patient and her role as caregiver. The act of writing about oneself, as evidenced by these projects, engenders an empathetic textual space that facilitates a reevaluation of the past and the adaptation of perspectives concerning an estranged parent whose life was characterized by illness, vulnerability, and difference.

In *Personne*, the incorporation of citations from her father's autobiography within and alongside that of his daughter's narrative serves to further complicate questions of narrative voice and temporal cohesion. The juxtaposition of these texts, along with the use of the "I" in the father's autobiography and the "I" in the daughter's reinterpretation of his work, creates an opportunity for the narrator to critically examine the lacunae and omissions present in their respective recollections of history. This act of belated textual care serves as a poignant reminder of the responsibility of narrators in addressing these gaps and offering a voice to the silenced aspects of history. In *Électrochocs*, the author chronicles her personal growth and endeavors to recuperate the memory that was deprived from her mother due to prolonged shock treatment therapy. The legacy that these two parents have bequeathed their daughters is characterized by the father's own fragmented psyche and marginalization caused by bipolar disorder (in the case of *Personne*) and the mother's erratic mood swings, which are explained as symptoms of her mother's bipolar disorder, and loss of identity brought about by medical treatments (in *Électrochocs*). In this manner, Aubry and Rabaudy articulate divergent aspects of the shame and silence that played a role in their misconceptions of their parents, which furthered their estrangement from them.

While both Aubry and Rabaudy address deeply personal and painful experiences of caregiving, their texts also raise important questions about the gendered nature of care. The act of caregiving, especially in the context of familial relationships, has long been shaped by traditional gender roles. Women, particularly daughters, are often expected to take on the responsibility of caring for parents, especially in situations of illness or incapacity. In both texts, the author-daughters' engagement with their parents' respective mental illnesses is inextricably tied to their identities as women, as caregivers, and as daughters. In *Personne*, Aubry's portrayal of her father's mental illness highlights the unspoken expectations placed on her to manage both emotional and physical care, even in the absence of explicit caretaking duties. The work of writing becomes a form of care in itself—one that allows her to make sense of her father's fragmented identity and her own role as his daughter. This act of writing both honors and renegotiates the caregiving dynamic, in which the daughter assumes a form of authority over

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the narrative of the father's illness, offering both care and control over his memory. This is a power dynamic that is subtly embedded in the expectation that daughters must bear the emotional weight of family trauma, even as they attempt to rewrite the past. Aubry's work, then, can be read as a critique of these gendered expectations—her text challenges the notion that care must be an obligation and instead posits it as an act of reclamation and agency.

Similarly, Rabaudy's *Électrochocs* foregrounds the intersection of caregiving, gender, and the trauma of growing up with a bi-polar mother. Rabaudy's act of writing becomes a form of self-care and survival, but it is also a way of reflecting on and redefining the emotional labor traditionally expected from daughters. The memoir situates her care within the context of maternal relationships, highlighting how her sense of duty and obligation to care for her mother is deeply entwined with gendered expectations and social class. The intertextual references to other women writers who have explored mental illness, including Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, serve to situate her personal narrative within a broader tradition of women's writing that engages with mental health, caregiving, and trauma. Rabaudy's writing also critiques the notion of care as a duty, suggesting that her caregiving role—much like Aubry's—was influenced by societal expectations of women as natural nurturers.

Accordingly, both texts interrogate the notion of caregiving as a gendered responsibility, while also employing life writing as a means to challenge and reshape these expectations. Through their respective texts, Aubry and Rabaudy relate stories of caregiving and engage with the ethical implications of care as shaped by power dynamics within families. These texts do not merely document the experiences of daughters caring for parents; they also critique the cultural and gendered narratives that prescribe caregiving as an inherent duty for women. In this manner, their contributions to the ongoing discourse on care ethics are evident, as they elucidate the tensions between obligation and autonomy, power and submission, and memory and forgetfulness within the domains of life writing and the family memoir.

## Notes

1. See for example: Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde: La littérature française face au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*; Pascale Molinier, *Le Travail du care*; Sandra Laugier, editor, *Tous vulnérables? Le care, les animaux et l'environnement*; Sophie Bourgault and Julie Perreault, editors, *Le Care: Éthique féministe actuelle*; Fabienne Brugère, *Le sexe de la sollicitude*; Fabienne Brugère, *L'Éthique du care*; Marie Garrau, *Care et attention*; Marie Garrau and Alice Le Goff, *Care, justice et dépendance: Introductions aux théories du Care*; Loïc Bourdeau et al., editors, *Australian Journal of French Studies*.

2. See for example: Laurent Demanze, "Les possédés et les dépossédés"; Dominique Viart, "Le récit de filiation: 'Éthique de la restitution' contre 'devoir de mémoire' dans la littérature contemporaine."

3. Laureline Amanieux has defined this text as exemplifying what she terms "un récit siamois" ("a conjoined narrative"), "une forme narrative spécifique, fondée sur une structure dédoublée dans sa configuration [. . .] dont émerge deux récits simultanés, qui établissent entre eux des rapports de coexistence et de conflits, générateurs d'indécidable" ("a specific narrative form, based on a structure that is doubled in its configuration [. . .] from which emerge two simultaneous narratives, which establish between them relationships of coexistence and conflict, generating indecidability"; my trans; 94).

4. Additionally, we observe reader-writer empathy in Amanieux's remarks as she contemplates the implications of active reading that this "conjoined narrative" necessitates. "Le roman [. . .] demande au lecteur réel de ne pas choisir entre les deux versions du récit proposées par la narratrice: folie ou sagesse, il doit les actualiser dans une double lecture [. . .]" ("The novel [. . .] asks the actual reader not to choose between the two versions of the story offered by the narrator: madness or wisdom, they must actualize them in a double reading [. . .]"; my trans; 103).

5. Joan C. Tronto, "An Ethic of Care."

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# The Poetics of Language in Francophone Films: *Inch'Allah dimanche*, *The Class*, and *Fatima*

Amina Saidou

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## I. Conceptualization and Historicity of the Term “Francophone”

Throughout history, and even today, linguistic contact has been a major driving force behind the evolution of languages worldwide. Yet, the universalism long advocated for surrounding the French language policy seems to ignore what Nathalie Perrin mentions in her article, “La langue française face aux langues de l’immigration: état des lieux en communauté française de Belgique” (“The French language in the face of immigration languages: A status report in the French-speaking community of Belgium”), to be a refusal to accept the languages that cohabit with French in the context of immigration. History has long shown that the dialects of the past have evolved into contemporary French. Language is often associated with its positive contributions and functions in our daily lives. However, we frequently overlook the fact that it is also a source of discrimination, hierarchization, and other social inequalities, serving as a basis for social stratification, particularly in the context of immigration. In “Language training for adult migrants in France,” Hervé Adami, speaking of French policy on linguistic realities states that, since the French Revolution, France has prioritized the dominance of the French language, marginalizing regional languages, especially through the school system, which has systematically replaced them with French (129). The history of the French language today has evolved significantly, shaped by various factors that gave rise to the concept of “Francophonie,” from which the label “Francophone” is derived.

This paper examines the conceptualization of the term “Francophone” and the controversies surrounding the label in literature and cinema, focusing particularly on the power dynamics that shape its usage. It analyzes the connections between the “Francophone” label and the use of French in African and diasporic films, specifically *Inch'Allah dimanche*,

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*The Class* (*Entre les murs*), and *Fatima*, directed by Yamina Benguigui, Laurent Cantet, and Philippe Faucon respectively. The paper also investigates how language functions as a critical tool of identity and marginalization in Francophone films, with an emphasis on the experiences of African migrants in France. Important questions include: What does it mean to be Francophone? What defines a Francophone film? The distinction between what is and is not considered Francophone, both in literature and film, depends on various factors. The essay is divided into three parts: the first focuses on the conceptualization and historicity of the “Francophone” label; the second contextualizes the label in cinema; and the final section examines the influence of language on the characters’ daily life within a French-speaking social context. Drawing on the frameworks of prominent “Francophone” African writers and filmmakers, I explore how their analyses of the “Francophone” label provide insight into its resonance in the aforementioned films.

Talking about the poetics of language, in this case French, leads us to conceptualize the terms “Francophone” and “Francophonie,” which bring people together around the French language. This concept, though more common in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is not a recent one. It dates back to 1880, when geographer Onésime Reclus first employed it as a way to classify people who speak the French language. This notion of “Francophonie,” originally intended to convey the French values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is now embodied by the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie) established on March 20, 1970, in Niamey, Niger. The adjective “Francophone” functions both as a common noun and as a proper noun. The organization brings together institutions to officially represent French-speaking countries. These institutions include but are not limited to promoting the French language and linguistic and cultural diversity, and supporting education, training and research. Its ambition was to create a linguistic, cultural, and academic community around the French language. This project is at the heart of these concerns. “Francophone” may also refer to a person who understands, reads and speaks French. Thus, writers belonging to this “Francophone” space are categorized as writers and their literary productions, as well as filmmakers and films, as “Francophone.”

“Francophonie,” an institutional body whose objectives include education and culture, with literature as one of its torchbearers, faces challenges, notably the linguistic one. According to Alain Mabanckou, “la littérature francophone n’est perçue que comme une littérature des marges, celle qui virevolte autour de la littérature française, sa génitrice” (“Francophone literature is perceived only as a literature of the margins, one that swirls around French literature, its progenitor”; my

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trans). Marginalized and subjected to hierarchization, Francophone literature is often relegated to a subordinate position compared to French literature, the one written “by metropolitan French people, and in the French language, [which] has always played this role of unit of measurement with regard to literary tradition” (Barbery et al). As a result, this literary hierarchization has repercussions on the so-called “Francophone” writers, who feel categorized, and whose work is perceived as being of lesser quality, prompting them to refute the “Francophone” label.

Likewise, language has been a central issue for Francophone filmmakers, particularly Africans, since the inception of Francophone cinema. While some filmmakers advocate for the use of the French language in African cinema as a means of unification, others, such as Sembène Ousmane, Djibril Diop Mambety, and Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, view local languages as the essence of African cultural identity. In his essay, “How African Languages Free Francophone African Cinema,” Amadou Koné highlights how language in cinema has always been a key concern for filmmakers outside the Western canon, particularly those shaped by a colonial legacy, such as African filmmakers. Koné supports his analysis by quoting Haffner and Paulin Soumanou Vieyra: “For us, the problem that arises is that language is a cultural fact; we have analyzed this for a long time . . . you have the mental chain and the sound chain, which condition the gestures, the attitude, everything. It is fundamental” (381). Due to its multilayered features in defining what constitutes a Francophone film, the field is constantly evolving, making it difficult to establish a fixed definition.

The complications surrounding the “Francophone” label when it comes to literary productions, especially in the African context, has prompted some filmmakers such as Sembène Ousmane and many others who have followed in his footsteps to turn to film production. Turning to cinema enabled them, first and foremost, to solve the linguistic problem of addressing their African audience in the languages they understood best, rather than in French, which most of them didn’t master. Later, producing African films in African languages became more a weapon of resistance to Western colonization and imperialism. Thus, for filmmakers, the term “Francophone” became more poignant in terms of content and regional context than in the naming or categorization of their film productions. However, the challenges of language are felt in their works, such as in *Fatima*, *The Class*, and *Inch’Allah dimanche* and many others.

## II. Contextualization and Conceptualization of the “Francophone” Label in Cinema

A Francophone film can be seen as a film produced in the French language, and can come from a variety of French-speaking countries, and or include features such as:

- The filmmaker’s identity (Films from directors from North and sub-Saharan Africa...)
- The narrative (on Francophones or about Francophone countries)
- The geographical area (Films from other French-speaking countries)

Then, labeling becomes more difficult when a film is made in French and in France by a Francophone filmmaker from Senegal or by a Francophone filmmaker based in the USA whose narrative focuses on Francophone culture. For example, the film *Little Senegal* is made by a French filmmaker of Algerian origin, Rachid Bouchareb, who is based in the US. Another film, *Chocolat* (1988), directed by Claire Denis, a French filmmaker, draws on her childhood experiences growing up in colonial French Africa for her multilayered, absorbing feature debut, which explores many of the themes that recur throughout her work. Though produced by a French director who focuses on a colonial Francophone African country, Cameroon, the film is classified under the “Contemporary Francophone African Cinema” on the Library of Congress website. The same applies to the film *The Class* (2008) by the French director Laurent Cantet, which is labeled in a similar fashion. Today’s multilayered possibilities and interchangeability of these features could make it harder and more complex to attribute the Francophone label.

French-speaking filmmakers, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa, have focused less on claiming the label of “Francophone” and more on the challenges posed by language, both in their cinematic productions and in their own empowerment. These challenges, including the use and mastery of the French language, are often mirrored in their characters, who similarly experience a lack of autonomy, particularly because of their status of immigrants. In addition to rejecting the label of “Francophone cinema,” filmmakers such as Sembène Ousmane, considered the father of African cinema, resist the obligation to use only French in their films. One of the major challenges facing African cinema comes down to funding. To receive financial support for pro-

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ductions from French sources, the use of the French language is often mandatory. Sembène Ousmane noted in an interview that this requirement applies specifically to Francophone countries in Africa. This condition was designed to prevent filmmakers from using their native African languages, a requirement that some, like Sembène, strongly opposed. In “BFB archive revisited: Ousmane Sembene on the State of African Cinema,” he states:

One must not overlook the fact that these only concern Francophone countries in Africa. At Cannes last May the possibility of African films in French to gain an extra 25% of the budget was mentioned. Now, let's face it, if they prevent us from using our languages, we must not sign such agreements . . . So why should our films be denied the use of More or Wolof or other languages, films which have achieved real success among our populations? Cinema is the last refuge for our languages. African filmmakers who agree with such conditions must do so alone, because creativity is an individual action. With cinema, we run the risk of stressing that separation between Africans speaking their native languages.

Sembène perceived discrimination and control in the requirement to make French the predominant language in African filmmaking. One of the goals of Francophonie is cultural influence through art; however, Sembène argued that such a requirement distorts the artistic value of his work. He believed that film production is meant to educate and should, therefore, be created in a language that people can understand. Language is also a marker of identity that must not be lost. Consequently, African filmmakers have a duty to safeguard it. Using French is ultimately detrimental to African languages and the identity of African people. To confirm Sembène's claim, Kenneth W. Harrow mentions in a book review, “African Francophone Cinema (Review).”:

Usually, Sembene's decision to reach out to the local African population was emulated by other filmmakers, so that 'Francophone' is used to convey a geographical region rather than a linguistic marker. Diop refers to the term as indicating films “in which the French language is predominant or has a great influence,” and yet many of the films he analyzes have no French at all, and in two cases are from “lusophone” Africa. In fact, the study is organized by themes, all of which are completely familiar ones: history, oral traditions, myth, religion,

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gender and sexual orientation, modernity, and postcolonialism, etc. (166)

This quote highlights the complexities surrounding the definition of what constitutes “Francophone.” Harrow, quoting Senegalese filmmaker Diop, associates Francophone cinema primarily with its linguistic content. However, in both instances, the term is used more to delineate regions formerly under French colonial rule than as a purely linguistic designation. Also, in Chapter 22 of the book *Routledge Handbook of Francophone Africa*, Amadou Koné shifts the emphasis to African film, highlighting the specificity of cinematic language. He explores how it incorporates a variety of codes, techniques, and methods, extending beyond language, thus enabling communication with the audience across the linguistic divides. This has enabled cinema in Francophone Africa to transcend the domination of the French language and facilitate the emergence of a new, modern art form, accessible to all without linguistic boundaries (16).

### III. Filmmakers’ Ideologies and Their Productions

Laurent Cantet is the French director of *The Class*, a film about Francophones in France and their Francophone realities. His work raises important questions about its definition and classification: What can be said about it? How should it be defined? And can it be categorized as Francophone? The work would be Francophone if content were the determining criterion in qualifying a work as “Francophone.” According to René Soli, writing about Cantet in the online newspaper *Libération*, Cantet, the filmmaker, who won the 2008 Palme d’Or with *The Class*, has always centered his cinema on profoundly human figures, in perpetual search of their place in society. The language in the migrant context is a determining factor in this perpetual quest for integration, just as it is with Yamina Benguigui and Philippe Faucon, who also situate their migrant characters in search of a place in French society.

Philippe Faucon, a French film director, was born in Morocco. His origin and vision of the French language are reflected in his works such as the film *Fatima*. Being of Moroccan origin and having lived a similar experience to his characters, he explores the relationship one might have to language after immigrating to France. His film, *Fatima*, adapted from the works of Algerian writer Fatima Elayoubi, portrays the integration journey of its eponymous character. The narrative is inspired by Elayoubi’s own experiences as she followed her husband

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to France without prior knowledge of the French language. In France, she had two daughters. In an interview, Faucon explores the character's background and integration journey, emphasizing the pivotal role of language in the process:

Because of this [language barrier], she only had access to jobs that were undervalued, and while in France, she gave birth to two daughters who have spoken French ever since they were born. The things she needed to say, the things she didn't have a way of expressing to her daughters in French, she began to write down in notebooks, in Arabic. The film talks about this woman's need to find a way to communicate with her daughters, but also to find an escape from the way people look at her, and to declare to the society she lives in that she is not only that woman labelled as a cleaning lady, who doesn't speak French, is an immigrant, is ignorant, and who has a rather tedious and repetitive life. She wishes to express what she is, what she brings to the society she has been brought to, and what she wants for her children. (Lemercier)

The film, inspired by true stories, offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding language barriers for immigrants. *Fatima* highlights the precarious conditions Fatima Elayoubi faced in France, particularly due to language barriers, underscoring the hegemonic role of language for immigrants who speak languages other than French. Writing in Arabic does little to alleviate the precariousness that confines her to the stereotype of an uneducated immigrant woman, deemed suitable only for undervalued jobs. Fatima's abilities as an immigrant are perceived solely through the lens of the host society, which imposes its gaze upon her. Fatima's own opinions and beliefs carry significantly less weight. The film director also identifies with his character/Fatima's life, mentioning in another interview:

I found many things that brought to mind my own family's history. My grandparents came to France from Spain by way of Algeria, and they also came without knowing how to speak French. In France, where they had come to work, they found themselves in a situation of 'invisibility,' much like that of Fatima. They also had children in France (and then grandchildren as well, myself among them), and they experienced the same kind of language-related separation as Fatima and her daughters. (Paul D'Agostino)

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Just like in *Fatima*, language is a key factor in *Inch'Allah dimanche*. In this film, Benguigui highlights the family reunification policy enacted by President Chirac in 1974, which primarily benefited the families of Algerian workers in France. The film brings out poignant themes relating to the difficulties occasioned by any change of living environment, such as integration, which inevitably requires a mastery of French. In the case of *Inch'Allah dimanche*, language is more of a liberator for Zouina's character, helping her to free herself from the patriarchal domination embodied by her mother-in-law, the guardian of Algerian traditions in France. Speaking the language would imply that Zouina escapes this patriarchal tutelage. However, from the point of view of integration, language is another cornerstone of Zouina's obstacles.

As is evident, the filmmakers and their characters have similar migrant backgrounds in France; a background that evolves around the difficulties of integration due to language. Benguigui is French of Algerian origin, while Faucon, director of *Fatima*, is French of Moroccan origin, and Cantet, French, directed *The Class*. All three films portray Francophone African migrants' life experience in France. The main characters, Zouina (*Inch'Allah dimanche*) from Algeria, Fatima (*Fatima*) from Morocco, and the students in Mr. François's class (*The Class*) who come from diverse backgrounds, primarily sub-Saharan Africa, raises important questions: Who or what qualifies as Francophone? Can all their films be labeled as such? Does the term reflect the region, the themes, or the people speaking the language, in this case, French? Does "Francophone" describe a film made by a French-speaking filmmaker, a film made in French, or a film about a French speaking country, people, or culture, regardless of whether the filmmaker is French, from a Francophone country or part of its diaspora? In essence, what does it mean to be considered Francophone, as in these films, when the language itself exerts dominant influence over those it defines?

Some critics embrace the Francophone label and accept the French language as a *butin de guerre* ("spoils of war") referring to their reappropriation and mastery of the colonial language. Early Francophone African writers use the language as a weapon to challenge the colonial mentality that persists in neo-colonial societies despite decolonization. Some, like the Caribbean Edouard Glissant and the Congolese Alain Mabanckou refuse the Francophone label. In his article, "Édouard Glissant's World Mentality: An Introduction to *One World in Relation*," Manthia Diawara writes in favor of Glissant's view:

That we needed to enter into a state of world and mind that was less prone to discovery and conquest, and to espouse a

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philosophy of relation that looked at our differences not as that which divide us, but which link us individually and collectively in the *Tout-Monde*, where the communication between our intuitions knew no frontiers of language, territory, or power.

In the *Tout-Monde* (“a world of relationships”), Glissant appeals for a mindset that is open to connection rather than division and advocates for a philosophy of relation that views differences as bonds uniting us. In Glissant’s world, unity transcends the boundaries of language, geography, and power. Likewise, refusing the “Francophone” label, Leïla Slimani, another writer of Moroccan origin and the Goncourt award winner for her novel, *Chanson douce* (2016), states: “When I write I’m not a woman, I’m not a Muslim, I’m not a Moroccan. I can reinvent myself and I can reinvent the world.” Just like Glissant and many others, she refuses categorization that confines and reduces them to a single sphere, offering power to language discrimination to divide people. The label instills in them a sense of otherness, leading to feelings of exclusion and not belonging. In a 2007 signed manifesto, “Pour une littérature-monde en français” (“For A World literature in French”), forty-four writers, including Tahar Ben Jelloun, Maryse Condé, Alain Mabanckou, Edouard Glissant, etc. argued that literature written in French should not be divided into “French” (for work produced by writers born in France) and “Francophone” (read: those writers with origins in France’s former colonies) categories but rather be unified as a global literature in French. They acknowledge the linguistic power and advocate for a Littérature-monde en français that includes works by authors born in France within the broader scope of “Francophonie.”<sup>1</sup> They aim to avoid biases, hierarchies, and the “ghettoization” of French-language art as Mabanckou states in “La francophonie, oui, le ghetto: non!”:

Il reste que les classifications sont le plus souvent soutenues par des éditeurs français qui créent des collections de littérature pour les Africains. Il s’agirait d’une question de visibilité pour ces auteurs. Or cette ghettoïsation dangereuse finit par atteindre ses limites un jour ou l’autre. Elle déprécie l’expression de tout un continent et offre une littérature de troupeau dont la seule légitimation est l’identité de la couleur de la peau ou le lieu géographique des écrivains. Ces auteurs ainsi cloîtrés, balkanisés, claquemurés, isolés, sont irrémédiablement condamnés à porter le fardeau d’une idéologie incompatible avec l’indépendance de la création.

The fact remains that classifications are most often supported by French publishers who create collections of literature for Africans. It's a question of visibility for these authors. But this dangerous ghettoization reaches its limits sooner or later. It depreciates the expression of an entire continent and offers a herd literature whose only legitimization is the identity of the color of the skin or the geographical location of the writers. Writers thus cloistered, balkanized, locked, isolated, are irremediably condemned to bear the burden of an ideology incompatible with the independence of creation. (my trans)

Beyond its linguistic power, a cry for unity, and the sociopolitical controversies surrounding the concept of "Francophonie" lies the tension that language can function as a tool of hegemonic force, shaping and strengthening power dynamics that serve political or social agendas. Operating as a doorkeeper, it helps define who has access to opportunities, resources, and upward social mobility. The "ghettoization" of non-dominant language contributes to inequalities in the context of migration. Migrants, like the characters in the films who do not master the dominant language, are relegated to societal margins, restricted to underpaid jobs and less access to public communication. Language functions as a means of communication but also is a mechanism of control and exclusion. In addition to these complexities, other factors such as gender, and the context of immigration, may even open a wider ground to intersectional analysis. The analysis of the three films that follows highlights the social marginalization of migrant characters, which is sometimes perpetuated by the school system. The film *The Class*, for instance, serves as a concrete example of how schools function as institutions that perpetuate linguistic hegemony. From Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony, one of the enterprises through which hegemonic ideas are used to gain domination is language.

#### IV. Language Influence in *Inch'Allah dimanche*, *The Class*, and *Fatima*

Through the prism of immigration, this article's second stance explores areas of language influence on the main characters' social experience in *Inch'Allah dimanche*, *The Class* and *Fatima*. At the heart of all three films is the French language and its resulting tensions in the lives of the main characters wherein it reduces them to a state of otherness, the

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same categorization concern expressed by those “Francophone” writers and filmmakers.

### *Inch'Allah dimanche*

Released in 2001, *Inch'Allah dimanche* features Zouina, an Algerian woman in France under the family reunification program. Zouina, an Algerian woman, joins her husband in France, accompanied by her three children and her mother-in-law, Aïcha. The film begins with the family reunion, when Zouina must leave behind everything that defined her: her family, her parents, her culture and her language, suddenly surrendering herself to an unknown world. The break-up, integration, and reconstruction of Zouina's cultural identity are marked by the language element, which takes on a strong symbolic meaning. Beyond Zouina's character, mastery of the dominant language favors integration in all its forms, the opposite of which produces adverse effects the kind of which Zouina experiences. In France, Aïcha and her son, Ahmed, exercise strict control over Zouina, limiting her actions and interactions. Zouina's only break moments come on Sundays, when the dominant figures are absent, or during her furtive outings with her three children, who slowly introduce her to the city. Sunday is the only day Zouina can find relief, hence the title *Inch'Allah dimanche* (“Sunday God Willing”).

The protagonist faces strict control from the two dominant figures (her husband and mother-in-law), cultural conflicts, and a language barrier that isolates her and exacerbates her struggles with integration, identity, and psychological trauma. Zouina speaks only Arabic, and the language barrier worsens her already precarious situation. This linguistic challenge, a source of culture shock and frustration, drives Zouina to look in vain for ties with her native culture such as the feast of *Aïd el-Kébir* (“Eid el-Kebir”); her failed attempts to meet Malika, another Algerian woman in France; or any other experience, even spiritual, that might bring her closer to Algeria. Zouina must survive language-related challenges such as cultural misunderstandings and physical and verbal assaults in her interactions with her xenophobic neighbors the Donze couple, who are from French families and take advantage of Zouina's basic language skills. Her misfortunes at the grocery store or even the purchase of a vacuum cleaner testify to the difficulties linked to language that she experiences. Since she cannot read or write French, Zouina is tricked by the household appliance salesman who sells her a vacuum cleaner on credit. She is lured into accepting the vacuum cleaner, even though she has no understanding of how to use it. This situation earns her Ahmed's physical punishment. Also,

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at the grocery store, she receives unexpected bills for her household shopping. Zouina falls victim to the capitalist system in France due to the language barrier. For Zouina, language becomes a vector of cultural conflict, physical violence, isolation, and psychological trauma.

### *The Class*

Laurent Cantet's *The Class* explores similar cultural and linguistic tensions but in a multicultural Parisian classroom. Here, interactions between a teacher and his students reveal social hierarchies tied to the French language and socio-economic disparities. The teaching focuses solely on the instructor's perspective, plunging viewers into the heart of debates, where the French language is at the center of tension. Culture shock here revolves mainly around the French language, which based on context and socio-economic level, reveals a social hierarchy (exhibited in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital).<sup>2</sup> In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu defines cultural capital as the knowledge, skills, and behavior that enable individuals to navigate society, helping or altering their experiences, and thus influencing the opportunities available to them. He argues that cultural capital, as a set of resources, can provide individuals with access to a society's dominant culture (13). In the chapter of the same book, "The Aristocracy of Culture," Bourdieu explains how individuals manage to rise to the top of society while others, remarkably the poor, are held back. Through his theory of capital, he identifies four forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) that, when possessed, enable individuals to climb the social hierarchy and gain power. Conversely, those who lack these resources face limited opportunities. Migrants in our three analyzed films lack one or more types of capital, particularly cultural capital, which itself manifests in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and education that an individual acquires through socialization and education, often from a young age. For example, speaking a language at a mastery level, with a native accent, is perceived as valuable cultural capital in a society. Thus, possessing a non-native accent can produce adverse outcomes. Therefore, language becomes a key factor in acquiring cultural capital and is weaponized by systems such as education. In *The Class*, for instance, mastery of the dominant language is required by the instructor for attaining institutionalized cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications and credentials. Zouina, Fatima, and Mr. François's students lack this cultural capital, which in turn impedes their upward social mobility and their ability to access higher-level job positions

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within institutional structures. So, language operates as both an entrance door and a barrier that influences their opportunities in France.

In *The Class*, the challenges are rooted in misunderstandings and ruptures between François and his students, and thus between the institutional structures and the immigrant bodies. This is parallel to Hervé Adami's critique of systemic inequalities regarding access to elite education for children of immigrant and working-class backgrounds. Adami, in "Le rôle de la littéracie dans le processus de l'acculturation des migrants" ("The role of literacy in the acculturation process of migrants"), states that, "the inequalities in access to the grandes écoles or prestigious streams for children of immigrants, but more generally for children from working-class backgrounds: the number of pupils of immigrant origin is as ridiculously low as that of pupils from working-class backgrounds" (2). As a result, in Cantet's film, the inequalities, based on lack of inclusion, lead to the learning gap. Students with perspectives and values different from those promoted by the professor encounter linguistic, grammatical, and literary examples that feel distant from their daily lives, widening the cultural gap and fueling tense exchanges. The French title *Entre les murs*, which literally translates to *Between the Walls* in English, evokes a sense of confinement. The allegorical dimension of the title reflects the linguistic confinement imposed by Mr. François on the students, who criticize his teaching methods for failing to address their interests and knowledge base. Feeling that their needs are overlooked, despite their attempts to express them, the students often feel alienated from the educational system, partly explaining the resistant behavior of students like Souleymane, Coumba, and Boubacar. Their struggles with language highlight the difficulty of the institution, represented by Mr. François, in acknowledging their multifaceted identities. Symbolically, Mr. François positions himself as a fervent defender of French language universalism while ignoring his class's linguistic diversity.

## *Fatima*

Similarly, in Faucon's *Fatima*, language is at the heart of the misunderstanding, emotional upheaval, and isolation experienced by Fatima, a North African woman living in France with her two daughters, Nesrine and Souad. She faces the dual challenge of raising her children while balancing her desire to uphold Maghrebi traditions with the cultural expectations of French society. One of her primary struggles is her limited mastery of the French language, which is crucial for both economic success and socio-cultural integration. Unlike her daughters, Fatima communicates, processes, and expresses her frustrations and emotions

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in Arabic, highlighting the gap between her lived experiences and her ability to integrate into French society. Her limited oral comprehension of French and her difficulty speaking it lead to daily challenges in her interactions with her daughters and in her pursuit of employment. Her daughters often feel embarrassed by her linguistic limitations. The narrative emphasizes how this language barrier exacerbates her sense of frustration and alienation, particularly in relation to her daughters' education. Fatima feels intimidated by her new cultural environment at Souad's school because she has not mastered the language. As evidence, she tells her colleague at work,

I sat there not knowing what an actual teachers' meeting is. But I didn't talk like the other parents. I just listened and watched. I didn't say what I thought. My daughter's problems weren't theirs. I sat there, arms folded and speechless. I didn't understand a thing. If I could write. Maybe I would have understood and written like the other mothers. That's what lack of schooling does. I'm going to have to learn to write, speak, and read French. (*Fatima*, 24:22-25:18)

Fatima faces this discrimination in France, first from and concerning her daughters, and later in the job market, where language requirements play a key role. Fatima feels devalued and overlooked, both by her new society and by her daughter Souad, who blames her for being unable to assist with her schoolwork. As Pierre Bourdieu would say, Souad lacks the cultural capital essential for her success, which is language. Nevertheless, Fatima tries to engage in her daughter's education by encouraging her to complete her homework and attending parent-teacher meetings, though she seems restricted by language. This puts her in a state of marginalization and social stratification, placing her at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Language, as a tool, facilitates identification and categorization into social classes; in other words, it enables the perception and interpretation of the Other. The Other is not well versed in the language. Knowing a language equates with being educated and intelligent; therefore, those lacking it are deemed to be uneducated and unintelligent. Deemed different, Fatima experiences culture shock as a result of the devalued identity imposed on her by a new social environment, where the language barrier stigmatizes her as ignorant and confines her to precarious working conditions. This limitation, critical to social mobility, confines Fatima to the lower ranks of French society. In her book *Bourdieu and Social Space: Mobilities, Trajectories, Emplacements*, Deborah Reed-Danahay explains that Bourdieu examined mobility as

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both physical movement and social advancement, highlighting how symbolic power creates boundaries that enforce immobility. His work underscores how migration and mobility are shaped by social and geographic classifications that determine status and opportunities:

Bourdieu was interested in movements across space that are associated with mobility . . . We can see Bourdieu's contributions to mobility studies in his concern with symbolic classifications of social, linguistic, and geographic boundaries. Bourdieu's theory of social space includes . . . the workings of symbolic power that produce immobility. Mobility can equally refer to human movement across space . . . to social movement or social mobility whereby a person or group rises or falls in their position or status. Migration is often understood as a form of mobility. (2-3)

Throughout Fatima's journey in France, her spatial mobility is evident in her determination and resilience to succeed as she strives to provide a decent living environment for her two daughters, despite numerous obstacles. Fatima, though educated in Arabic, is deemed illiterate in French, a label that marginalizes her, makes her socially invisible, and reinforces her subaltern status. She works as a cleaning lady to support her family, while her daughters, born and educated in France, are fully integrated into French culture. This cultural and linguistic gap creates an emotional distance between Fatima and her daughters, who struggle to understand their mother's sacrifices and to reconcile their own ambitions with family expectations. For Souad, her mother's lack of understanding of her difficulties at school is exacerbated by language barriers, weakening their filial relationship. In her diary, written in Arabic, Fatima expresses her often invisible struggles, her isolation, the generational conflicts with her daughters, and the lack of understanding of a society that, through language, imposes conformity as the only path to success. At her daughter's school, she also feels marginalized during the interview with the principal because of her limited skills in French, despite her command of Arabic. She also experiences difficulties in understanding the support services, which seem to ignore her needs and expectations. Francophone films like *The Class* and *Fatima* highlight the complexities surrounding the French language, particularly as it intersects with the realities faced by young immigrants navigating between family traditions and the education system.

Following colonization, where the French language served as a key tool of the "civilizing mission," the establishment of the Francophone institution promoting the French language continues to reflect the

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spirit of French universalism. The term “Francophone,” which derives from “Francophonie” is a label that many writers from French-speaking regions reject, viewing it as a way to categorize their work as secondary to French literature. Defining what or who qualifies as “Francophone” is complex due to the multilayered attributes assigned to works by writers and filmmakers who use the French language or come from French speaking countries. Debates surrounding the French language, particularly among many Francophone filmmakers, predominantly Africans, underscore concerns about sociocultural identity, as reflected in the lived experiences of characters in the understudied films. *Fatima* and *Inch'Allah Dimanche* advocate for linguistic integration that acknowledges migrants' cultural specificities. Immigrant characters in these films grapple with the dual challenge of navigating their immigrant status and integrating into the host society, with language mastery being both a necessity for integration and a source of alienation. Zouina faces multiple layers of isolation, including separation from her homeland, familial control, and language barriers, while Fatima struggles for stability and societal acceptance.

Migrants often face linguistic and cultural alienation, feeling disconnected from both their culture of origin and the host culture. Zouina's struggles with her family's conservatism, her isolation, efforts to integrate, and the pressure to preserve her native Arabic, much like Fatima's conflict between French cultural demands, highlight the psychological and emotional challenges of navigating a divided immigrant identity. The films studied here feature challenges such as categorization, ghettoization, exclusion, stereotypes, and the marginalization migrants face due to language barriers. There is a parallel between the artists who resent the Francophone label and the characters in *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, *The Class*, and *Fatima*. The discomfort, discrimination, and hierarchies caused by linguistic misunderstandings stem from poorly managed diversity as exemplified by and in Mr. Francois's class. While language serves as a tool for communication and identity, it can also become a source of tension and a threat to rebuilding one's identity after immigration.

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### Notes

1. Paraphrase from “The End of Francophonie: The Politics of French Literature June 2011.”
2. Bourdieu’s capital theory argues that different capital owned by individuals can determine their positions in the social stratification structure, and further influence the pattern of social behaviors. More specifically, there are three forms of capital, namely economic, social, and cultural capital.

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# America's Marvelous Alterity/Identity: Alejo Carpentier and *The Kingdom of This World*

Nathan Dixon

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Set in Haiti in “the run-up to and the aftermath of the revolution that gave the country its independence,” Alejo Carpentier’s 1949 novel *The Kingdom of This World* initiated the genre that Carpentier himself called *lo real maravilloso* (Padura x-xi). Although he had previously “expressed in theoretical articles and reportage,” his proposal of America’s marvelous reality, the concept did not “find mature expression” until the publication of his novel and “the famous prologue to the . . . first edition,” in which he defines this concept in opposition to European surrealism (x). In his article “On the Marvellous Real in America,” Carpentier accuses the surrealists of “willing the marvelous,” which yields monotony and makes practitioners into “dream technicians” and “bureaucrats” (85). He insists there is:

no excuse for poets and artists who preach sadism without practicing it, who admire the supermacho because of their own impotence, invoke ghosts without believing that they answer to incantations, who establish secret societies, literary sects, vaguely philosophical groups with saints and signs and arcane ends that are never reached without being able to conceive of a valid mysticism or to abandon the most banal habits in order to bet their souls on the terrifying card of faith. (86)

According to Maria Takolander, Carpentier means to move beyond the simple assumption that the surrealists were “simply too feeble to achieve the genuine faith necessary to experience the ‘real marvelous’”; rather, “they were, as Europeans, fundamentally incapable of the artless conviction required to perceive the authentically magical” (*Catching Butterflies* 97).

Accessing the specifically American political power within Carpentier’s novel requires moving beyond what Takolander calls “the exoticist commodification” of magical realism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the anthropological characterizations that insist the “fla-

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grantly implausible” be read as plausible (“Magical Realism” 166). This is an elaboration of Lois Parkinson Zamora’s insistence that although “conventional narrative realism constructs the illusion of a fictional world that is continuous with the reader’s (and whose ontological status is therefore naturalized, transparent), magical realism foregrounds the illusionary status of its fictional world by requiring that the reader follow its dislocations and permutations,” which leads to “an essential paradox”: “magical realists write against the illusionism of narrative realism by heightening their own narrative investment in illusion” (500-1). Anne Hegerfeldt similarly argues that “Not the suspension, but the creation of disbelief is magic realism’s hallmark, the constructed nature of knowledge its topic” (279). In his expository essays on America’s marvelous reality, Carpentier asserts the opposite—that the events narrated in his novel are, in fact, *reality*. The novel “rests on a foundation of extremely rigorous research,” he writes in the preface; the events are “as real as any event included in schoolbooks for the edification of young readers” (xx). Channette Romero likewise insists that “Spirits are not ‘magical’ or separate from ‘realism’ to individuals, communities, and sacred traditions that assert a belief in the existence of spirits; they are merely part of their everyday world” (38). In an interview with Nelly McKay, Toni Morrison similarly argues that “it does not bother [black Americans] one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all the parts of living are on an equal footing” (153).<sup>1</sup> I will argue, however, that it is not necessary for Carpentier and his readers to mime the beliefs of the novel’s characters in order to believe that the characters believe.

An outsider perspective—paired with the tool of thick description—can often equip a writer to observe more clearly the inside of *another* society.<sup>2</sup> Yet Carpentier, whose cosmopolitan background has been well-documented, claims the perspective/belief of his eighteenth-century Haitian characters when he insists in the preface that “the experience of the marvelous presupposes a certain faith,” that those “who do not believe in saints cannot cure themselves with saintly miracles” (xvi).<sup>3</sup> Zamora asserts that magical realist writers “undermine the credibility of narrative realism by flaunting the relative *incredibility* of their own text. In short, they point to the literary devices by which ‘realistic worlds’ are constructed and constrained, and they dramatize by counterrealistic narrative strategies the ways in which those literary worlds (and their inhabitants) may be liberated” (501). Lewis Hyde asserts the same idea in another way: “Our ideas about property and theft depend on a set of assumptions about how the world is divided up. Trickster’s lies and thefts challenge those premises and in so doing reveal their artifice and suggest alternatives” (72). While the trickster famously

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dwells at the threshold, pundits must pick a side, and Carpentier abandons the role of authorial trickster by explicating his aims in his essays. In this article, I will link Carpentier's marvelous reality to Emerson's call for an American poet and John Lowe's concept of the *tropical sublime* before performing a close reading of several key passages from *The Kingdom of this World* to 1) dismantle what I see as bad-faith critiques of several scenes set in Haiti and 2) critique the only scene set in Europe, in which the author struggles to imagine cross-cultural interactions from the side of the American "other."

### Part I: Situating the Marvelous in the Kingdom of America

In the famous preface to *The Kingdom of this World*, Carpentier explains that during an extended stay in Haiti at the end of 1943, he "came in daily contact" with the concept of the marvelous real as he stepped "on ground whereon thousands of people eager for freedom believed in the metamorphic powers of Mackandal, to the point where that collective faith would produce a miracle on the day of his execution" (xvii). He again heard the story of Bouckman the Jamaican voodoo initiate; he "visited the Citadelle of La Ferriere, a building without architectural precedent"; he "breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of remarkable endeavors" (xvii-iii). Ruminating upon the mysterious history and people of this place, he came to realize that "the presence and relevance of the marvelous real was not a privilege only of Haiti, but rather, a patrimony of all of the Americas" (xviii). For "what is the story of all of the Americas," he asks, "if not the chronicle of the marvelous and the real?" (xx).

As Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris point out in their succinct introduction to the author, Carpentier believed

*lo real maravilloso americano* differed decidedly in spirit and practice from European Surrealism. In Latin America, Carpentier argues, the fantastic is not to be discovered by subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations of images. Rather, the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto. (75)

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Zamora and Faris ground the genre in reality, link this reality inextricably to the fantastic, and locate the genre in specific time(s) and place(s) (i.e., post-European-contact America). Further, they identify the irreducible crux of Carpentier's concept: "improbable juxtapositions" inherent to Latin America. Carpentier's job, then, becomes an exercise in pointing out that which already exists, his aim diagnostic rather than prescriptive.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the improbable juxtapositions that account for the marvelous real in America originate with the crashing of the old world into the new. Stephen Greenblatt asserts that Columbus himself "had a highly self-conscious interest in the marvelous," using the term "marvelously" (*maravillosamente*) to "describe God's bestowal of the discovered [Caribbean] islands," from which followed "other voyages, widening discoveries, the dawning realization that classical geography was wrong and that a whole new hemisphere had been discovered, the violent encounter of civilizations, the missionary enterprise, mass enslavement and death, the immense project of colonization" (52-53).

Takolander argues that, "The mysterious 'something' that Carpentier detects and describes as the marvelous real combines two discrete phenomena": The first comprises "marvelous phenomena that [certain] people believe to be real," under which heading we should place the legends of Mackandal and Bouckman; the second comprises "real phenomena that Carpentier [himself] believes to be marvelous," under which heading we should place the Citadelle of La Ferriere ("Magical Realism" 167). It may seem objectionable to gloss the Citadelle as *marvelous* on account of it being built by re-enslaved "children, pregnant girls, women, and old people" (*Kingdom* 80). Carpentier, however, endeavors to "establish a definition of the marvelous that does not depend on the notion that the marvelous is admirable because it is beautiful. Ugliness, deformity, all that is terrible can also be marvelous" ("Baroque" 102).

In tracing this conception of the marvelous, Carpentier points first to Charles Perrault, "author of the *Mother Goose* stories," whom Carpentier fashions as both "inventor" and "recoverer" of the folk tales he documents, and then to Andre Breton, the founder of surrealism (101).<sup>5</sup> Using these authors as examples, Carpentier asserts that "the creators of the marvelous take charge of telling us what they [think] about the marvelous"—a justification, perhaps, for his own theorizations—and that the marvelous includes the incestuous, the horrendous, the abominable, and the terrible (99-101). Neither Breton nor Perrault considered "that the marvelous was admirable because it was beautiful"; both thought it was admirable "because it was strange" (103). This harkens back to Freud's idea of the *uncanny*: "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once

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very familiar" (369-70). Freud proposes that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality" (398). Although blurring the lines between fact and fiction is important to both Breton's surrealism and Carpentier's marvelous reality, Carpentier insists that the surrealists "very rarely looked for [the marvelous] in reality . . . their fabrication[s] of the marvelous . . . [were always] premeditated and calculated to produce a sensation of strangeness," a kind of "manufactured mystery" ("Baroque" 103-04). In comparison, the American marvelous real soars above the old world languages, which are "too narrow to identify so many new things" (105).<sup>6</sup> Carpentier asserts that America needs a new language written by Americans, a language that maintains the surrealist idea that the marvelous encompasses both the outrageously wonderful and the outrageously terrible—but that looks for illustrations of these marvels in organic reality, rather than in the manufactured and sterile laboratories of European artists. "If our duty is to depict this world," Carpentier writes, "we must uncover and interpret it ourselves" (106).

This call for an explicitly American rendering of America echoes Emerson's call more than a century before in his essay "The Poet," where he writes: "We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials" (1189). Fellow Transcendentalist Theodore Parker sounds a similar note when he proclaims in his 1846 speech "A Sermon of Merchants": "We have no American literature which is permanent. Our scholarly books are only an imitation of a foreign type; they do not reflect our morals, manners, politics, or religion, not even our rivers, mountains, sky. They have not the smell of our ground in their breath" (267). For Emerson, the new world—whose "geography dazzles the imagination"—rests on "the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos" (1190). A foundation of wonder and an American reincarnation of ancient gods likewise permeate Carpentier's explication of the marvelous real. Although Emerson complains that he has not yet found the bard to sing the unsung land, he admits that neither can he find an appropriate voice "in Chalmers's collection of five centuries of English Poets," implying that whoever finally trumpets America will undoubtedly be American (1190). Eleven years later, of course, Walt Whitman answers the call, writing in his preface to *Leaves of Grass* that "a bard is to be commensurate with a people. . . . His spirit responds to his countries spirit. . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes," etc. (618).

Carpentier attempts to answer his own call. "I have to create with my words," he writes, "a baroque style that parallels the baroque of the temperate, tropical landscape," which "leads logically to a baroque that

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arises spontaneously in our [American] literature" ("Baroque" 106). "America, a continent of symbiosis, mutations, vibrations, *mestizaje*, has always been baroque," he writes—elaborating Emerson's *incomparable materials*; the "American baroque develops along with the *criollo* (creole) culture," which is above all an "awareness of being Other" (98-100).<sup>7</sup> This otherness finds its place in a "world baroque because of its architecture . . . the unruly complexities of its nature and its vegetation, the many colors that surround us," and "the telluric pulse of the phenomena that we still feel" (105). This idea of the baroque bursts from the unrhymed and unmetred spill of Whitman's American poetry and from the marvelous reality of Carpentier's Haitian history. David Mikics notes that both

Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean writers have followed Carpentier by asserting that the New World possesses an original aesthetic virtually embedded in its social and natural landscapes, a magical reality unavailable to the European artist or writer. Not the writer's style, but the historical scene that his or her writing reveals provides the magic. (373)

According to Carpentier, the baroque is "a constant of the human spirit that is characterized by a horror of the vacuum, the naked surface, the harmony of linear geometry" ("Baroque" 93). The baroque gushes forth when "decorative elements . . . completely fill the space," when nuclei proliferate, and when, "depending on the time of day, all of the figures seem to move" (93-94).<sup>8</sup> Here, at the intersection of the baroque and the marvelous real, at the intersection of marvelous beauty and marvelous horror, of rural fairy tales, European surrealism, and American fecundity, we find what John Lowe calls the *tropical sublime*.

Although there has been "a tendency to associate the sublime with northern landscapes and with mountains, rather than with the tropical," Lowe writes, explorers and travelers in the southern United States "for much of the nineteenth century" were "constantly awed, astonished, or terrified by the beauty, mystery, and menace of nature, and by its sudden eruptions of violence, through animals, hurricanes, floods, fires, burning heat, and bone-deep cold" ("Nineteenth-Century" 90-91). Lowe contends that this awe-inducing natural world extends to the "tropical wilderness" of Florida, and beyond Florida to the Caribbean, where descriptions of the tropical sublime "anticipate the surreal, which is usually associated with the effect of dreams on the imagination" (96). "Words often fail spectators who view things for the first time," he writes, and travel writers like Lafcadio Hearn and Constance Fenimore Woolson "groped for a new language to encapsulate the

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subjects and landscapes of the circum-Caribbean" (93). Carpentier, a travel writer himself, comes close to Lowe's topical sublime with his baroque and fecund concept of America's marvelous reality, which likewise needs a new language. According to Zamora,

Magical realist texts, in their most distinct departure from the conventions of literary realism, often seem to pulsate with proliferations and confluences of worlds, with appearances and disappearances and multiplications of selves and societies. These magical instabilities depend upon an array of narrative strategies that multiply/blur/superimpose/unify or otherwise transgress the solidity and singularity of realistic fictional events, characters, settings. (501)

Lowe refers to Southern writers when trying to name these *magical instabilities*, glossing them as "what Faulkner's Addie Bundren calls a 'shape to fill a lack,' or what Zora Neale Hurston termed 'the inaudible voice of it all'" ("Nineteenth-Century" 93). "In magical realist fiction," Zamora continues, "individuals, times, places, have a tendency to transform magically into other (or all) individuals, times places" and this "slippage from the individual to the collective to the cosmic is often signaled by spectral presences" (501).<sup>9</sup>

In *The Kingdom of This World*, the most obvious embodiment of this slippage is Mackandal, the "Vodou priest in the Rada rite," who is "invested with extraordinary powers through various spells under the grace of the greater gods" (22). He is capable of "chang[ing] his shadow according to his will" and transforms himself successively into "a green iguana . . . warming itself on the roof of the tobacco barn . . . a nocturnal butterfly flying at midday . . . a large dog with bristled hair . . . a gannet," shaking its wings above a vine trellis, "a fly, a centipede, a moth, a termite, a tarantula, a ladybug, . . . a firefly glowing with large green lights," and finally, "a buzzing mosquito" (25-32). Here is the pulsating proliferation of which Zamora speaks, a Whitmanian attempt to get at the ungraspable thing itself.<sup>10</sup>

Plenty of other characters in the novel undergo their own transformations: Lenormand de Mézy, Pauline Bonaparte, Henri Christophe, Soliman, and, of course, the hero Ti Noël, who metamorphoses into a goose "whose existence did not tolerate having one individual stand above others of the same species" (128). Noël wishes to join a flock—a community—but the community rejects him, which leads him toward a dawning consciousness about the state of man. Just before his "declaration of war against the new owners," Noël muses that "man never knows for whom he suffers and waits. He suffers and waits and works

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for people he'll never know, and who likewise will suffer and wait and work for others who won't be happy either, since man always longs for a happiness that lies just beyond that which is given to him" (130). This language sounds cribbed from Kafka, but Carpentier adds a note, if not of hope, then certainly of perseverance. "There is no greatness to achieve in the Kingdom of Heaven," he writes, which is why, "burdened by sorrows and labors, beautiful within his misery, capable of loving in the midst of plagues, man can find his greatness, his greatest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World" (130). Tangible reality becomes the only theater in which both character and author can access marvelous greatness.

## Part II: Absence, Presence, Perspective

In her introduction to Pablo Medina's translation of *The Kingdom of This World*, Edwidge Danticat asserts that Carpentier's "words and sentences are as carefully mounted as the walls of the massive citadel that the ambitious King Henri Christophe commands and Ti Noël and his countrymen build" (ix). Carpentier describes Christophe as "short, very strong, and barrel-chested, with a roman nose and a beard partly hidden by the embroidered collar of his dress coat," a proud man who wears a "Napoleonic bicorn" and "a bicolored cockade," and is able "with a simple gesture of his riding crop" to order the death of the "peasants" (i.e., slaves) as he climbs to the top of Bonnet a L'Eveque to sit "above everything, including his own shadow" (*Kingdom* 84-85). Critics have argued that Carpentier likewise sits apart from the Haitian people whom he uses to his own fictional ends, disregarding through omission those who do not fit into his scheme.

The absence of Toussaint L'Ouverture, who is never mentioned, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who is mentioned only once, are particularly noticeable, though their absence may be justified. Borges famously riffs on Gibbon's observation that "in the Koran, there are no camels" which proves "the authenticity of the Koran" because it was "written by Mohammed," who, "as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were especially Arabian; for him they were a part of reality, and he had no reason to emphasize them" (181). As Zamora argues, "Absence is not the opposite of presence, but its necessary condition" (518). Roberto Calasso insists that because Kafka's K "is potentiality itself . . . his physical appearance can never be described, directly or indirectly" (11). Carpentier's omissions likewise seem to stem from the idea that there is greater *potential* in the idea of revolution—the potential for perpetual (and radical) change—than the way in which the Haitian Revolution

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was, in fact, carried out. He gestures toward this idea in Ti Noël's declaration of war at the end of the novel and in Noël's assertion that "the greatness of man lies precisely in wanting to improve on what already is by taking on labors" (130). As Danticat notes, "the essence of a revolution lies not only in its instantaneous burst of glory but in its arduous ripples across borders and time, its ability to shame the conquerors and fortify the oppressed, and, in some cases, to achieve the opposite. For if history is recounted by victors, it's not easy to tell here who the rightful narrators should be, unless we keep redefining with each page what it means to conquer and be conquered" (x).<sup>11</sup> This recalls Walter Benjamin's insistence that "all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers" (199-200). While none of Carpentier's characters strike the reader as "victorious," critics argue that his authorial perspective within the novel belies his stated alliance—within his essays—with the enslaved Haitians.

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert asserts that "in many ways, to Carpentier, Haiti is as exotic as his native Cuba would be to a European," and his resulting fascination "presupposes for Makandal and for Haiti an essential otherness, a primitivism that surfaces in their inability to inhabit their own history as a process understood rationally but only through the prism" of "magic and religious faith" (118). Natalie M. Leger states that Carpentier can only conceive of Haiti as "progress as stasis," which leaves no example to follow but the example of "the West" (102). Because Carpentier "desires to maneuver around Haiti, its people, and abject post-revolutionary reality," she claims he "ultimately maligns his literary articulation of 'the marvelous real,'" which is supposed to be explicitly American (102). I propose an alternate reading—in which maneuvering around the post-revolutionary reality allows Carpentier to advocate for a kind of continuous revolution. Nonetheless, it is worth unpacking Leger's and Paravisini-Gebert's arguments that regional singularity in *The Kingdom of This World* "becomes no more than Europe in New World-face" (Leger 102).

Pauline Bonaparte edges out Henri Cristophe as the character who best embodies this "Europe in New World-face." After she becomes convinced in the novel "that there was no escape" from the plague and "that the doctors were useless," she begins listening "to the advice of Soliman, her black servant, who awakens in her 'the lees of her Corsican blood'" (66). Readers find her "kneeling on the floor with her hair loose" while Soliman—"Wearing nothing but a belt from which hung a white handkerchief by way of a loincloth"—"jumped like a bird, waving a rusty machete" above "a rooster with its throat cut flopp[ing] around on a bed of corn kernels." Both characters howl like "dogs at full moon"

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(67-68). This scene, as Paravisini-Gebert would have it, is “inspired by terror and not by faith . . . [and] speaks of the practices of Vodou as superstitious mumbo jumbo, practiced . . . by a harebrained coquette and her manipulative servant” (126). Pauline’s being ruled by terror rather than faith, however, does not render the scene any less believable, and naming Soliman as the more manipulative of the two requires its own leap of faith, which the text does not bear out. Paravisini-Gebert argues that this scene “subverts Carpentier’s project . . . fetishizing the rituals of possession and communion with the gods into an inane version of *danse macabre* that titillates the reader with images of a naked white woman prostrate in abjection before her loin-clothed black savior brandishing a bleeding chicken” (126). She fails to acknowledge, however, that voodoo is a religion of sacrificial ritual and myriad fetishes. As Zora Neale Hurston tells us, the question “What is the truth?” can only be answered by “the Mambo, that is the priestess . . . throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs” (113). Paravisini-Gebert’s own disbelief leeches into her assessment. The question, however, is not whether readers believe, but whether Pauline Bonaparte—the character in the book—behaves in a believable way.

Pauline, royal sister to the emperor of France, treats her husband’s military mission to Haiti as a vacation. Of course she is a *coquette*. She indulges herself during her visit to the Jewel in the Crown of the Antilles, passing her time reading “lachrymose novel[s] . . . happily enjoying the luxury and abundance” of the island, swimming naked in her “blue mosaic swimming pool,” and allowing her servant to “kiss her legs” (*Kingdom* 63). She is a “lyrebird in her muslin skirts,” until one day her hairdresser falls in front of her “vomiting dark, half-clotted blood” (62-64). This “horrible killjoy,” a foreshadowing of what’s to come, deteriorates into nightmare when Pauline is forced to flee to La Tortue, followed by her dying husband (64). There, she comes to feel there “is no escape” and only then begins engaging in Soliman’s ritual worship (66). Soliman, who appears to be her closest companion during her visit to Haiti, ostensibly speaks on behalf of the black population, which is apparently immune to the ravages of Yellow Fever. Might Pauline participate in ceremonies and spells that Soliman claims ward off the fever, especially since she views him as “the only possible defender against the blows of the other shore, the only possible doctor before the uselessness of the medical manuals” (67)? Might the ointments that Soliman spills on her chest have legitimate medicinal qualities, akin perhaps to the power of those herbs that Madison Smartt Bell’s fictional Dr. Hebert learns from Toussaint L’Ouverture? “The plants of the colony,” the French Dr. Hebert states to himself in Bell’s novel “had virtues quite unknown in Europe” (249). Although Pauline

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participates in the voodoo ceremony, she does so neither “naked” (it is Soliman in the loincloth, not Pauline) nor “prostrate in abjection,” as Paravisini-Gebert asserts, nor is the scene any more *titillating*—to borrow Paravisini-Gebert’s word—than Pauline’s performance on-board the ship crossing the Atlantic where she lets the wind reveal “the magnificent shape of her breasts,” sleeps nude “on a folded sail,” and—in her “general carelessness”—bathes in full sight of the sailors (61-62). In fact, these episodes—along with those of Soliman “rub[bing] her with almond cream, remov[ing] unwanted hair,” bathing her, and “kiss[ing] her legs”—are much more titillating than the voodoo scene (63). Neither the implicit sexual nature of the scene nor Pauline’s whiteness renders the scene any less believable. In her first-hand account of voodoo initiation, Hurston details how a female voodoo practitioner “prepare[s] young girls for love,” and also identifies a Caucasian voodoo practitioner, Doctor Resner: “the white man who is a houngan (Voodoo priest),” who “walked out of his Nordic body and changed” into the “stuff of which the soul of Haiti is made” (18, 245, 257). Pauline Bonaparte is no Doctor Resner, yet even if she doesn’t believe, her behavior is certainly believable.

According to Takolander, both the charge of “exoticist commodification” and the often insisted upon “anthropological characterization” have established a well-developed cynicism toward magical realism (“Magical Realism” 166). Paravisini-Gebert falls into the former category when she calls the scene a “fantasy of barbaric otherness” and accuses Carpentier of fetishizing ritual practices (126). She falls into the latter, when she complains that this scene “inverts and subverts the alliance of Makandal, Boukman, Dessalines, and Henri Christophe with the Iwas that had come to their aid in turning the tide of colonial rule,” thus condemning Carpentier for failing to accept these ritual practices as absolutely legitimate (126). “After all,” Paravisini-Gebert writes, “the slaves may be deluded by faith into believing . . . Makandal has survived. The planters and soldiers of the text—and most importantly, Carpentier and his readers—*know* he has not” (126). One wonders if Paravisini-Gebert includes herself among the readers that she indicts. Her charge highlights, nonetheless, the question that lurks within Carpentier’s assertion that “everything that eludes established norms is marvelous”—that is, who establishes these norms? (“Baroque” 101).

According to Takolander, “Carpentier clearly attempts to situate himself in the camp of the African Haitians, whose faith allows them to apprehend manifestations of the genuinely marvelous” (“Magical Realism” 168). I disagree with Romero’s assertion that spirits are “*merely* part of [the] everyday world” [emphasis mine] to “individuals, communities and sacred traditions that assert a belief in the ex-

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istence of spirits” because Christians still believe that miracles are miraculous, and voodoo initiates still count possession by an Ogun as extraordinary (38). However, a clear line exists between believers and non-believers, a point that Carpentier himself makes in his preface: “the marvelous invoked in disbelief” is “nothing more than a literary ruse” (xvii). “Nevertheless,” Takolander argues, quoting Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, “Carpentier’s premise of the marvelous real inexorably betrays a ‘spurious European perspective since it is only from the other side that alterity and difference may be discovered—the same seen from within is homogenous, smooth, without edges’” (“Magical Realism” 168). In order to prove Carpentier’s spurious European perspective, critics commonly reference the author’s supposed demystification of Mackandal’s miraculous escape-through-metamorphosis.

It is “collective faith that would produce a miracle on the day of [Mackandal’s] execution,” Carpentier writes in the preface, yet the author’s critics question his place among the faithful (xvii). The “noise and screaming and the mob was such,” the text of the novel reads, “that few saw that Mackandal, held down by ten soldiers, was being forced headfirst into the fire and that a flame enhanced by his burning hair drowned out his last scream” (33). Romero insists that this “moment of demystification by the narrator challenges the beliefs continuously held by slaves and their descendants for centuries” (36). Yet Carpentier never erases the transformative act; he relates the metamorphosis of Mackandal into the mosquito on the previous page, claiming “the masters ignored” the power of Mackandal, which is “why they had wasted so much money in organizing this useless spectacle, which would reveal their impotence in fighting a man anointed by the Great Loas” (32). If the aim of this spectacle was to frighten the enslaved people, then the white people failed, as the black people “returned to their plantations, laughing the whole way,” believing that “Mackandal had fulfilled his promise to remain in the kingdom of this world” (33). Carpentier laughs along *with* the enslaved Haitians—not *at* them—and while Romero insists that “magical realist texts typically misrepresent the folk beliefs they are using as a literary tool, often by refusing to locate these beliefs within specific religious and spiritual traditions,” Carpentier clearly locates the metamorphosis of Mackandal *specifically* within the religious and spiritual tradition of voodoo (36). Romero has picked a bad example. Mackandal’s metamorphosis itself sits as a crowning achievement within the marvelous reality in which the enslaved people and their descendants live. The Haitians’ *belief* in this metamorphosis, more than the metamorphosis itself, constitutes this marvelous reality.

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This does not, however, absolve Carpentier from charges of a spurious European perspective. He often writes of “the European man in contact with the American marvelous real,” a landscape that cannot be anything other than strange because it is different from anything the European man knows (“Baroque” 104). So too, however, would the American native, uprooted and taken to Europe, find the landscape and people entirely strange and previously inconceivable. Indeed, Nina Baym writes of a “Taino Indian from the Bahamas . . . whom Columbus seized and took to Spain” where he was “baptized and renamed Diego Colón” before returning to San Salvador to tell his fellow natives of “things undreamed of, plants and animals and most of all strange peoples whose uncanny customs, costumes, and beliefs astonished all who heard him” (3). Quoting the historian Andrés Bernaldez, she explains how Colón “regaled the other natives with tales of ‘the things which he had seen in Castile and the marvels of Spain, . . . the great cities and fortresses and churches, . . . the people and horses and animals, . . . the great nobility and wealth of the sovereigns and great lords, . . . the kinds of food, . . . the festivals and tournaments [and] bullfighting” (3). Olaudah Equiano likewise writes in the second and third chapters of his narrative of his “astonishment,” “terror,” “surprise,” and “wonder” upon first encountering Europeans. These “white men” seemed to possess “some spell or magic,” “seemed to be made of wonders,” and he “thought if [he] should ever get home what wonders [he] should have to tell” (57, 63, 64).

In *The Kingdom of this World*, however, when Soliman the Haitian finds himself transplanted to Rome, Carpentier fails to detail the wonders his character witnesses, focusing instead on the “scandalous uproar” that Soliman’s black skin provokes among the European citizenry (112). Children follow him through the streets calling him King Balthasar, and Italians pat his sweating cheeks to “see if the color [comes] off” (112-13). Soliman becomes an object in the novel—a curio—rather than a subject. Carpentier’s failure to acknowledge that *established norms* necessarily run in two directions at once, sets him on the blood-stained pedestal of the colonizer. As Greenblatt shows, Columbus believes that the natives will be good servants, but “does not imagine that the Indians could have anything like a comparable thought about the Spanish” (77). When Soliman finally touches what he believes to be the marble “corpse of Pauline Bonaparte, recently hardened,” it “seemed he had fallen into a trance as a result of touching the stone of a grave, as happened to some of the possessed back home, who were both feared and revered by peasants because they were best able to communicate with the Lords of the Cemeteries” (116-17). To whom, however, does it seem this way? Carpentier has already revealed

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that Soliman is extremely drunk and has contracted malaria, which leaves him “trembling with fever” (117). This scene—which in many ways mirrors the death of Mackandal—presents a much more damning demystification than the execution of the rebel leader. Soliman will not take the medicine prescribed by Napoleon’s European doctor, whose “professional merits,” Carpentier reports, “were well-known” (118). Instead, he chants to Papa Legba. The author’s demystification in this case, however, prevents reading Soliman as “feared and revered” and voids Carpentier’s own place within the camp of believers. “What anthropological and hostile approaches to magical realism seem to be responding to,” Takolander explains, are less the “magical realist texts than the ethnographic nationalist agendas so often rehearsed by magical realist writers” (“Magical Realism” 167). These reproaches become inevitably more hostile when the author’s identity conflicts with the ethnographic group represented in the fiction.

## Conclusion

In the first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” Breton writes that “Christopher Columbus should have set out to discover America with a boatload of madmen. And noted how this madness has taken shape, and endured” (243). He fails to recognize that from an indigenous perspective, the actions of the colonists may well have been considered *mad*. The continued colonizing practices of settler nations, the repeated making and breaking of treaties, the endless encroachment upon sacred lands, the long history of the African slave trade, the systematic genocide of native and enslaved populations all represent a persistence of this madness. What could be more surreal, what more marvelous, than witnessing the apocalypse and surviving to tell the tale?

By foregrounding “the fundamental fakery of literary acts and, indeed all acts of world rendering,” Takolander writes, magical realist texts highlight “the autonomy and authority of representation” (“Magical Realism” 166). By foregrounding a paradigm of irony, authors point not only to the manufactured nature of their own narratives, but to the fact that every narrative has an author, and therefore every representation of the world can be in some way deconstructed. Commenting on the “creole or mestizo culture” outlined by “those Latin American fabulists whose texts demonstrate the manifest impurity, the fascinating mixture of real and surreal in all experience,” Edward Said asserts that when reading “magical realists’ like Carpentier, who first describes it, Borges, García Márquez, and Fuentes, one vividly apprehends the dense interwoven strands of a history that mocks linear nar-

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rative, easily recuperated 'essences,' and the dogmatic mimesis of 'pure' representation" (276). Even if he is joking, Carpentier need not hold up children's history textbooks as models of "reality" to which his work aspires. Instead, his work should act as a catalyst for students who hope to work against those textbooks by wresting hegemonic control of the single story from the hands of colonizers. The marvelous real—what has come to be known as magical realism—should prompt readers to look within rather than without and examine the assumptions that underlie their own conceptions of the world(s) in which they live. To erase this irony—as Carpentier attempts to do when he insists that his own belief matters as much as his characters'—strips the power, the magic, the marvelousness from the works themselves.

## Notes

1. For more on the type of non-syncretic hybridity that Morrison herein describes, see Nathan Dixon's "Dimorphism and Audiovisionary Presence: N. Scott Momaday's 'Priest of the Sun.'" Although Morrison never wavered in her insistence on the realism of her portrayal of black characters, her attitude toward the term "magical realism," does, in fact, seem to have evolved. In 1986, when Christina Davis asks Toni Morrison why she dislikes having her work described as "magic realism," Morrison responds:

I was once under the impression that that label "magical realism" was another one of those words that covered up what was going on. I don't know when it began to be used but my first awareness of it was when certain kinds of novels were being described that had been written by Latin American men. It was a way of not talking about politics . . . If you could apply the word "magical" then that dilutes the realism but it seemed legitimate because there were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text. . . .

My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew . . . there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting, and so it seemed impossible for *me* to write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was "unbelievable." . . . So I have become indifferent, I suppose, to the phrase "magical realism."  
(225-26)

Morrison makes much of her own identity and her personal relationship with people who believe in *enchantment*, yet stops short of asserting her own

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continued belief in the *unbelievable*. Her disavowal of the term “magical realism” turns to indifference as she comes to understand that her impression of the term—as a way to avoid talking about politics—may, in fact, be mistaken. Indeed, a year later, when Gail Caldwell compares *Beloved*’s “Gauguin-like imagery and commonplace mysticism” to “the Latin American fabulists,” Morrison “nods at the comparison between black American folklore and magic realism,” and says, “stuff was so readily available to them—that mixture of Indian and Spanish. Whereas I felt the preachers, the storytelling, the folklore, the music was very accessible to me, but I felt almost alone. It wasn’t only mine, but I didn’t have any literary precedent for what I was trying to do with the magic” (242-43).

2. For an anthropological methodology, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. For examples of “outsider” authors dealing with the American tropics, see 1) Lafcadio Hearn, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and William Seabrook, who all produced travel writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; 2) Zora Neale Hurston’s anthropological study *Tell My Horse*; and 3) writers such as Claude McKay, Jacques Roumain, Christina García, Caryl Phillips, and Junot Díaz, all of whom left their native countries (willingly or otherwise) only to write extensively about them, thus inviting comparisons to James Joyce. Another recent standout is Madison Smartt Bell, a Caucasian from Nashville, Tennessee, who fills in the blank spaces of Carpentier’s historical novel with his trilogy about Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution.

3. While Carpentier always identified as Cuban, his father was French and his mother Russian; he was “born in Switzerland and . . . lived more than twenty years of his life in France” (Takolander, “Magical Realism” 167).

4. In this, Carpentier resembles Marx and Engels who, in their “ur-manifesto of the modern period,” speak of the communist revolution-to-come as if the groundwork laid by the industrial revolution can lead to no other conclusion (Danchev xx). Carpentier’s diagnosis—contrary to what Zamora and Farris, and even Carpentier himself believes—serves as a type of manifesto.

5. Although Carpentier often railed against surrealism, he himself was a surrealist practitioner while living in France. After spending “forty days in jail in 1927 for signing a manifesto against the Cuban Gerardo Machado dictatorship (1925-33),” Carpentier had a “fortuitous encounter with the surrealist poet Robert Desnos” who “offered [Carpentier] papers so that he could flee to France” where—within 48 hours of his arrival—he “joined the new cult of Surrealism” and was welcomed like a brother by all involved (Takolander, *Catching Butterflies* 93). He contributed to an array of surrealist texts including Georges Bataille’s *Documentos*, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes’s *Biffure*, and even Andre Breton’s *La Revolution Surrealiste*, before Breton excommunicated him and several others for what he considered a betrayal of his vision of surrealism (93-94).

6. Of the *uncanny*, Freud similarly writes, “Indeed, we get the impression that many languages are without a word for this particular variety of what is fearful” (“Uncanny” 370).

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7. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “mestizaje” as “Reproduction between and cultural intermixing of Spanish and Indigenous American people (originally in Mexico, and subsequently also in other parts of Latin America); miscegenation, racial and cultural intermixing.” Suzanne Césaire refers to the miscegenation of Caribbean culture when she calls for a specifically Martinique surrealism: “Finally, those sordid contemporary antinomies of black/white, European/African, civilized/savage will be transcended. The magical power of the mahoulis will be recovered, drawn forth from living sources. Colonial stupidity will be purified in the blue welding flame. Our value as metal, our cutting edge of steel, our amazing communions will be rediscovered. Surrealism—the tightrope of our hope” (126). Clearly, not all Caribbean writers were as intent as Carpentier on breaking ties with the surrealists. Suzanne’s husband, the surrealist Martinique poet Aimé Césaire anticipates Carpentier in writing of the marvelousness—and specialized otherness—of the black men populating the Caribbean:

[S]lavery weighs heavily upon us, we know. But to attribute our present poverty to this alone is to forget that under the slave regime the nigger was magnificent. The better to treat him as a beast, they had to make him a beast. They broke his body. They tormented his soul. And the nigger resisted. Resisted the whip, professors in their mortarboards, theologians, sadists. Contempt was met with humor—that force that the dour Indian never knew. The gloom of false science was combated with ringing laughter. Cruelty was sometimes combated with *patience*, sometimes with revolt, never with resignation. (79-80)

“Only those,” he continues, “who *don’t know* what Africa was would be *surprised* at this” [emphasis mine] (80). Here lies an implicit indictment: those who marvel at alterity are merely ignorant of the “other.”

8. Carpentier anticipates Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, who assert that the word “decorative” carries a pejorative meaning in the contemporary art world: “the prejudice against the decorative has a long history and is based on hierarchies: fine art above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art, men’s art above women’s art” (176-77). “By focusing on these hierarchies,” they continue, “we discovered a disturbing belief system based on the moral superiority of the art of Western civilization” (176). Carpentier challenges the West’s superiority by asserting the beauty of decoration—always proliferating in the strange juxtapositions of the New World—in opposition to the efficient and austere lines of European high modernism. His rejection of Western *purity* becomes especially apparent in his celebration of creole culture in the Americas.

9. What she names “slippage” bears a resemblance to what E.M. Forster called “prophecy”: the theme of the prophetic artist, “is the universe, or something universal, but he is not necessarily going to ‘say’ anything about the universe; he proposes to sing, and the *strangeness* of song arising in the halls of fiction is bound to give us a shock” [emphasis mine] (125). The resulting question ties prophecy directly to Carpentier’s idea of the marvelous real: “How will song,” Forster asks, “combine with the furniture of common sense?” (125).

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10. Carpentier's compulsive cataloguing, on display in *The Kingdom of This World* and in his expository essays on the marvelous real, becomes even more pronounced in his subsequent novels *The Lost Steps* and *Explosion in a Cathedral*, both re-translated by Adrian Nathan West and released by Penguin Classics in 2023.
11. For a detailed look at the "arduous ripples" of the Haitian Revolution "across borders and time" see the third chapter of John Lowe's *Calypso Magnolia*.

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“My People”:  
Demagoguery versus Communalism in  
Ernest J. Gaines’s *In My Father’s House*  
and *A Lesson Before Dying*

*Robert Lance Snyder*

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“Ernest J. Gaines’s entire career,” observes Jeffrey J. Folks, “has been marked by a search for a useful African-American cultural tradition.” As this critic goes on to explain, the challenge for Gaines in that endeavor was to recover “an inherited culture with roots in folk and popular tradition” well after the African-American Diaspora and more recent migration out of the South by people of color (“Communal” 259). The future novelist experienced that dislocation when in 1948 he was brought at age fifteen to join his mother and stepfather in Vallejo, California, leaving behind his earlier life on Pointe Coupee Plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, where he had been raised by a highly esteemed aunt named Augusteen Jefferson. After earning a degree in literature from San Francisco State University, spending two years in the Army, winning a Stanford University writing fellowship, and publishing several short stories, Gaines then returned to his home state in 1963. From that time onward this native son’s ten books of fiction repeatedly addressed not only a tension between the responsibility one feels he or she owes to self versus a formative community but also how such a distinction is fundamentally spurious. If Gaines’s canon revolves around a recurrent motif, it is that the enterprise of ontological completion is inseparable from embracing one’s indebtedness to a subculture as a matrix of self-fashioning.

In what follows I propose to trace this theme by juxtaposing *In My Father’s House* (1978) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). The earlier text is set in 1970 shortly after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, pursuant to which, as William R. Nash explores, the Civil Rights Movement became divided by differences between the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Stokely Carmichael’s Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) regarding strategic policy. Focusing on Reverend Phillip J. Martin, the charismatic sixty-year-old pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church in St. Adrienne and president of the parish’s Civil Rights Committee, the novel chronicles

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his personal downfall as well as his betrayal of the local community's trust when he is visited by an illegitimate son christened Etienne at his birth late in 1942 but who in adulthood adopted the name of Robert X. If as one of his devoted supporters claims their leader is "Our Martin Luther King, you might say" (16), poised in the words of an older female admirer to become "the first black Congressman from Louisiana" (38), a younger and more skeptical African-American named Shepherd Lewis hints at the pastor's demagoguery by dubbing him "King Martin" (30). Encapsulated here is a generational shift that replicates the SCLC-SNCC schism, but *In My Father's House* quickly establishes the hollow-ness of a convert to Christianity at age forty-five who, relying on John 14:2 ("In my Father's house are many mansions" [KJV]) as a sermon proof text, lives with his thirty-five-year-old wife Alma and their three children in a "ranch-style brick house" that is "the most expensive and elegant owned by a black family in St. Adrienne" (28). Reverend Martin, rumored to be "involved with women other than his wife," is also fond of expensive suits, gold jewelry, and his big Chrysler (34).

Socioeconomically far removed from the world of Phillip Martin is Grant Wiggins, the first-person narrator of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Nearly six years after his graduation from an unspecified university in the early 1940s, this "chosen one" who lives in the former slaves' quarter with his aunt, Tante Lou, is an elementary-school teacher on Henri Pichot's sugarcane plantation in Bayonne, the fictive parish seat for St. Raphael. Loathing the place and his job there, Wiggins bristles when with his aunt and her close friend Miss Emma Glenn he is expected to enter Pichot's antebellum house via the back door. After the visit Grant vents his frustration to his Creole girlfriend Vivian Baptiste, a graduate of Xavier University and mother of two children who is seeking a divorce, by saying: "I need to go someplace where I can feel I'm living [. . .]. I don't want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church. [. . .] I want to be with you, someplace where we could have a choice of things to do. I don't feel alive here" (29). After she later reminds Grant that he can always return to California where his parents live, he recalls having done so in the summer following his junior year at college but "came back, which pleased my aunt," though since then, he adds, "I had been running in place, unable to accept what used to be my life, unable to leave it" (102). Wiggins honors his formative bond with and indebtedness to matriarch Tante Lou, who has sacrificed greatly to ensure his higher education, but he chafes at the constraints thereby imposed on his freedom of individuation.

The tension between egoistic ambition and communalism is the generative core of *In My Father's House*, a novel that Gaines admitted he had trouble writing over the span of seven years because he could

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not narrate it from a first-person point of view<sup>2</sup> but also because, as he said to Anne Gray Brown in 2006, he could not resolve the issue of “how to have Phillip Martin redeem himself” (“Scribe” 25). The latter admission is particularly revealing because it bears on a thorny issue in African-American literature, one which Gaines historicizes in the same colloquy:

Fathers and sons were brought here in chains and then separated on the auction block in slave-holding places. I don't think that they've made a connection since. Too often our fathers cannot help the sons. African American fathers do not send us to war. They're very seldom our judges when we're standing at trial. They're not often our doctors. They don't represent us when we're in the courtroom. We often blame him [sic] without realizing that he's never been given the opportunity to defend us. We've fought in every war that this country has ever had, beginning with the War of Independence, and yet, when it comes to defending our families, our children, our wives, some way or another the white man makes all of those decisions, and that separates father and son. (“Scribe” 22-23)

Gaines here targets a white hegemony for the generationally repeated rupture between African-American fathers and sons, a view voiced by Reverend Martin when in the closing chapter of *In My Father's House* he asserts to old drinking buddy Chippo Simon that “what keep[s] us [fathers and sons] apart is a paralysis we inherited from slavery. [. . .] I thought fifteen years ago when I found religion I had overthrown my paralysis. But it's still there” (202). If as Folks proposes in “Ernest Gaines and the New South” the 1978 novel is its author's “most significant treatment of modernity” (39), the protagonist's blaming the legacy of slavery for his abdication of moral responsibility in fathering three illegitimate children—Etienne, Antoine, and Justine—by a woman named Johanna Rey on the Reno Plantation in the 1940s seems disingenuous, not least because he cannot even recall their names and has not provided for their welfare since his religious conversion.<sup>3</sup> The root cause of Phillip Martin's abdication, suggests Gaines, is self-absorption bordering on a narcissism that later manifests itself as demagoguery, related ultimately to his abandoning a formative sense of communalism although in his public rhetoric he refers often to “our people.”

Mary Ellen Doyle has pointed out that *In My Father's House* is “structured in thirds: the suspense about Robert X's identity and concern with the minister (chapters 1 through 4), Phillip's internal and external attempts to grapple with his son's return (chapters 5 through

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8), and his pursuit of Chippo Simon and his confrontation with his own soul (chapters 9 through 11)" (157). The opening section sets the stage for Reverend Martin's crisis of accountability when at a Saturday evening gathering of supporters at his residence the widely admired civil-rights leader is rallying the faithful for a protest demonstration six days later against Albert Chenal, a bigoted white storeowner who opposes equal rights. After urging the audience to pray for Chenal because "Love is the only thing. Understanding the only thing" when "You got some out there screaming Black Power" (37), he collapses to the floor upon glimpsing the wraithlike face of Etienne/Robert X across the crowded room. The burly minister's prostration, of course, alarms all those in attendance, while the only white supporters there, attorney Anthony McVay and pharmacist Octave Bacheron, hover over Martin before helping him to his feet and guiding him to a bedroom. Seemingly oblivious to the symbolic drama that has just unfolded is the emaciated tenant staying at Virginia Colar's boarding house whom kindly disposed Elijah Green, church choir director, has prevailed on a reluctant Shepherd Lewis to bring to the party. Before then Robert X tells Lewis that he is going to die soon because his "soul is sick" (27), and after Reverend Martin's collapse he once more vanishes.

The second part of *In My Father's House* recounts that over the next four days, while avoiding his wife Alma's solicitude and feigning compliance with doctor's orders for bed rest, Phillip obsesses about the specter from his past, recalling a recent dream involving his separation from the boy, whose name he still cannot recall, twenty-one years ago. In the dream Martin envisions Etienne's returning some money Phillip had given to Johanna before he ran after the six-year-old child, but the omniscient narrator reports that "he hadn't run after the boy at all" and that, when "the woman" tried to return the pittance, "he hit her with his fist" (53). Little wonder, then, that Pastor Martin wakes up screaming from his unconscious memory's falsification of the past. By the end of chapter 5 he can resurrect an image of Johanna with "That good, light-brown café-au-lait color. [. . .] So different from all the others, so much better than all the others" (67), but as the chapter closes he is still asking himself, "Who really was Phillip Martin, and what, if anything, had he really done?" (72).

Developments thus far bear out Karla F. C. Holloway's argument that "Martin's selfish focus on his own stature," stemming from a Eurocentric quest for "personal [. . .] individuation," soon "excludes him from the community that had been responsible for his identity" (181, 182). The rupture between the minister and the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee is dramatized in the novel's eighth chapter, but before then he betrays their collective mission for purely selfish

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reasons. When Reverend Martin learns that white Sheriff Nolan has arrested Etienne/Robert X for vagrancy, he goes to the jail with check-book in hand to pay bail for his son's release, only to be told that his money is not wanted and that his sole alternative is to call off the upcoming protest against Albert Chenal. "I can't do that to my people" (91), pleads Martin proprietorially, but the intransigent Nolan declares that "When they nailed that coffin down on King, that demonstrating was over with. All you doing now is bullshitting the people, that's all. It's over with" (92). After the deal is struck, Phillip takes his first-born son on a long drive along the St. Charles River to establish some rapport with him. When asked about his mother, Etienne/Robert X calmly reveals that he has returned to Louisiana for revenge. To the uncomprehending father's question "Revenge for what?" his firstborn son replies: "For destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family: my mama, my brother, my sister" (99). When the self-named Robert X then takes umbrage at his progenitor's addressing him as "boy," Phillip makes himself a target of derision upon retorting, "I love you now, and I loved you then. I was too weak then to do anything. Today I have strength. 'Cause today I have God" (100). The pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church goes on to elaborate his conversion from being a "brutish animal" who couldn't "stand," alleging that "They had branded that in us from the time of slavery" (102), but his self-exculpation is lost on an irretrievably alienated son.

Symptomatic of Reverend Martin's abortive effort to vindicate himself and redeem the past is that, after watching Etienne/Robert X walk away toward a distant woods, he returns not to his wife Alma but instead to his godmother, Angelina Rouie, on nearby Reno Plantation. Although he has not visited his "Nanane" for some time, she tells him that Chippo Simon has recently come back from San Francisco where he saw Johanna Rey only a month ago. Ecstatic at the news, which seems to offer a glimmer of hope for ameliorating his past, Phillip drives back to his house in St. Adrienne, but upon arrival there he is confronted by five members of the Civil Rights Committee. Having heard of the "deal" their pastor "made with Chenal" (119), in head deacon Howard Mills's words, they remind him that "No one person can come before the cause, Reverend. Not even you" (122). Thumping his chest, the autocrat reminds all those present that "I'm president of this committee" (124), but eighty-four-year-old Mills eloquently explains that, with the exception of assistant pastor Jonathan Robillard at age twenty-two, they all have sons who refuse to return to a segregated Deep South. Martin's plangent reply, "Still, I'm only a man [. . .]—and a father" (127), fails to prevent the quorum in attendance from voting him out of office. Immediately after the committee's decision Phillip asks Alma to talk

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to their children before his departure for Baton Rouge to meet with Chipppo Simon, but she retorts, "Say what to the children, Phillip? Say something about their brother? Say what about their brother?" (135). A page later Alma tells him that ever since they met he has been running, but away from what she does not know. Now stripped of his position as the St. Adrienne civil-rights leader, a humbled Martin makes his way to Louisiana's capital in an aimless, meandering search.

The final section of *In My Father's House* loosely resembles the "Nighttown" sequence in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), for in its lengthy ninth chapter Gaines's protagonist revisits the old haunts of his youth. Starting his quest for Simon on East Boulevard, the now-dilapidated neighborhood where he and Chipppo used to gamble, drink, womanize, and engage in barroom brawls, Phillip meets several interlocutors who represent the past's fraught continuation into the present. The first are two sisters named Geneva and Theresa who are returning from a Catholic church where they had lit candles for the latter's deceased son three years ago. Aware of Martin's identity from newspaper and television coverage, Theresa tells him that "They killed one of our people today" (144), a black Viet Nam veteran gunned down for stealing some food from white storeowners. While thinking about the incident, Phillip next encounters a Reverend Peters,<sup>4</sup> who over coffee admonishes him never to doubt because God "works in mysterious ways." The platitude prompts the St. Adrienne minister to retort: "There's a gap between us and our sons, Peters, that even He [. . .] can't seem to close" (154). The next person Martin meets is by far the most important in the chapter. Like the young man killed that same day in Baton Rouge, twenty-four-year-old Billy survived a tour in Viet Nam only to return home disillusioned by the passivity of his fellow African-Americans ("Niggers go'n be niggers. For the rest of they lives they go'n be niggers—you hear me?" [159]). His avowed goal is to radicalize a million insurrectionists trained in guerrilla tactics who in a one-day campaign will overthrow the United States of America. When Phillip cautions him that he is playing a dangerous game, the young militant accepts the fact that "most of us'll die" before saying: "This country here is the last crutch for Western Civilization—what *they* call civilization [. . .]. Burn it down, you destroy Western Civilization. You put the world back right—let it start all over again" (162; italics in original). To Phillip's query about how the gap between black fathers and sons can be closed, however, Billy has no answer. As though to emphasize the futility of Reverend Martin's quest for insights from outside himself, the chapter's final encounter occurs at the Red Top Saloon where he happens to meet former lover Adeline Toussaint, who makes clear her readiness to resume her sexual liaison with the man "at war with [his] soul" (178).

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Lillie Anne Brown has contended that “Phillip must lend himself to an exterior surrogacy if self-evolution and personal growth are the desired result” (18). As she reads *In My Father’s House*, its beleaguered protagonist moves “toward truth and reconciliation” (23), achieving in the end “a level of integrity” en route to redemption (29). I find this argument unpersuasive, not least because as he admitted in a previously cited comment Gaines could not resolve the issue of “how to have Phillip Martin redeem himself.” That the minister does not finally gravitate toward a reckoning with his past, one attesting to integrity of character, is manifest from his reaction to Chippo Simon’s story of Johanna Rey’s life in San Francisco with her three children. Reluctant to narrate what he learned while there, Chippo prefaces his tale by saying, “Johanna still love you, Phillip” (184). When Martin cavalierly replies that he still loves her, Gaines writes:

Chippo grunted and looked at Phillip accusingly. “No, no,” he said. “You don’t love her that way.” He touched his chest with his glass. “Deep, deep love for you. Up till a month ago, she thought you might knock on that door any moment to take her back.”

“After twenty years?” Phillip asked.

“Up to a month ago she still thought so.”

“Is she all right?” Phillip asked.

“You mean is she crazy?”

He didn’t say it. But Chippo could see that’s what he meant. (185)

The passage underscores Phillip’s shallow attachment to Johanna, which is unsurprising in light of an earlier disclosure that Etienne “was not his only child out of wedlock. He had children that he knew of by three or four other women” (150). Returning to the tenth chapter, we along with Martin then learn from Simon the rest of the tragic saga. After their sister Justine’s rape by one of Johanna’s temporary lovers, a pool-hall wastrel named Quick George, younger brother Antoine served five years in prison for killing him, after which Antoine and Justine both married, moved to New York, and began families of their own. During that earlier crisis, however, Etienne, as the oldest son and

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“man of the house” (196), defaulted on his responsibility to avenge his sister and ever since then has been living in a “crypt” (193).

One would think that this backstory would motivate Reverend Phillip Martin, albeit belatedly, to act, but in Gaines’s concise concluding chapter, after recounting to Chipppo Simon his physical collapse upon glimpsing Etienne/Robert X in his St. Adrienne house, Phillip can only rhetoricize. “When will we stand up and tell our people the truth?” he asks. “When will we make our legs go to our sons and make our arms protect our sons?” (201-02). Moments later Shepherd Lewis reports that earlier in the day Etienne committed suicide by drowning himself in Big Man Bayou. A disbelieving Martin then recalls that “They took the leadership from me today,” casting the blame on his “young punk assistant” Jonathan (204). Quickly drinking a few glasses of whiskey, he boasts that he is going to pay a visit to Adeline Toussaint, reverting to his typical behavior when younger and calling into question his *metanoia* at age forty-five. Upon Chipppo’s and Shepherd’s blocking the door, Phillip swings his big fists at both men, but when the testosterone-fueled standoff ends the dejected minister is consoled by two women. Beverly Ricord, the long-time girlfriend of Shepherd Lewis, gently admonishes Reverend Martin that he “wanted too much from man, from God. Too much all at one time. It don’t work that way” (211). Reminding him that he has another son, Patrick, a student in her class, Beverly urges Phillip to join his wife in an adjacent room. When he does, lying down on a bed beside her and admitting that “I’m lost, Alma. I’m lost,” she replies in the novel’s closing line: “Shhh. Shhh. We just go’n have to start again” (214).

This coda of *In My Father’s House* reinforces the restorative nurturing that black women are so often portrayed as providing in African-American fiction, but it should also be noted that the rupture between Reverend Phillip Martin and Etienne/Robert X is not a consequence of fatherless households as the legacy of slavery. The novel explicitly records that in his youth Phillip “lived with *his parents* in one house” on Reno Plantation, whereas Johanna Rey “lived with her mother and sister farther down the quarters” (63; italics added). No generational inevitability is implied as accounting for the rupture between a black father and his son, though the detail that Johanna lived “farther down the quarters” does suggest that in siring three illegitimate children by her Phillip may have been taking advantage of a plantation caste system. His attraction to Johanna’s “good, light-brown café-au-lait” hair, as cited earlier, “So different from all the others, so much better than all the others,” conceivably parallels Grant Wiggins’s love for Vivian Baptiste in *A Lesson Before Dying*, though otherwise the two novels are incommensurate in how they portray male accountabil-

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ity in relation to community. Gaines's 1993 narrative, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, is a magisterial achievement because it "offers us a vision in which [African-American men] must socially construct their individual identities through the locus of communal connections" (Magill 61). The paradigm of this new masculinity, moreover, valorizes reciprocity and responsibility.

Numbering fewer than seven full pages, *Lesson's* opening chapter deftly establishes the novel's precipitating event. Twenty-one-year-old Jefferson (no surname given), one of Grant's former students at the plantation school, is unjustly sentenced to death by electrocution for being a bystander when two of his acquaintances, Brother and Bear, engaged in a shootout with a Cajun storekeeper, Alcee Gropé, over the sale of a pint of Apple White wine. All three die in the senseless confrontation, but only Jefferson is indicted for its outcome. "I was not there" at the trial, begins the novel, "yet I was there" (3). The highly nuanced first line establishes the court proceeding's pervasive impact on the Pichot plantation community, where the verdict by "twelve white men" is a foregone conclusion (8). Knowing the odds are stacked against his client, the appointed defense attorney invokes once regnant racist stereotypes, including those drawn from the pseudoscience of phrenology, in an attempt to absolve Jefferson.

Gentlemen of the jury, look at him—look at him—look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? [. . .] Look at the shape of his skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan [. . .] anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan? [. . .] What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. (7-8)

The lawyer ends his speech by saying, "Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this" (8), a representation that anguishes Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, who tells Grant Wiggins that "I don't want them to kill no hog [. . .]. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet" (13).<sup>5</sup> Under pressure from his aunt, Tante Lou, Grant is tasked with the job of making Jefferson a man—that is, of instilling a sense of human self-worth—in the face of racist dehumanization. The mission entails symbolically a revision of

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American history because Jefferson is named after a Founding Father who became the third President of the United States.

Before he ascended to that office, Thomas Jefferson hesitantly allowed his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) to be published, a text in which the wealthy owner of over two hundred slaves rued the institution of enslavement but also advanced his “suspicion” that

[. . .] blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them? This unfortunate difference of color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. (143)<sup>6</sup>

Although he balks at what is expected of him, protesting that “I teach what the white folks around here tell me to teach—reading, writing, and ’rithmetic. They never told me how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store” (13), we see in the fifth chapter how, frustrated with the limitations of his job, Wiggins has unwittingly adopted the stern authoritarianism of his employers by using his Westcott ruler to impose physical discipline on recalcitrant students. When after graphically describing to them how Jefferson will die Grant mentions the expectation to “make him a man,” he naively adds, “Exactly what I’m trying to do here with you now: to make you responsible young men and young ladies” (39). Before long, however, Gaines’s narrator will learn that an altogether different approach to imparting autonomy, one founded in the creative power of his community, is needed to instill the rudiments of that difficult lesson.

He comes to that discovery slowly and only after the white superintendent of schools, Dr. Joseph Morgan, makes his annual visit. Calling the teacher Higgins rather than Wiggins, the florid and overweight functionary asks the students a few academic questions before inspecting the children’s teeth, as though they were livestock, and delivering a ten-minute lecture on nutrition. “Beans were good, he said. Not only just good, but very, very good. [. . .] Then he said fish and greens were good. And exercise was good. In other words, hard work was good for the young body” (56), especially if the students’ future involved only the prospect of picking cotton in the fields. A few weeks later, after

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recalling his own former teacher Matthew Antoine, a “big mulatto” who cynically advised his plantation charges that “there was no other choice but to run and run” (62), Grant takes Miss Emma and Tante Lou for their initial visits to the jail in Bayonne thirteen miles away where Jefferson is incarcerated. Bringing some home-cooked food, they encounter a sullen Jefferson preoccupied with his impending death. Thereafter, Miss Emma being unable to endure her godson’s dejection, Grant makes the trip alone. When he opens the basket of fried chicken, sweet potatoes, and biscuits prepared for the prisoner, Grant tells him that “You’re a human being, Jefferson. You’re a man” (83), only to see a defiant Jefferson mimic a hog slaver over its feed. At this point in *A Lesson Before Dying*, roughly a third of the way into the narrative, Grant Wiggins is similar to Marcus Payne in Gaines’s *Of Love and Dust* (1967) because “[h]e is disconnected from members of his community” (Babb 254), but that separation begins gradually to change in the twelfth chapter.

Appropriately enough, the process begins with an example of African-American folk culture’s vitality. En route home from the jail and needing “time to get [his] lies straight” for Miss Emma (86-87), Grant stops off at the Rainbow Club where two old men are animatedly celebrating Jackie Robinson’s athletic prowess in his second year with the Brooklyn Dodgers after breaking the color barrier in major-league baseball on 15 April 1947. While observing their reenactment of Robinson’s base-stealing ability, Wiggins recalls how at age seventeen he and all other residents in the “quarters” thrilled to a radio broadcast of boxer Joe Louis’s rematch victory over Max Schmeling on 22 June 1938. To his own surprise Grant discovers that both experiences corroborate an Irish lecturer’s assertion at Wiggins’s predominantly black university, a claim he did not understand at the time, that Joyce’s “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” from *Dubliners* (1914) had a universal theme. Writes Gaines:

It was not until years later that I saw what he meant. I had gone to bars, to barbershops; I had stood on street corners, and I had gone to many suppers there in the quarter. But I had never really listened to what was being said. Then I began to listen, to listen closely to how they talked about their heroes, how they talked about the dead and about how great the dead had once been. I heard it everywhere. (90)

A lecture about a literary text here gives rise in retrospect to an enhanced appreciation of Grant’s orally transmitted African-American cultural heritage. And that, in turn, paves the way for his coming to

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terms with what heretofore he has rejected out of hand about the local community from which he has distanced himself.

Representing all that Wiggins has repudiated is the figure of Reverend Mose Ambrose, a “simple, devoted believer” who without any theological training serves as the plantation church’s pastor (101). Although he knows that Grant is a backslider, Ambrose finds that his pious admonitions to Jefferson such as “Put all your faith in Him, and He’ll bring you through” (121) elicit only enmity, forcing him reluctantly to rely on the teacher as an emissary to the condemned prisoner. Named after the biblical Moses and fourth-century St. Ambrose, the pastor has a frictive relationship with the young man he once baptized when Grant buys a twenty-dollar portable radio for Jefferson so that the condemned prisoner, less than a month and a half before his death, can listen to popular music. In one confrontation a frustrated Reverend Ambrose protests that Jefferson “needs God in that cell, and not that sin box” (181). Three weeks later the tension between Ambrose and Wiggins comes to a head when the minister asks, “You think you educated?” (214). Grant’s reply that he learned the skills he teaches prompts the vehement retort: “What did you learn about your own people? [. . .] You learned your reading, writing, and ’rithmetic, but you don’t know nothing. You don’t even know yourself” (215). Lest readers be inclined to construe this exchange as only an intergenerational rivalry between a religious leader of the community and a younger apostate, Gaines assigns Reverend Ambrose a peroration that despite its length warrants quotation here:

You think you educated, but you not. You think you the only person ever had to lie? You think I never had to lie?

[. . .] You know, all right. That’s why you look down on me, because you know I lie. [. . .] I lie at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. Cause ’reading, writing, and ’rithmetic is not enough. You think that’s all they sent you to school for? They sent you to school to relieve pain, to relieve hurt—and if you have to lie to do it, then you lie. You lie and you lie and you lie. [. . .] And that’s the difference between me and you, boy; that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. (217-18)

In this speech, as Nash posits, “the minister makes a powerful, eloquent case for his role in the community and demonstrates an understanding of both himself and his congregation that far outreaches Grant’s level of awareness” (351). A few chapters earlier, however, the teacher

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made a breakthrough in his interaction with Jefferson, one of which Reverend Ambrose is unaware, that attests to his maturation as an involved member of the community.

The scene between Grant and Jefferson occurs in the jail's dayroom where Sheriff Guidry has allowed the shackled prisoner to receive visitors instead of in his cramped cell. Once the date of 8 April, the second Friday after Easter, is set for the execution because "It couldn't happen during Lent" (156), Grant provides his former student with a notebook and pencil, urging him to record his thoughts for their subsequent discussion. In a visit soon thereafter, while walking around the dayroom's perimeter beyond earshot of Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose, Grant asks: "Do you know what a hero is, Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do. [. . .] I could never be a hero." He then exhorts Jefferson to "give something to [Miss Emma], to me, to those children in the quarter," adding that "I want you to show [the white people] the difference between what they think you are and what you can be" (191). Continuing his appeal, the now fully engaged teacher says: "White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth—and that's a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth" (192). Both injunctions resonate deeply with Jefferson, who during a subsequent visit will say, "Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing" (222). The success of Grant's appeal to the former field laborer's intrinsic manhood becomes apparent, though, when Jefferson comments, "Yes, I'm youman [human], Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn't know that 'fore now" (224).<sup>7</sup> To this avowal a few weeks before Jefferson's death a humbled Grant can only reply, "You're more a man than I am [. . .]. My eyes have been closed all my life. Yes, we all need you. Every last one of us" (225).

Chapter 29, "Jefferson's Diary," of *A Lesson Before Dying* is "the most critical chapter in the novel," as Anne Gray Brown has shown at length, because in it Jefferson demonstrates that he has "internalize[d] his position as 'the chosen one'" ("Writing for Life" 23). The journal's entries are rendered in the phonetic vernacular of Jefferson's speech and without benefit of either capitalization or punctuation, but in only nine stream-of-consciousness pages their author "reconstructs himself as a viable member of the community, achieving, in his last hours, what he has been unable to achieve as a free man: a sense of visibility, pride, and integrity" (Brown, "Writing for Life" 40). Despite physical tremors on the eve of his execution and uncertainty about the idea of an afterlife, Jefferson knows the importance of the example he sets for his people.

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At dawn the next day, after taking note of the sun's rise and the song of a bluebird, he thus can calmly say goodbye to Mr. Wiggins, urging him to "tell them im strong tell them im a man" (234). By virtue of its very simplicity and immediacy, "Jefferson's Diary" is a moving attestation of human dignity.

The novel's polyphonic next chapter, where Gaines presents vignettes of individual reactions to Jefferson's impending fate, dramatizes the event's impact on the community. After an anecdotal description of a black truck pulling up behind the courthouse to unload some tarpaulin-covered equipment, we learn matter-of-factly from Grant Wiggins that "My aunt did not sleep at the house the night before. Like many of the other older people in the quarter, she spent the night with Miss Emma" (236). Meanwhile at the Rainbow Club in Bayonne, where Grant goes for a drink, owners Joe and Thelma Claiborne are closing up early. The segment devoted to Sheriff Guidry at home suggests, surprisingly, his regret about the execution: "As the sheriff ate, he talked to his wife, but he avoided looking her directly in the face most of the time. He told her that he wished this day had never gotten here, but now that it had, he had to do what he had to do" (238). The observations of other townspeople both black and white—department-store employees Melvina Jack and Juanita deJean, prison custodian Fee Jinkins, café worker Clay Lemon, young deputy Paul Bonin—attest to the event's pervasive repercussions.

The coda of *A Lesson Before Dying*, so different from that of *In My Father's House*, reinforces the unity and respect that are the legacy of Jefferson's death. At noon on the appointed day Grant has his students remain on their knees until news arrives from the courthouse. All the African-American residents, as decided at church, have taken the day off from work to honor Jefferson. Meanwhile, restlessly interrogating himself on the school's grounds, the teacher sees Paul Bonin approaching him with Jefferson's notebook in hand. "He wanted me to bring you this," says the deputy, before adding: "He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins. [. . .] When [state-appointed executioner Henry] Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, 'Tell Nannan I walked.' And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked" (253-54). As indicated by Paul's addressing Grant by his full name in this eyewitness testimony, Bonin "stands alone in refusing to follow the racist script of the Southern white majority" and "gives Grant Wiggins a reason for staying to teach the children" (Piacentino 83). Thus begins a modest step toward racial reconciliation as the two men clasp hands as friends.

At the risk of stating the obvious, that expression of mutuality and reciprocal respect is vastly different from the hollow gesture of sup-

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port that white political allies Anthony McVay, who warns off Jonathan Robillard by calling him “boy,” and Octave Bacheron show to Reverend Phillip J. Martin near the start of *In My Father's House* while helping him to his feet after a symbolic fall. In the 1978 text such intervention is linked to the demagoguery that undermines Reverend Phillip J. Martin; fifteen years later, however, Gaines captured the healing integrity to be found in a genuine commitment to communalism. That the author could envision a healing rapprochement in *A Lesson Before Dying* as set in the late 1940s attests to his profound grasp of what at the time was only latent in American culture. The distinguished novelist's image now graces a U.S.P.S. commemorative stamp in the Black Heritage Series, but a widely available photograph of a beaming Gaines while seated in a wheelchair and gazing up at President Barack Obama, who is bowed over their joined hands, during conferral of the National Medal of Arts in 2012 seems to project another moment of mutual respect.

## Notes

1. The trope of “chosen one” found often in African-American literature and based on scriptural allusions to Jesus refers to the child who by virtue of some special ability is invested with the other family members' aspirations. As the eldest of twelve children, Gaines admitted in an interview with Anne Gray Brown that he was the “chosen one” to write letters for illiterate neighbors on the False River Plantation during his youth (“Scribe” 13). For a discussion of the metaphor during the period when Gaines was writing his fiction, see Robert J. Patterson's 2007 doctoral dissertation.
2. Gaines commented in a 1978 interview that his eventually resorting to an omniscient narratology was dictated by Martin's self-isolation: “You cannot tell that story from the minister's point of view because the minister keeps too much inside him. He does not reveal it—he won't reveal it to anybody” (Rowell 41).
3. Regarding Etienne in particular, “Nothing suggests that [Reverend Martin] ever thinks of a lost son, recalls his childhood appearance, wonders about him, or has a restless conscience in his regard” (Doyle 159).
4. Lillie Anne Brown mistakenly identifies Reverend Peters as “the Reno Plantation preacher” and associates him with Angelina Rouie (23). Nowhere, however, does Gaines's text so identify this secondary character, nor does Angelina ever mention a Reverend Peters. He seems instead to be simply a lonely, somewhat senile cleric who frequents Dettie's Dinette for company and conversation with other customers.

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5. The lawyer's comparison of Jefferson to a hog recalls, as Philip Auger suggests (74), the opening line of Claude McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die" published in the July 1919 issue of *The Liberator* magazine. The line reads: "If we must die, let it not be like hogs."

6. I am indebted to Carlyle V. Thompson's article on *A Lesson Before Dying* for drawing my attention to this passage from Jefferson's *Notes*.

7. David E. Magill suggests two other possible meanings of "I'm youman" besides "I'm human," a recognition that Jefferson is not a hog but a human, like Grant. Writes this critic: "The word could also mean 'I'm you—man,' implying his acceptance of his masculine identity, again like Grant. The most interesting meaning, however, is one explicitly connecting the two men together: 'I'm you, man.' The recognition of their similarity is the final step in Jefferson's quest and reflects the mission that Jefferson shares with Grant" (71). Magill ends his essay by observing that Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* "articulates a communal black masculinity as a radical political identity for African-American men" (73), a view that Keith Clark explores probingly and at greater length in a book chapter subtitled "Ernest J. Gaines and the Neo-Masculinist Literary Imagination" (65-93).

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## About the Author

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# Introduction to Statius: *Thebaid* 1.1-196

Douglas McFarland

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The subject of the *Thebaid*, composed by Statius during the reign of Domitian in the late first century C.E., is the craving for power and the self-consuming rage over its loss. Unlike Lucan, who chose a watershed moment in the late Republic for the subject of his epic, Statius turned to the myth of the war fought between the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, over the kingship of Thebes. The poem opens on the disfigured and bitterly resentful Oedipus, cursing his sons for their disrespect and calling on Tisiphone, the goddess of revenge, to punish them. Dismissive of shared rule, the brothers engage in a horrific battle for absolute supremacy. Their mutual hatred, stoked by the Furies, culminates in their killing of each other. Their funeral pyre is itself not immune from their manic rivalry, as two competing flames consume their corpses. The *Thebaid* may well be a commentary on the increasingly cruel and arbitrary rule of the emperor Domitian, but the poem speaks to any political environment beset by the self-indulgent will of its capricious leaders.

The *Thebaid* is characterized by the tension between a mannerist texture of extravagance and irony and skillfully crafted rhetorical design. Oedipus's invocation of Tisiphone at the beginning of the poem provides a telling example of this tension. Oedipus recalls his own downward spiraling history in a mere fourteen lines, within a series of dependent conditional clauses that are resolved with a single imperative verb. This is followed by another dependent clause functioning as a coda to the fourteen-line sentence. The compression and periodic construction of the tragic narrative strains to contain the visceral impact of patricide and incest. The aim of my translation is to preserve this tension, as well as lead readers to one of the many fine translations currently available of Statius's masterpiece of post-Virgilian epic poetry.

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*Thebaid* 1.1-196

Warring brothers, I sing, and anger  
Unspeakable, a kingdom contested  
With hate and Thebes a city defiled.  
These I recount; these the Pierian muse  
Inflames my memory to recollect.  
But goddess, from what point do you demand  
I wend? Shall I sing the first beginnings  
Of the cursed tribe? The rape of Europa,  
The rigid bond of a father's edict,  
Dooming Cadmus to scour the sea, to find  
The daughter astride the bull? The chain  
Would stretch far back, if I should unravel  
Its links and recall the warrior plowman  
Sowing dragon's teeth in wicked furrows;  
Or the song by which Amphion moved stones  
To buttress Tyrian walls; the threatening  
Anger of Bacchus aimed at kindred city;  
The cruel work of Juno at whom luckless  
Athamas raised his bow; or why Ino  
Did not fear to fall with Palaemone  
Into the vast Ionian waters.  
Better now I skip the lamentation,  
As well the eminence of Cadmus. Let me  
Sing, my muse, but the tangled, twisted house  
Of Oedipus. Let me string my lyre and tell of  
Theban wars and royal scepter bearing death  
To tyrants born from single womb, death  
That cannot dampen frenzied madness.  
Let me tell of rebel flames rekindled  
On the funeral pyre, and strewn corpses  
Lacking ritual mounds. Let me sing of  
Cities depleted by civil slaughter,  
When the blue Dircean stream blushed red,  
Stained by Argive blood; when Thetis bristled  
At Ismenos, accustomed to rub gently  
Dry banks, yet now cascading in one great  
Flood. Oh Clio, which hero will you first  
Grant me declaim? Shall it be Tydeus  
Whose wrath spewed beyond measure? Or shall  
I recall the abyss suddenly gaping

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Open for the laurel browed warrior priest?  
Or crazed Hippomedon, hurling cadavers  
Into the hostile river? Must I first  
Lament the battles of the shameless  
Arcadian, or must I sing the horror  
Of Campaneus, a horror like no other?  
Oedipus had already dug deeply  
Into unholy eyes with righteous hands,  
Condemning his shame to eternal  
Night, dragging his sullied soul to long drawn  
Death. Although succumbing to the shadows  
Of a sunken lair, tending household gods  
Forever denied heaven's rays, a cruel  
Illumination circled round his mind  
On indefatigable wings, while the black  
Erinyes, avengers of crime, settled  
In the well spring of his soul. Up he turned  
Vacuous orbs, the bleeding, pitiful  
Retribution for still living and beat  
The hollow ground with hands stained  
Blood red and with fierce voice thus implored:  
"Gods, you who rule over the guilty souls  
Of Tartarus, a realm narrow and teeming  
With penal lash, and Styx that I perceive,  
Though livid in shrouded pit; but mostly you,  
Tisiphone, oft called by me, think worthy  
This twisted and crooked and serpentine  
Prayer. If ever I should merit some  
Favor; if falling from my mother's womb  
Your lap secured me; if you offered strength  
When father Laius spiked my feet with iron;  
If I sought the Delphic pool flowing midst  
Twin peaks, to pursue my hidden lineage,  
Though I might have welcomed a spurious  
Parent; if on narrow path of triple forked  
Phocis, I grappled with the aged king,  
And severed the head from his paternal  
Trunk; if with your aid I shrewdly unpacked  
The riddle of the duplicitous Sphinx;  
If I entered my mother's woeful marriage  
Bed with sugared fury and oft spent nights  
Making unspeakable love and fathering  
Children for you, Tisiphone, for you;

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If mad for punishment I soon pressed inward  
My eager fingers and bequeathed my eyes  
To a pitiful mother; then hear me.  
Hear me, if what I beg seems worthy,  
Of a sort that you yourself might grant  
To a frenzied supplicant. Those I begot,  
No matter in whose bed, refused to guide  
My steps nor assuage my grief with words,  
Though eyeless I stumbled, powerless to  
Command others. Look on these proud tyrants.  
See how they thrive by my ruin, sneering at  
My groans and skipping past my darkness.  
Will the Father of Gods lazily sit?  
Will he carelessly dismiss my sorrow?  
Tisiphone, true avenger, you at least  
Approach and weave a web of punishment  
For all my brood. Don the diadem wet  
With gore that these bloody nails once took hold.  
Spurred on by a father's prayer, turn upon  
Brothers and let iron cleave kindred bonds.  
Queen of hell's pit, bestow the impious  
Evil I crave. Not slowly will my sons  
Follow your call; come my worthy goddess,  
Come and mark my ungrateful spawn."  
The vicious Fury turned her fierce visage  
Onto the profane supplicant. By chance  
The goddess of revenge was sitting by dank  
Cocytos, where she had allowed the snakes  
Entwined midst strands of hair to slip free and lick  
Ripples of sulphureous stream. She leapt  
Up suddenly from bitter smelling shore,  
More quickly than Jove's fire or falling stars.  
A quaking crowd of hollow creatures scurried  
Aside, fearing to cross her spiteful path.  
Moving through shadows and fields darkened by  
Swarms of dead souls, she sought the gated  
Threshold of Taenarus that bars return  
To upper realms. Day felt her presence,  
And Night with a pitch black cloud befuddled  
Day's translucent team. From a distance Atlas  
Let the globe fall from off his wavering neck.  
Emerging through the vale of Malea,  
She hurried along the well-known track

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To Thebes. No other path did she travel  
Along more quickly, nor preferred her own  
Tartarus more; one hundred horned snakes  
Rose up to shroud her visage, a lesser  
Brood than teemed behind her horrible head.  
A harsh glow lurked within the Fury's  
Hollow eyes, just as Phoebe is tinted  
Blushing red in Atracian marble.  
Imbued with venom her skin was stretched,  
Swollen with bloody stuff. In the black recess  
Of her mouth a fiery vapor loitered,  
From which came long drought, disease, famine, and  
Death common to all. A hideous wrap  
Stiffened on her back, fastened by hellish  
Blue hooks cross her breast. Atropos and  
Proserpina attended to her trappings.  
Anger rattled both hands: one flashed with  
Funereal fire; the other whipped the air  
With a hydra seething with life.  
She stopped where the steepest peak of Cithaeron  
Touches heaven and spewed out a feral hissing  
From her green serpentine locks, a signal  
That echoes all along the Achaean shore  
And Peloponese. Parnassus rising  
Up mid sky and Spartan Eurota too,  
Both heard the spiteful noise; and thunder  
Rocked wavering Oeta to its side;  
Isthmos barely resisted twin swells.  
The genetrix herself, Palaemona,  
Snatched her boy to maternal bosom  
From atop the dolphin's arching back.  
On Camdean summit she checked her hurried  
flight and befouled the Theban gods of hearth  
With veil of gloom. A sudden tremor struck  
Fraternal marrow, and Fury flowed  
Downward, deep within their tribal souls;  
Then Resentment, sickened by another's good  
Fortune; then Fear, the begetter of hate;  
Then the savage zeal of unaccompanied  
Rule; then Ambition, impatient with lesser  
Privilege; then Joy to hold the highest rank  
Without rival; finally Disharmony,  
The progeny of coequal power.

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Just as when a farmer labors to yoke  
Fierce-eyed young bullocks to single plow,  
They bristle; for not yet have gnarled shoulders  
Bore the pressing weight of common ploughshare.  
They pull along differing tracks, work loose their fetters,  
And with equal strength plow muddled furrows.  
Hardly otherwise, the savage brothers  
Wrangled over who shall rule, who shall  
Serve, till agreeing to exchange each year  
Sovereign power for disdainful exile.  
A malignant pact now compelled Fortune  
To swing unabated in the passage  
Of time from one brother to the other.  
This was the familial bond of siblings.  
This the only delay to fraternal war,  
A hopeless covenant mired in prompt  
Decay. Not yet did paneled ceilings  
Glow tawny brown with solid metal;  
Not yet did towering atria shine,  
Uplifted on Greek marble, broad enough  
For crowds of clients; nor did royal lance  
And girded steel yet secure the restless  
Sleep of kings; nor did revelers fancy  
Bejeweled cups or gold encrusted plates.  
Only naked power drove these brothers  
To wage war over a pauper's kingdom.  
While they bickered over who should plow  
The unkempt acreage of squalid Dirce,  
Or who vaunt the lowly regal power  
Of the Tyrian exile's town, civil law  
And divine decree and human goodness  
And decency in life and in death, all  
Perished. What is the limit of your wrath,  
You unrepentant pair? What if you were  
To falsely seek the boundaries of heaven's  
Twin poles, where the rising sun looks out on  
Dawn's eastern hinge before setting westward  
Through the Iberian gate, the lands Sol  
Brushes with oblique light, where Boreas  
Chills or where moist Notos warms with tepid  
Breath? What if the treasure of Phrygia  
And Tyre were amassed in a single space?  
A scene of horror and edifice of

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Wickedness, not wealth nor empire, aptly served  
Your hatred. Monstrous rage alone secured  
The tainted seat of Oedipus.  
Polynices cursed his adverse fortune,  
His share of power delayed by casting of  
Lots. But for you, savage Eteocles,  
That day was yours and yours alone; whenever  
You gazed across your palace, unburdened  
Of rivals, you understood all the power  
Of law was yours and never might a head  
Rise above your own. Already grievous  
Murmurings circulated midst the fickle  
Common crowds. This the way of the mob,  
Always to prefer the absent ruler  
To the familiar; one from the Theban herd,  
Accustomed to strike the highest with lowest  
Venom and never to bear a tyrant's  
Weight pressing down atop a willing neck,  
Spoke these words: "Is this the portion harsh Fate  
Has dealt to Thebes? To endlessly exchange  
One fearsome ruler for yet another,  
To submit unwilling necks to bartered  
Shackles? They take their turns to twist our lives.  
They lay their hands on Fortune and render  
It light and capricious. Will I always  
Serve in turn as minion to exiled kings?  
Highest of gods, the sower of earth's seeds,  
Is this your will, to rotate twin rulers,  
Coupled together as perverse allies?  
Or does the ancient augury extend  
From that time when Cadmus was told  
To search in vain the Carpathian sea  
For the Sidonian bull's enticing  
Burden and as exile acquired a realm  
In Hyantean fields, bequeathing a sign  
Of fraternal war that arose from the cleft  
In fecund Theban soil? See how power  
hardens its brow and grows still more fierce  
Once it needs not share. What menace exudes  
From the face of Eteocles. How his  
Arrogance willfully oppresses all.  
Will he ever be content a mere citizen?  
Yet consider his brother, gentle with

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Supplicants, virtuous in prayer, and more  
Lenient with justice. How miraculous!  
No wonder! He has yet to rule alone.  
We sell cheap. We bow down to whatever  
Master looms. Just as when chill Boreas  
Pushes sails one way and cloud bearing Eurus  
Another, the fate of the ship wavers,  
Held aloft midst contentious winds; thus we  
Hang, quaking with fear and suffering without  
Measure. Eteocles as yet commands;  
His brother eagerly awaits.”

### About the Translator

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*Reading Typographically: Immersed in Print in Early Modern France*, by Geoffrey Turnovsky, Stanford University Press, 2024, 328 pp. \$70 (hardcover).

Print history, especially book history, has produced rich scholarship on the shift from orality to literacy or print on the one hand, and the emergence of the novel as it conditioned reading into an immersive experience on the other hand. While the focus on the shift speaks to the evolution of print technology, the latter investigates the psychological impact of the genre on reading practices. The sentimental nature of episodes and the moral content of the stories, among other things, have been closely examined as factors that shaped reading as a practice and cultures of the book. Such practices and cultures govern processes of and expectations from books and reading even today, or especially today, as the book is held up as a nobler sibling of distracting digital content.

In *Reading Typographically*, Geoffrey Turnovsky steps away from these macro narratives of the evolution of the book to turn to the micro sites of typeface, maps, book formats, epistolary practices, and punctuation as evident in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. The history he unearths from these lenses is a deeply researched account of the changing materialities of the book. Some of it gets reflected in the physical form of the book through changes in font or punctuation (discussed at greater length below). But some of it manifests in institutionalisation of reading practices. For instance, the inculcation of the “gallant culture” of reading required the framing of the narrative or the contents of the book in the voice of a secretary-narrator who was merely recording what was heard, making it seem that such documents were meant for closed circles but accidentally leaked to a larger, unintended audience or readers. This made the works acquire greater social currency as they generated conversations about the elite or aristocratic circles. Another instance is that of the rise of the shorter format of the book called the duodecimo, a pocketbook of some sorts, in the contemporary sense of the hardback and the paperback. The format’s portability facilitated sociality and collective reading. A variation of this experiment with the innovation of the format of the book is that of editorial framing of the epistolary genre as anchored in real personal correspondence: the text was created out of “real” letters that were being circulated for the benefit of the larger audiences, deflecting the attention away from the supposed letter writer. The practice might be understood more in terms of modern-day public relations antics. The “editors” laboriously prefaced the letters with details of the chang-

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es being made to adapt the letters to a book so that they could become accessible to the broad public. Together, these practices add nuance to the rise of the novel (within the larger book history) in England, which has been studied for the ways in which it established the conventions of the epistolary genre and, before it, of the adventure story of the protagonists (Robinson Crusoe and Lemuel Gulliver).

France has already been used “as a laboratory for exploring questions in the history of reading” (27), a field that Turnovsky further enriches by paying attention to the minutiae and the marginalia, of which the stories of typeface and punctuation are the most interesting. His overall argument is that books began to be seen as immersive spaces at this point in time and place thanks to certain innovations that rendered the book a transparent medium. As typeface and punctuation were perfected, for instance, the reading time and journey of books became seamless, drawing attention away from the book as an object and toward the meaning, story, or emotion.

Garamond, the font named after its inventor, the punch cutter, became popular for its “ability to guide the reader’s attention away from itself and onto the ‘text’” (67). In another context, that of the small book which required individual readers to hold the book very close to their face, Didot typeface, named after the publisher, proved to facilitate readers’ intimacy with books. While Garamond’s bolder lines made the book as a medium transparent, helping the reader distinguish between alphabets and words in a regular book, Didot, with its thin and pale form, brought the book physically closer to the reader. With several such examples and histories, Turnovsky talks about immersive reading in terms of diminishing distances, literal and metaphorical. It constitutes a precious history for, as Turnovsky reminds the readers, reading does not leave traces and readers do not record their experiences of reading. In such a scenario, turning to components such as typeface helps contextualize the roots of reading: as publishers invested in newer print-friendly fonts, they discarded artisanal designs as these were seen as obstructing the reading process. Today, ebook gadgets allow one to change the font type and size with such ease that such details in the evolution of reading can be easily overlooked. However, it needs to be documented lest we forget the very recent roots of reading-as-forgetting:

An inattention to the book’s materiality became a necessary condition for a full experience of the text. The inattention was cultivated by the power of the work’s effusive, emotional language and rhetoric, to be sure, which led the reader, absorbed by the narrative, to “forget” that she or he was reading. But the

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book itself, as a typographic object engineered to obfuscate itself as a medium, also critically directed the reader's attention away. Indeed, the sentimental language and the pared-down typography go hand in hand: the rhetoric of the eighteenth-century novel is couched in a typographic framework outside of which it would not be able to function. (72)

Apart from typeface, punctuation poses interesting questions to contemporary reading habits. Turnovsky points out that editors work extensively on texts from this period because these texts did not carry punctuation, especially around direct speech, indicating switches between speakers and characters. While without the punctuation marks, today's readers would be disoriented, readers in early modern France faced no such challenge. On the contrary, punctuation would have seemed artificial and as interfering with reading. Just as one does not "see" punctuation when listening to different accounts narrated by a person in everyday situations, readers of that time faced no problems navigating who spoke when:

In their original forms, these works famously lacked modern paragraph divisions. The text was instead presented in an unbroken format over scores, even hundreds, of pages . . . In fact, no dedicated punctuation at all distinguishes characters' speech from the text that envelops it—no quotation marks, guillemets, dashes, or inverted commas. Only interpolated clauses—"she said," "he replied," and the like—set off by commas or in parentheses (if the clause is long), indicate to readers that a text is now no longer the narrative voice but the transcription of a character's speech and identify for readers who is, at a given moment, speaking. (178-79)

Turnovsky's astonishing examples and observations point to a lacunae in book history, which should not just be seen in terms of technologies of mass production or publishing institutions or content, style, and genres of writing. That archives contain traces to understand how books were held and how they were read is a point of reflection for various linguistic and national histories of reading. Thus, Turnovsky contributes to further research possibilities on the arrival of the book in various cultures: did all kinds of readers take to it in similar ways, wanting to be immersed in the narrative, and to what extent did typography aid that process through its self-effacement toward the larger goal of making the book a transparent medium?

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Finally, one must note that as a book that tells us how we have come to equate reading with being lost in the book, *Reading Typographically* is, ironically, very immersive, sucking the reader into a rich narrative around the different texts and moments of the period it is concerned with, especially if the readers are familiar with the French literature and social history of the period.

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