

EAPSU Online:  
A Journal of Critical  
and Creative Work

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# EAPSU Online: A Journal of Critical and Creative Work

Table of Contents

Volume 11, Fall 2014

## Introduction

*Jeffrey Hotz & Kim McKay, Editors* ..... 4

## From Imagining to Experiencing: Ted Kooser’s Unpredictable Sense of Place

*Phillip Howerton, Missouri State University, West Plains*..... 6

## “I Had Been as Easy to Rape as the Land He Owned”: An Ecofeminist Reading of Tawni O’Dell’s *Sister Mine*

*Diane Todd Bucci, Robert Morris University* ..... 18

## Coming on Midnight in a House of Bebop

*Patrick Walters, Kutztown University* ..... 37

## Rekindling Metafictional Insight: The Many Faces of S.

*Courtney Jacobs, Colorado Mountain College* ..... 47

## Selected Poetry

*Bill Boggs, Slippery Rock University* ..... 58

## Entering the Anus: The Construction of Space in Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene*

*Justin Holliday, Clemson University* ..... 63

## A Royal and Melancholy Blue

*Richard Madigan, East Stroudsburg University* ..... 85

## Teaching Incest, the Erotic, and Lesbianism; or, The Troubles Teaching Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Calixthe Beyala’s *Your Name Shall Be Tanga*

*Christine Grogan, University of South Florida*..... 94

**EAPSU ONLINE submission and subscription information**.....125

## Introduction

We are very happy to present the Fall 2014 edition of *EAPSU Online*. As usual, we have fine articles of scholarship and interpretation, wonderful poetry, and an excellent work of creative non-fiction.

Our opening essay, Phillip Howerton's "From Imagining to Experiencing: Ted Kooser's Unpredictable Sense of Place" examines a selection of Ted Kooser's poetry in terms of Kooser's creation of spaces that are both universal and regional, inflected with a Midwestern sensibility. Howerton gives an astute, sensitive view of Kooser's style and method.

Diane Todd Bucci's "I Had Been as Easy to Rape as the Land He Owned": An Ecofeminist Reading of Tawni O'Dell's *Sister Mine*" offers a detailed ecologically sensitive reading of Tawni O'Dell's novel about the aftermath of a coal mining disaster in Pennsylvanian town. Bucci argues that O'Dell's popular novel provides a strong critique of capitalism that is rooted in exploitation of the land and the worker.

Patrick Walters' work of creative non-fiction, "Coming on Midnight in a House of Bebop," an excerpt from a larger project, presents an eloquent vision of jazz as it exists today and as it existed in the past in a small jazz club in Philadelphia. Walters' prose memorably captures the moods and rhythms of jazz music and the culture that surrounds it.

The five poems by Bill Boggs develop an ecological and spiritual awareness, which is conveyed in beautifully rhythmic language and exquisite imagery. Boggs' poetry is a true delight.

Justin Holliday's "Entering the Anus: The Construction of Space in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*" is an engaging essay on Ben Jonson's play in terms of closeted, private homoerotic experiences in the play that are sustaining versus public homoerotic expressions, which are presented as destabilizing.

Richard Madigan's "A Royal and Melancholy and Blue" returns to the space of jazz with a comparative analysis of William Matthews' poem "Mood Indigo" and Duke Ellington's 1930 composition, "Mood Indigo." Madigan explicates the dignified, exalted, and pained state of mind of the blues.

Last, Christine Grogan's "Teaching Incest, the Erotic, and Lesbianism; or, The Troubles Teaching Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall Be Tanga*" develops a thorough, probing textual interpretation of two novels and a study of the difficulties of teaching texts dealing with incest, a subject that is typically viewed as too taboo for discussion.

For the Fall 2015 edition, Kim McKay and I will be turning things over to a new editor, Dr. Carl Seiple from Kutztown University, who will bring his expertise to the journal. We give Carl the

warmest welcome. It has been our pleasure to co-edit *EAPSU Online*, and we hope you enjoy the 2014 edition.

Sincerely,

The Editors

Dr. Jeffrey Hotz  
Associate Professor of English  
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania

&

Dr. Kim McKay  
Associate Professor of English  
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania

## From Imagining to Experiencing: Ted Kooser's Unpredictable Sense of Place

*Phillip Howerton, Missouri State University, West Plains*

John T. Frederick, in *Out of the Midwest* (1944), observes that it is often argued that a good writer “uses the literary substance which he knows best, the life of his own neighborhood, of his own city or state—the material about which he is most likely to be able to write with meaning” (xv). The literary career of Ted Kooser grants this view validity, for, as Kooser has often stated, he has never lived anywhere except the Midwest, and he has always written about what he has experienced. Although Kooser’s themes are too universal and his subjects too diverse for his poetry to be classified as regionalism, his poetry does contribute to the imagining of the Midwest. For example, his use of specific place names and rural imagery provide a Midwestern setting, and his clear and forthright style fulfills the expectations many have of a Midwestern voice. A more expressive aspect of his poetry, however, is his use of observed detail, detail that he describes in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* as being “unexpected, unpredictable” (105). Kooser’s use of the unpredictable not only infuses many of his poems with a sense of place and authenticity, it also engages the everyday experiences of readers to acclimate them to the unfamiliar surroundings of the Midwest.

Kooser’s use of specific place names grounds his poetry in the region where he has lived his life. In *Rooted: Seven Midwest Writers of Place*, David R. Pichaske notes that “[p]lace is important to literature for several reasons. For one thing, many American place names have a ring all their own. A litany of place names lends that music—and mystique—to a poem or story. ... Place also provides concrete, recognizable markers of geography” (5). Several such place

names appear in Kooser's collection *Flying at Night*, and, as though to establish the boundaries of his region, he incorporates several such names into titles of these poems: "In a Country Cemetery in Iowa," "Late Nights in Minnesota," "So This is Nebraska," "Fort Robinson," "North of Alliance," "A Hot Night in Wheat Country," "A Place in Kansas," "A Roadside Shrine in Kansas," and "Walking at Noon Near the Burlington Depot in Lincoln, Nebraska." Several more specific places are mentioned in the bodies of the poems. In this same collection, Kooser also provides the imagery that brings the region to readers, imagery such as "a few black snowdrifts" (17), "the empty barn, the empty silo" (65), "freshly plowed fields" (18), "the loosening barns" (36), and when he describes a child's toys strewn in the lawn of an abandoned farmhouse: "a rubber cow / a rusty tractor with a broken plow, / a doll in overalls" (63).

Kooser also contributes to the imagining of the Midwest by using a poetic voice that seems to reflect Midwesterner speech. Edward Hirsch, while commenting on Kooser's appointment as poet laureate, observed that "[s]omething about the Great Plains seems to foster a plain, homemade style, a sturdy forthrightness with hidden depths, a hard-won clarity chastened by experience. It is an unadorned, pragmatic, quintessentially American poetry of empty places, of farmland and low-slung cities." This plainness and clarity of writing from the Great Plains or the Midwest has been referenced by numerous critics. David Baker notes that it is commonly argued that "a plain style... is a necessary feature of Midwestern aesthetics" because, as the common reasoning goes, "[t]he land is plain, the people are plain, so the poetry should be plain" (344). Likewise, several critics have observed that Kooser's style is often simple and direct. David Mason, in his review of *Winter Morning Walks* states that Kooser "has chosen a plain style..." (192), and Dana Gioia in *Can Poetry Matter?* states that Kooser's "style is

accomplished but extremely simple—his diction drawn from common speech, his syntax conversational” (qtd. in “Ted”). Kooser responds to such evaluations with characteristic goodwill and confidence: “I don’t object to my poems being called accessible, and I work hard during the process of revision to make them clear. I revise away from difficulty and toward clarity and simplicity” (“An Interview” 336). But what is most important here is that Kooser does not revise to affect a Midwestern voice and neither does he allow his style to diminish the complexity of his subject matter.

More pertinent than Kooser’s use of place names or Midwestern voice is his use of detail. This is a key aspect of Kooser’s aesthetics, and one that he devotes an entire chapter to in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*. Most every rhetoric handbook and composition instructor urges students to move beyond merely telling by using detail to show, Ezra Pound warned, “Go in fear of abstractions,” and William Carlos Williams chided, “No ideas but in things.” Kooser underscores the central role of detail when he notes that although “[m]emory and the imagination are excellent tools when it comes to creating a setting,” a poem built of details drawn from imagination often will not “feel quite real because we would have built it from the predictable details, from our imaginations” (95, 105). He then adds that “[t]he imagination makes a lousy realist; it places in its scenes only those things that it prefers to see there” (106). In an essay in *The Midwest Quarterly*, Paul McCallum, a former student of Kooser’s, states that Kooser vividly demonstrated this point about unexpected detail one evening when prompting the class to list descriptors of an abandoned farmhouse. McCallum says that students “conjured up an old car on blocks, a sagging porch, broken windows, a shutter hanging by a single nail, peeling paint—all commonplace.” Then Kooser said, “Now... suppose we show an empty potato

chip bag blowing about in the front yard.” McCallum notes that “[t]he effect was startling: the unexpected detail made all the stock images seem suddenly fresh, as if we were seeing such a place for the first time” (408-409).

Kooser does not employ details to highlight the differences of a place but to reveal the depth and commonality of experiences. Regional features have been emphasized in creative works for a variety of reasons, such as promoting unity between peoples of different regions, capturing regional culture before it was leveled by the forces of modernity, challenging the pioneer myth—and the more insidious purposes, as noted by Richard H. Brodhead, of serving “an elite need for the primitive to be made available as leisure outlet” or “offer[ing] freshly found primitive places for the mental resort of the sophisticated” (132, 133). Kooser does not focus on or exaggerate the uniqueness of the Midwest. “What’s important to me,” he says, “is whether the poetry that gets written is any good. Where it got written doesn’t make much difference” (qtd. in Stillwell 134). In many of his poems, readers do not visit an unfamiliar place as much as they re-visit a familiar experience. The setting is there because this is the place Kooser has known, and, once Kooser has made a connection to the reader through experience, details of the Midwest are added unto it, and readers are inside the experience looking out at the region rather than outside the region looking in.

One of Kooser’s most popular and critically acclaimed poems, “An Old Photograph,” from his 1985 collection *Flying at Night*, illustrates his use of the unexpected detail to create authenticity and universal experience to locate readers inside the Midwest. This poem describes an old photograph of an elderly farm couple. The first three lines inform readers that “this old couple, Nils and Lydia” are sixty years old and that they will remain married for

seventy years. Such an introduction signals that this will be a portrait of a special and ageless love, a poem describing this couple's ever-growing affection that will matured into completeness, a Hallmark love—but this is not Hallmark verse. After introducing this husband and wife, who are determined and bound to spend another thirty years together, Kooser delivers the unexpected detail: they are “already like brother and sister” (5). This is a comparison fraught with numerous connotations, none of which bode well for this marriage. This comparison suggests that they share a physical resemblance, that they have become almost the same blood. Although there remains a form of affection, it is an affection lacking its former passion, romance, and physical attraction, and it is an affection resembling that of siblings, one perhaps tempered by jealousy, rivalry, and a host of grudges. This also implies that they are becoming too much alike to love as they once loved, that they have become realists who recognize that they have required too much of one another for too long, and that they have worn apart, like blades of old scissors.

Such stagnation and emotional distance is a common reality in long-term relationships everywhere, not just in the Midwest of yesteryear. Numerous demands of ordinary, everyday life drain the extraordinary from life every day: a nine-to-five job, graduate school, a mortgage, a car payment, a daily commute to a job that has lost its potential and purpose, the loss of sense of self, a circle of friends in the grasp of the same alienation, the stresses of parenthood, social isolation, a loss of family members, and life being traded for someone else's dreams. The sorrows and trials that Nils' and Lydia's affection for one another has brought upon them are repeated every day in relationships everywhere. The status of their lives together is something that readers recognize and understand even though the challenges confronting this farm

couple, such as a plague of grasshoppers, barns burning, and drought are not common contemporary antagonists.

Another poem from *Flying at Night*, “Late February,” contains one of the most startling images in Kooser’s poetry. The first stanza of the poem depicts a warming spring day; the snow is melting and there are several images of spring joy, such as bicycles, carnivals, and children playing in puddles. But the tone of the poem turns dark at the beginning of the second stanza as Kooser notes that “such a spring is brief” and threatening images creep into the poem like a winter draft under an old door. The sense of the ominous enters—the sense that something has gone wrong—when it is mentioned that the cornfields are “staked for streets and sewers” (15). This echoes the farm foreclosures of the 1980s and perpetual urban sprawl. With this image, the pastoral melts away with the snow, revealing a brutal, shocking reality:

the body of a farmer  
missing since fall  
will show up  
in his garden tomorrow,  
as unexpected  
as a tulip. (16)

These concluding lines contain two surprising details. The first is the body of the farmer in his garden. This is a clear allusion to the closing scene of *Giants in the Earth*, in which the corpse of Per Hansa surprises both the readers and the “troop of young boys” who stand transfixed before the dead man sitting against a haystack (452). Such a reality challenges idealistic images of the Midwest as a place of self-reliance and wholesome survival. The second unexpected detail is Kooser’s seemingly absurd comparison of finding this corpse with finding a tulip. But this comparison is not absurd, for each spring we expect the tulips—even anticipate them—but they always surprise us. One day they are just pointed leaves wedged out of the

earth, the next day they have stretched into color, surprising us, like the first explosion of a fireworks display. Tragedies, too, surprise us even though we expect them. We try to predict them and even attempt to insure ourselves against them, but tragedies happen, and we are shocked and taken aback when they do.

Kooser returns to death as a source of the unexpected later in the same collection as the narrator of "In January, 1962," describes his eighty-eight-year-old grandfather's reaction to the grandmother's funeral. While creating the setting, Kooser engages several unobtrusive details, details expected to be found in the Midwest: the little frozen creek that cuts through the cornfield, "Broken, brown stubble," "a green tent" that "flapped / under the cedars," and these place readers squarely in the Midwest (98). These details are not unexpected; they may be a little out of the ordinary experience for many people, yet they do not seem foreign, but suddenly, as the grandfather watches from the farmhouse window, the unexpected appears:

Throughout the day before,  
he'd stayed there by the window watching  
the blue woodsmoke from the thawing-barrels  
catch in the bitter wind and vanish... (98)

The image of the smoke and of the thawing barrel shakes readers out of the pastoral. Here the earth is so cold that it has to be thawed, and burial in the earth appears impractical and unnatural; the curtain has been pulled away from the funeral rituals, and dust to dust gives no comfort, for there remains only the gruesome and chilling reality that the earth is a cold place and that death is unforgiving. The thawing barrel suggests that this is a difficult burial, a forced relationship between body and earth and is a direct challenge to the desire to hold onto the person being buried. Such moments will be experienced by all, for death of others is a situation all must confront repeatedly, and here it is delivered to readers in a harsh image. The

uncommon reminds readers of the common, and they can now see and experience the Midwest through shared experiences.

Although Kooser focuses less upon the Midwest in *Delights and Shadow* than in earlier collections, the region is still a significant presence. One poem that delivers Midwestern imagery, engages unexpected detail, and connects to universal experience is "Mother." The Midwest is not directly identified in this poem by a specific place name, yet several details, such as wild plums, new grass in the burnt ditches, tornadoes, a storm walking on legs of lightning, and geese on a pond, when read in relation to Kooser's body of work, clearly reference the Midwest. The narrator is addressing his late mother who had passed away exactly one month before. The first four of the five stanzas identify common events that she would have enjoyed: the "lacy white" and "timeless perfume" of plum blossoms, the "fat spring clouds... somersaulting, rumbling east," and sprouting red peonies "burning in circles like birthday candles" (25). This is a reaction to a common experience, for after a death of a loved one the small things once enjoyed by the departed capture the imagination of the living. Up to this point Kooser has introduced nothing unexpected, but then he says, "You asked me if I would be sad when it happened" (25). The surprising question reported in this line provides immediate insight into the intimacy and complexity of this relationship. The narrator then moves on to what the mother has given that will continue to give, primarily the way she had taught him to look at the world "to see the life at play in everything" (26). He closes by noting that without this way of seeing the world he "would have to be lonely forever," and he circumvents this loneliness not simply by entertaining his mind with metaphor, but by turning his experiences into poems that transcend regional boundaries through experience.

A more recent poem, "I Turn My Back," which appeared in the Spring/Summer 2013 issue of *Great River Review*, is a surrealistic response to the urban sprawl that threatens natural areas and farmland. In this poem Kooser relates how, after he figuratively turned his "back for a moment, the prairie / was draining away" to be replaced by houses, sidewalks, and streets, and then whole cities. Much as William Cullen Bryant in "The Prairies," Kooser looks out at the plains and contemplates the rise and fall of societies, but unlike Bryant, who was offering a largely positive comment on the future, Kooser laments the destruction of nature and the rural and closes his poem by noting that "small children / were playing in the last puddles of green" (32). The unexpected in this poem is not the loss of nature or the rise of the cities; rather, it is the rapidity of the transformation from nature to city, the speed at which the beige empires of housing developments and the concrete and asphalt surround the last of nature's green. In this poem of nine lines, this transformation, one that is too often viewed as gradual and natural, is revealed to be what is really is: an irresponsible, myopic, and frenzied destruction parading under the euphemistic guise of "development." Although such sprawl may appear slow-paced and relatively innocuous at the local level, on a national scale it is operating at the rapid pace suggested by Kooser.

Although much of Kooser's poetry is set in a specific region, his poems do not habitually emphasize the peculiar or the unfamiliar, for the universal, not the regional, is his subject. As R. S. Gwynn observes in his review of *Delights and Shadows*, many of Kooser's "poems reside in a territory that should be familiar to most of us, that is, in our own backyards," and he adds, "If Kooser inhabits any region, it is not primarily one of place but of custom, which is to say the daily actions of the "ordinary' life" (683). Speaking of the Midwest, Kooser stated in an

interview in *The Midwest Quarterly*, “I have never lived anywhere else, and I’ve always written about what I’ve experienced. I might have written about different landscapes if I’d lived somewhere else, but I think the poems might have been much the same. My interest is in writing about the ordinary, and the ordinary is everywhere” (335). Kooser repeatedly prompts readers to observe the ordinary, to perceive the extraordinary in this ordinary, and to image a region that is beyond their ordinary experience.

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**“I Had Been as Easy to Rape as the Land He Owned”: An Ecofeminist Reading of  
Tawni O’Dell’s *Sister Mine***

***Diane Todd Bucci, Robert Morris University***

**“The trouble with the miner... is that he has no one to speak for him. He stands alone...”  
Upton Sinclair, *King Coal***

For anyone living in the coal-rich Appalachian regions of southwestern Pennsylvania and West Virginia, stories of lives lost to the mining industry are all too real. Not long ago, Quecreek and Sago became household names when nine workers were rescued from the flooded Quecreek mine in Pennsylvania and twelve died at the Sago explosion in West Virginia. In April of 2010, twenty-nine miners were killed in the Upper Big Branch disaster in West Virginia. Mining tragedies occur beyond our backyards, as well. In May 2014, over three hundred people were killed in a coal mine fire in Turkey. As we all know, it’s only a matter of time before the next mining catastrophe. *Sister Mine* (2007) is the third novel by bestselling author Tawni O’Dell, whose first novel, *Back Roads*, was an Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection. O’Dell is largely overlooked by scholars, but for those interested in regional writing, her work is worth closer examination. A second look also reveals that an ecofeminist reading of *Sister Mine* is appropriate. Indeed, O’Dell vividly depicts the maltreatment of women and nature and indicts the capitalistic forces that are responsible for the oppression of the working classes, while her richly developed characters defy gender stereotypes.

*Sister Mine*, set in the fictitious town of Jolly Mount, Pennsylvania and perhaps loosely based on the events surrounding what occurred at Quecreek, dramatizes the aftermath of a

violent mine explosion that nearly took the lives of five workers, labeled by the book's media the Jolly Mount Five. Through the novel's protagonist, Shae-Lynn, the reader is introduced to each of the survivors as he tries to heal his physical and emotional wounds and grapples with whether he should sue their employer, no easy decision given the employees' conviction that "miners don't sue coal companies" (45). During this time, Shae-Lynn's pregnant sister, whom Shae-Lynn believed was killed by their abusive father eighteen years earlier, reappears and reveals her unconventional means of earning a living.

Ecofeminist Mary Mellor defines ecofeminism as "a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (*Feminism and Ecology* 1). There has been resistance to ecofeminism as a theoretical approach in that it has been criticized by some feminists who see a connection between women and nature as problematic because, traditionally, they have been assigned subordinating positions in the man/woman and culture/nature dichotomies. In fact, ecofeminist Greta Gaard explains that scholars have rejected ecofeminism "as an exclusively essentialist standpoint" and turned to alternative "frameworks" to advance their writing (660), but Gaard asserts that ecofeminism *is* a viable framework. To be sure, when a female protagonist proclaims, "I had been as easy to rape as the land he owned" (232), this is a less-than-subtle hint that the novel necessitates an ecofeminist reading.

In her discussion of the significance of place in environmental and American Indian literatures, Donelle N. Dreese explains that "[a]ll human beings develop their own sense of place through life that determines why they love certain regions... It is not an uncommon human experience to long for the particularities of a certain place that have had a powerful

interior effect on their human psyche” (1). She goes on to say that “[p]erhaps there is no place more influential in the development of the human identity than the place where one grows up” (2). It is logical, then, that an author’s connection to her hometown would manifest itself in her writing. In fact, in her well-known essay “Place in Fiction,” Eudora Welty asserts that “[i]t is both natural and sensible that the place where we have our roots should become the setting, the first and primary proving ground, of our fiction” (129). Thus, it is not surprising that O’Dell, who grew up in Indiana, Pennsylvania, feels a strong bond with the region and has chosen to use the area as the setting for all of her novels. Significant portions of her narratives are devoted to developing a sense of place, and at times, the Pennsylvania landscape becomes more than a backdrop for the events of her novels, especially *Sister Mine*.

Just as O’Dell left and later returned to Pennsylvania so, too, does Shae-Lynn, who left the region with her five-year-old son when she was twenty-two to work as a police officer in Washington, D.C. Several years pass, and when a young foreigner with whom she has an affair inquires about her “home,” she finds herself questioning exactly where her home is: “Wasn’t Washington, D.C., my home? Didn’t I live here?” (123), she wonders. In truth, she has begun to resent the chaotic urban environment where “nights were never dark and silence was never quiet” (122). She finds herself yearning for the openness of the landscape that she left behind in the hills of southwestern Pennsylvania as an immigrant pines for her native soil, and she regrets that her son cannot experience the “independence of journeying alone on a country road” (122). Ultimately, Shae-Lynn recognizes, “there was only one place I considered home” (123), and when she is liberated by her abusive father’s death (in yet another mine explosion), she takes a job with the local police and returns to Jolly Mount, her homeland.

Dreese points to a “respect for nature and an awareness of interconnectedness” as being among the basic tenets of ecocriticism (4), a discipline related to ecofeminism. She goes on to say that “we are interconnected with the world around us and, therefore, studying the environment involves studying how human beings affect and interact with the environment” (4). It is clear that Shae-Lynn feels a respect for and connection with the region’s landscape. When she was a child, she believed that the land was alive and that “it could feel” (9); and as an adult, she admires the familiar countryside and appreciates the air that smells like “the wet, earthy smell of an old, shattered tree stump when the sun starts to warm it after a rainstorm” (164). But despite the splendor of the region’s landscape, O’Dell makes it clear that the land has been tainted by man’s greed.

Originally, Jolly Mount was a trading post that, ironically, was celebrated for its natural beauty; in fact, it was named Jolimont, meaning “at the foot of the beautiful mountain” (80), by French trappers. It wasn’t long, though, before man began depriving the region of its natural resources: “the beaver were trapped and hunted into extinction” (80), and “the town lost its original reason to exist” (80). The theme of depletion foretells the town’s ultimate demise for the discovery of coal was its “new and final reason to exist” (80). The surrounding valleys are already plagued by abandoned roads and railroad tracks and tipples that were once used for pouring coal into waiting train cars: “When the trees lose their leaves in winter, its [a tipple’s] remains can be glimpsed lying on the hillside like the decaying carcass of some huge beast” (158), and a short drive outside of town boasts a “beautiful countryside where Nature’s majesty and Man’s shabby attempts to survive in it have blended together over time into a comfortable harmony of abandoned industries and permanent hills” (9). The picture that O’Dell paints is

very real: in his account of the mining industry, Jeff Goodell explains that a decline in industry that included the closing of many coal mines created “desperate places,” and he says that “Western Pennsylvania was among the hardest-hit regions of the country” (120). There is little that remains for the greedy to exhaust.

Essayist Noel Perrin points out that American acquisitiveness has been such that “almost all of us still believe what the Dutch sailors thought: “that here is an inexhaustible new world, with plenty of everything for everybody” (21). Indeed, Mellor reminds us that the “emphasis on human-centredness [sic] and individualism in western philosophy has laid the moral basis for consumerism, private ownership and profit-seeking, which drives both ecological and human exploitation” (*Feminism and Ecology* 179). In fact, Goodell wonders, “Would Americans be quite so eager to burn coal if they knew what life is like in a coal mine?”(48). He goes on to call us “a nation of electricity junkies” that is a result of a consumer culture made possible by electricity (109), which, of course, is generated by power plants that are generally coal-fired. Certainly, the novel’s Cam Jack, the greedy owner of the book’s fictitious J & P Coal, perhaps an allusion to the Indiana County R & P Coal, recognizes that he has Americans’ insatiable need to consume to thank for his company’s success: “They want to run their five TVs and their four computers and have every light on in the goddamned house all night long and never think about where the juice is coming from” (290).

Certainly, one might make the case that coal-generated electricity is in decline, and to some extent, this is true: coal consumption in the United States has fallen, but according to Christopher Helman, it has rebounded from an all-time low in 2012, and he also notes that coal’s contribution to U.S. electricity is nine times greater than solar and wind energy combined

(par. 5). Further, the demand for coal in Asia remains strong, and as Richard Martin shows, a mine in Wyoming, North Antelope Rochelle Mine, is busy exporting coal to India and China, countries that are craving cheap energy, regardless of the environmental consequences. Martin emphasizes: “Anyone who thinks that the so-called war on coal is over and that the environmentalists and the federal regulators won should visit NARM, one of the dozen open-pit mines that pock the landscape of the basin. If the coal industry is expiring it’s putting on a hell of a death scene here in eastern Wyoming” (par. 5). NARM is owned by Peabody Energy, whose CEO, Grey Boyce, believes that coal can transform developing nations and that environmental concerns are secondary: “[t]he greatest crisis we confront in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not a future environmental crisis predicted by computer models, but a human crisis today that is fully within our power to solve” (Martin, par. 20). Martin doesn’t miss the opportunity to point out the audaciousness of Boyce’s “bit of rhetoric: allying the interests of one of the biggest extractive companies in the world with those of the downtrodden masses in Asia and Africa” (par. 21).

The fictitious Cam is also a profit-driven CEO, and O’Dell portrays the novel’s unabashedly evil villain as one who epitomizes capitalistic and chauvinistic greed. Cam inherited the J & P Coal mining company from his father and shows no appreciation for his good fortune; instead, the community members describe him as stingy and careless and blame him and his cavalier attitude for the near destruction of the town’s only surviving mine, Josephine (45). Through Cam, O’Dell shows all that is wrong with American capitalism, where the main goal is to maximize profits at any cost, including the lives of one’s loyal employees. Like many real-life coal companies, J & P Coal is known for operating unsafe mines, has endless safety violations, and has been blamed for several explosions. Despite his culpability, Cam is indifferent, and in

fact, it is common knowledge that he “never pays to have anything properly repaired or replaced” (248), nor does he provide the miners with the self-rescuers that are used to filter out the deadly carbon monoxide after an explosion (278). Cam’s selfishness is so great that he didn’t even put in an appearance when the miners were trapped (43). Cam’s true devotion is to American capitalism, which is symbolized by the American flag tie clip that he sports with his pristine suit, his appearance “hale and hearty,” an ironic contrast to the pale, grimy miners who do his dirty work, and his tendency to commodify is obvious in that he refers repeatedly to the miners as “my boys” (43), as if they are among his many possessions.

Despite his family’s long history with the region, Cam shows no loyalty to the land or its people. His money enables him to acquire property (more possessions), but he is nothing more than a slum lord who is unwilling to spend the money that is needed to improve the buildings. Even the town’s historic inn, which with its “bygone elegance” has the potential to be a grand local attraction and could help to revive the region, is as rundown as “everything else in town,” and “[h]e had no desire to modernize it or declare it a historic landmark” (15). Instead, his coal company rapes the area of its natural resources while underpaying its employees. Despite the fact that Shae-Lynn’s father worked full-time as a miner, Shae-Lynn remembers that her family lived in poverty when she was a child. Her mother died when she was six, and Shae-Lynn was left with the responsibility of stretching the family’s meager budget to feed a family of three (66). Today’s miners are no better off: the Jolly Mount Five haven’t been given a raise in nearly ten years, their health benefits have been cut, and their 401(k) slashed (325), all under the miserly management of Cam Jack. This, too, reflects reality: PBS Coals, the owner of Quecreek,

“was a strictly cut-rate, non-union operation, with a reputation among locals for using shoddy equipment and squeezing every last dime out of every ton of coal” (Goodell 56).

It is not surprising that Cam’s self-interest extends to women, and the rape metaphor takes on greater significance when he proves himself to be a rapist. When Shae-Lynn was sixteen, she was no virgin: she’d lost her virginity at fourteen and realized that sex was a means of having power over a boy, but her experience with the local boys did nothing to prepare her for an encounter with Cam Jack. When he invites her to go for a ride in his fancy Cadillac, she is flattered by his attention and agrees. Before long, he begins to grope her, and she realizes her mistake: “When I tried to back out, he treated me like I was attempting to break off a business deal with him; he dropped all pretenses of pretending to woo me and made it clear that he had owned me all along” (274). Days after they have sex in the back of his car, Shae-Lynn, plagued by violent nightmares, struggles with what occurred between her and Cam, and she naively considers that she wasn’t raped because she didn’t put up enough of a fight. In her seminal discussion of how women are commonly devalued, Sherry B. Ortner acknowledges “woman’s nearly universal unquestioning acceptance of her own devaluation,” and she says that woman’s participation in a culture in which she has secondary status “is evidenced in part by the fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture’s point of view” (15). On the one hand, the perception that Shae-Lynn fails to grasp that she was, in fact, raped might demonstrate her willingness to accept her male-dominated, culturally imposed second-class status. On the other hand, there might be greater significance to how Shae-Lynn names what happened to her. In an ecofeminist reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Sigridur Gudmarsdottir claims that for ecofeminist Karen Warren, “the most important contribution of ecofeminist spiritualities lies in their

capacity to deconstruct language of domination” (219). Indeed, Warren notes that according to the “model of patriarchy,” the predictable response to rape is, “it’s your fault that you were raped, or that you could have prevented it” (211). Warren believes that “ecofeminist spiritualities” can challenge and replace these patriarchal attitudes and what she calls “impaired language” (211). In fact, Shae-Lynn concludes that the dictionary definition of despoil, “to strip of belongings, possessions, or value” (276), defines Cam’s treatment of her. The teen’s word choice is significant in that it prevents her from feeling like a victim. It is for the same reason that the adult Shae-Lynn refuses to tell her son, Clay, that Cam is his father: “I’d rather have my son think I was a slut than a victim” (108). Thus, the teenaged Shae-Lynn, who spent her childhood as a casualty of her father’s violent rages, is beginning to take steps toward empowering herself by defying the misogynist attitudes that have defined her.

Shae-Lynn, whose father’s presence terrified her so much that it made her “afraid to breathe or speak” (230), tolerated daily beatings because she believed, “I had no right to tell him he couldn’t beat me and my sister because he was our father and I believed we belonged to him as surely as his lunch pail” (148). Inherently, the young Shae-Lynn accepted that as girls, they were among their father’s possessions, and this attitude was reinforced by potential role models; for example, Shae-Lynn observes that her neighbor, Teresa, “went from being one man’s daughter to being another man’s wife to being the mother of two other men” (170). As Ariel Salleh notes, “Women, really objects in a so-called ‘division of labour’, have customarily been exchanged between men, father to husband, pimp to client, from one entrepreneur to another” (94). Conversely, when Shae-Lynn’s son was born, she understood that “he would be a man someday. No one could own him. Not even me, his mother” (148). Thus, the young Shae-

Lynn has been indoctrinated by patriarchal attitudes that support the notion that men own and women *are* owned; the language of ownership has been inscribed in her since childhood.

The belief that human beings are possessions is especially offensive to the adult Shae-Lynn, and we see that men are not the only sex guilty of treating people like objects to be bought and sold. The novel opens with pre-teen Fanci offering to trade her little brother for a ride to the mall, suggesting that, in turn, Shae-Lynn, who has left her job as a cop and now runs a one-woman cab company, “could sell him” (1). “He doesn’t belong to you or your mom... He’s not a dog. He’s a person. You can’t own another person” (3), reprimands Shae-Lynn. Certainly, it is significant that the novel begins with a sister willing to barter her brother for transportation in that it foreshadows the arrival of Shae-Lynn’s younger sister, Shannon, who, the reader eventually learns, is pregnant with her tenth child. That Shannon has been selling her babies to the highest bidder certainly defies the traditional notion of the nurturing mother and comes as a shock to Shae-Lynn, who finds it difficult to accept that her sister regards the transactions with the emotion of a farmer selling “his pigs for sausages” (198).

When Shannon became pregnant at seventeen and was taken in by a church-sponsored home for pregnant teens, she enjoyed being courted by barren women who came bearing luxurious gifts. And like a true capitalist, Shannon quickly determined that she could negotiate for bigger and better gifts, like coats and cars, and even cash (310). Shae-Lynn is nauseated by her sister’s willingness to serve as a “baby mine,” despite the fact that, ironically, it is not illegal for a woman to sell her baby. In fact, Shannon equates herself to a coal miner: “What’s the difference between rich people paying men to work in their coal mines or paying a coal miner’s daughter to have a baby for them” (304), she asks. So that no one makes the mistake of

idealizing the transaction by claiming that there is nothing wrong with a well-to-do couple assisting a girl “in trouble” because they’d do “anything for [a] healthy white baby” (209), Shannon is quick to set the record straight: “They don’t give any more thought to the baby than they do to buying a yacht or a golden retriever. It’s one more thing for them to acquire, one more thing they can buy to fill up their stupid empty lives” (303). In reality, a baby is another possession that their wealth enables them to purchase, and attorneys like the novel’s Gerald Kozlowski are guilty of encouraging bidding wars and brokering babies to the highest bidder. Note, of course, that while it is the woman who labors, it is the man who appropriates the fruits of her labor, if you will.

It is worth noting that O’Dell’s characters do not necessarily fulfill gender-based stereotypes. Indeed, her portrayal of Shannon rejects what Mellor describes as “an essentialist idealization of ‘women as mothers’” (258). Mellor goes on to point out that “[t]he fact that women biologically can and do give birth does not imply any particular adoption of feminine/feminist values” (“Ecofeminism and Socialism” 258). Similarly, Shae-Lynn struggles to liberate herself from essentialist stereotypes by rejecting societal norms. She resists traditional women’s work (she’s not a good housekeeper and her refrigerator is empty), and she doesn’t let herself “get emotional” (2); instead, she initiates barroom brawls and enjoys a “good romp” (72).

Clearly, the novel’s title has a double meaning in that Shae-Lynn’s sister serves as a baby mine and the sisters are from a town that has sister mines, and just as Shae-Lynn was a source of violation for Cam Jack, so, too, are his overworked and neglected mines. It is worth noting that all of J & P Coal’s mines are “named after women,” and each mine has characteristics that

make her unique: Beverly is gassy, Lorelei is damp, Marvella is tall, and Josephine, affectionately called Jojo by the miners, is wide (131). Environmental Historian Carolyn Merchant warns that symbolic language that fuses women and earth “can be double-edged,” for much of it is “suggestive of sexual assaults that render both women and nature passive and submissive.” She goes on to say that historically, this type of language has been used “to devalue women through identifying them with nature” (“Women and the Environmental Movement” 8). It is for this reason that many feminists resist the potentially essentialist association of woman and nature. However, Merchant explains that in contrast to the mainstream Recovery Narrative in which man seeks to reclaim Eden by mastering nature through capitalism, which is the story that most Westerners have been influenced by (*Reinventing Eden* 68), there is also an environmentalist counternarrative that became apparent in the writings of the romantics and transcendentalists during the middle of the nineteenth century. Their alternative to the Recovery Narrative personified “nature as a powerful female to be revered” and as a potential “intimate companion” (*Reinventing Eden* 118). Merchant notes that writers like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir “depicted nature in deeply personal terms as mother and virgin that militated against aggressive postures” common among earlier American writers (*Reinventing Eden* 134). Indeed, while the rape metaphor might apply to Cam’s exploitive attitude toward the mines, the miners themselves revere the mines because, from their perspective, like the women they love, the mines are a “source of life”; “[o]ur miners trusted their mines” (131). When they describe entering the mines, the descriptions are sexual yet not demeaning: “*You enter the tunnel.. working pretty deep*” (245). Even after having been trapped in the mine for four days, they continue to respect

the mines, and one of the miners remarks, "The whole time we were trapped down there... I never had a bad thought about her. I never blamed her" (325).

It might come as a surprise to some readers that the miners were blamed for the explosion rather than the mining company (241), but in fact, this mirrors reality. According to the Executive Summary of the investigation of the explosion at Upper Big Branch, it was found that Massey Energy Company "intimidated miners into not reporting hazards" (United States 1). Understanding that this sort of corporate bullying exists makes it believable that the fictitious miners testified that although they hadn't been "officially authorized" by the company to do so, "they jury-rigged equipment" because "they knew they were supposed to" (241). As well, it is important to note that while the miners are seemingly complicit in the many disasters that occur because they overlook management's safety violations, in reality, they are in a double bind: if they are forthcoming about the violations, they risk having the mines shut down, which they literally cannot afford because the mines are "the only source of employment" in the area (293); in fact, "[t]hey weren't afraid of anything except losing their jobs" (241). Clearly, the working class miners are the victims of Cam Jack just as much as the land and women he violates. Merchant blames a capitalist society that enables the "privileged class" to exploit both "wage laborers" and Mother Earth in order "to reap large profits" ("Women and the Environmental Movement" 9).

To be sure, coal mining is no easy way to make a living, but the men take on this dangerous work because, as Shae-Lynn explains, it is their legacy: they become coal miners like their fathers and their best friends and, in fact, it is regarded as a "betrayal" if sons choose not to become miners (21); they "work long, grueling, underpaid hours at a difficult, dangerous,

thankless profession that only gets attention when somebody dies” (19), and if men aren’t killed in mine explosions, they waste away at the end of their lives with black lungs (165), proof that, as Mellor reminds us, “Ecological impacts and consequences are experienced through human bodies” that include “ill health” and “early death” (*Feminism and Ecology* 2). Green activists agree and argue that “[i]t is working-class people who are most likely to suffer from unhealthy jobs and polluted living environments” (Salleh 7). Indeed, the Jolly Mount miners acknowledge, “We know the job’s dangerous but we still do it” (225). In her discussion of Karl Marx’s influence on ecofeminism, Salleh notes that “[e]nsnared in somebody else’s idea of production [in this case, Cam Jack’s], the worker [in this case, the miner] is reduced to accepting daily survival itself as ‘the meaning of life’” (69). Salleh observes that “[s]ome of Marx’s technological enthusiasm comes from his vision of automated production as capitalism’s eventual undoing. The objectified labour congealed in the machine is believed to be more efficient than the traditional exploitation of workers’ time” (77). Ultimately, though, this theory is problematic because new machinery costs workers much needed jobs. For example, while the cutting machine is described by coal miners as “a wonder [because]... it did the work of at least fifty men,” the reality is that “those fifty men lost their jobs” (O’Dell, *Sister Mine*, 41).

And as O’Dell illustrates in *Sister Mine*, there are safety issues to consider. Coal mining companies are often guilty of safety violations. PBS Coals was cited for ninety violations in a two-year period, and two of those violations played a role in a fatality. Quecreek Mine was also cited for twenty-six violations in the year leading up to the flooding of the mine (Ward, “Pennsylvania,” par. 19). As well, the findings of the Mine Safety Health Association Accident Investigation revealed that the company that owned the Upper Big Branch Mine at the time of

the explosion “violated numerous, widely-recognized safety standards and failed to prevent or correct numerous hazards that ultimately caused the catastrophic explosion” (United States par. 6). And despite the creation of the federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, a study issued by the U.S. General Accounting Office indicates that the MSHA, *the very organization that is supposed to be protecting miners*, is guilty of poor inspection and enforcement practices and has even been guilty of violating its own policies (Ward, “West Virginia,” par. 27). To be sure, O’Dell acknowledges that “[m]ining is a dangerous profession. There’s no way to make a mine completely safe” (“Heroes” par. 5). At the same time, though, she notes that many mining tragedies are foreseeable and, therefore, unavoidable. As she illustrates in *Sister Mine*, “Coal mining is an industry rife with mismanagement, corruption, greed and an almost blatant disregard for the safety, health and quality of life of its work force” (“Heroes” par. 8).

Coal isn’t sexy. Barbara Freese agrees: “Coal is a commodity utterly lacking in glamour. It is dirty, old-fashioned, domestic, and cheap” (2). Notwithstanding, as Freese chronicles in her historical account of the industry, there is no denying that coal has created “enough energy to change the world profoundly” (4). Goodell agrees: “Without coal, the world as we know it today would be impossible to imagine” (xiii). Indeed, CEO’s like Greg Boyce believe that coal can continue to transform the world: “Coal has provided light, heat, and power to millions of people, improving living standards for nearly two centuries, giving rise to the greatest increase in living standards in human history. Billions of people are still without access to affordable, reliable electricity” (Martin, par.19). There are those who believe that coal remains the answer, and as Helman notes, the reality is that “despite fears of global warming coal remains the fastest-growing fossil fuel worldwide” (par. 5).

Gaard notes that “[f]rom the beginning, one of the shared aims of ecocritics has been our commitment to praxis: teaching, studying, and writing about literary and cultural texts” to “educate” and respond to today’s “environmental limits” (659). Author and activist Silas House agrees: “while teaching, or singing, or writing, or being a scientist or a mining engineer or whatever we may be, we can simultaneously teach social responsibility” (15). Indeed, when asked to explain his choice to major in English, ecofeminist Patrick D. Murphy said that he believed “that literature could change consciousness” (x). Murphy encourages an ecocritical approach in the classroom, because “[l]iterature can only affect the minds of its readers if it has the ability to orient their thinking not only toward the world in the text but also the world in which the text materially and ideationally exists at the moment of the reading” (4). By bringing to life the pressing and very real problems of a region that has been dependent upon mining for its livelihood, O’Dell has become the miners’ spokesperson and encourages a heightened awareness in her readers. In turn, we can encourage our students to be socially concerned citizens, and we can demand that companies take responsibility for the violations that they knowingly overlook on a daily basis, and we can insist that the government have stronger regulations that are consistently enforced. In fact, we can all speak for the miners.

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## Coming on Midnight in a House of Bebop

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**Note:** This submission is a chapter from a larger, unpublished nonfiction manuscript on life at a small jazz club in Philadelphia. All the scenes and other information were written based on firsthand observation by the author and hundreds of interviews conducted by the author.

Two days before Thanksgiving, the notes of the jazz standard “I Remember You” are dancing through the air, slipping into the ears and minds of the crowd at Ortlieb’s Jazzhaus. A trio tears through the song on a small platform stage, channeling the energy of bebop’s first players from more than 60 years ago. The song sounds as if it will never end. A string bean of a man hunches over the piano on stage right, staring straight down at the keys as he glides across them, only slightly moving his head even as he plays the fast-moving song. Over his shoulder, above the black Steinway, hangs one of his gold records from 20 years ago, this one for “Live at the Bijou,” inscribed to James “Sid” Simmons. In three days, Sid will turn 62. These days he feels decades older than that. Tonight, though, he’s flying across the keys, showing hardly a sign of exertion or exhaustion – not even a trace of sweat.

To his left, a squat man sits behind the drums, eyes squinted and hands all but a blur as they flutter across the set. The crowd applauds with hoots, hollers, and claps as his solo winds up with a flourish of the sticks and a shimmer of the cymbals. “The great Byron Landham!” a man yells in a raspy voice from over at the bar, putting his thick, dark hands together again and again as he rocks slightly on his stool. “The fantastic Byron Landham!” Sweat pours down Byron’s domed forehead, making it an even richer mahogany color. As he nears the end of his

solos, or even just a pause, the applause grows louder each time. The bassist in the middle thumps away; the drums and piano begin to merge and the tune works itself, in perfect form, to a loud conclusion. In the acoustic confines of this club, the rise of applause from even just a few dozen people can make a song's ending far more thunderous.

The applause is fading away as Byron takes the microphone and starts to thank everyone for coming by. In order for jazz to survive, he likes to tell them, the people out there in the seats are the most important players of all. He introduces the three-man band to the scattered collection of people lined up at the bar to his left, and those seated before white tablecloths to his front and right. The band will be back up in just a few minutes after a short break, he tells them. But he has an announcement to make before turning on the recorded music that will get piped through the club's tiny black speakers during the interlude: There's a birthday coming up. Sid shrinks even further down behind the piano than normal; he was hoping Byron wouldn't do this. But after playing with him for 15 years, he should have known better. To smatters of applause, Byron tells the gathered crowd that Sid will turn a year older in a few days. Sid hangs his head.

"I hope I live to be that old!" comes the raspy yell from down the bar again, this time with an even heartier, throatier laugh. It's Mickey Roker, a local legend who was once Dizzy Gillespie's drummer and is now the unofficial dean of Ortlieb's Jazzhaus. Mickey, wearing a white baseball cap, turns to the man seated at his right and admits, to no one's surprise, that he actually turned 76 on Sept. 3. But, he says, he feels great. Sid lingers at the piano as his band mates step off the stage. He's soaking in his thoughts before heading to the bar for a drink and

maybe outside for a smoke in the cold November air. He always needs a little time to himself before confronting all the people in the club.

At the bar, Byron saunters over to Mickey and shakes his mentor's hand. "You sound great," Mickey tells him, echoing the praise he has been yelling out while his longtime protégé was on stage. Byron is just back from touring in Europe and then a trip playing on a cruise ship. Soon, they will head outside to talk to the musicians and hangers-on that always gather on the sidewalk, by the chain link fence of the empty lot next door. But right now they talk one on one, with Byron, in his late 30s, standing next to Mickey, swiveled slightly to his left on one of the bar stools. After a pause, and a few nods, Mickey's face drops a little as he thinks back on when he first brought Byron to this club as an unpolished, promising teenager 20 years ago. "I'm so glad I lived long enough to hear you play," he says, his voice choking up slightly.

Sid folds his 6-foot-plus frame into a bar stool and looks hunched and uncomfortable. His back hurts and his stomach, too. The doctors still haven't figured out everything that is wrong with him. His stomach has been killing him for days and the doctors say that, at the very least, he needs hernia surgery – but none of that keeps him away from this gig and this music. Some nights he wonders whether he's going to be able to make it to the club at all. But he always does. People keep asking him how he's feeling. They're always bugging him, asking if he's been to the doctor. Sometimes they look at the leathery, cocoa-colored skin stretched over his frame and tell him he looks way too thin, but he's been hearing that since he was a kid. He tells the man next to him that his mother is 92 and sharp as a tack. Then again, she hasn't been living in the jazz world, traveling the road for months at a time, and working in clubs for more than 40 years.

Some nights Sid can barely remember what he did just a few days before. Other times, he has trouble keeping track of just what day it is – even now that he’s no longer on the road much. Mostly, he’s here at Ortlieb’s in Philadelphia’s Northern Liberties neighborhood, less than two miles from the North Philadelphia row house where he grew up. He keeps track of the days based on what gig is coming up, if there is one at all. And this Tuesday, like all Tuesdays, is the weekly jam session at Ortlieb’s. It’s a virtual prayer session of bebop for players young and old, with himself, Byron, and bassist Mike Boone leading the way as the long-tenured house band. In less than half an hour, Sid will return from the brief intermission and be back on stage. Then the music will start again, going until midnight and beyond.

For now, Sid has too many things on his mind as he heads down the street to his car: Try to set up doctor’s appointments; keep up with the bills that pour into his mailbox; fit in plenty of practice at the piano, all while dealing with the piercing pain in his stomach. It’s so much different than it was when he was young. Now it feels hard enough just to get through gigs, gigs that are becoming tougher to find. “I’ve seen the top of the ladder,” he likes to say. “Now I’ve felt the bottom.” On some days he tells himself, *I don’t even recognize my life*. But after he walks into Ortlieb’s and gets behind the keys, things make sense for a little while.

\* \* \*

Less than 30 years ago, the club’s space was a drinking hole for workers at the now-defunct Henry F. Ortlieb Brewing Company. The rusted skeletons of the brewery are still scattered over the mostly deserted industrial landscape. Now, the three-and-a-half-story stucco and brick building sits on what has become a hazy border between the trendy bars, restaurants, and new condominiums of ongoing gentrification, and a hardscrabble neighborhood with

down-and-out row houses, vacant lots, and falling down buildings. The pop-pop-pop of gunshots can occasionally be heard from the sidewalk, while the air inside is filled with the faint dee-dee-dee, dee-dee-doo of a tenor saxophone. Car break-ins can be a problem. The sound of shattering glass can sometimes be heard on the street.

Just a few blocks south, young professionals and yuppies frequent some of the hippest restaurants in the city, eating fine fish, pasta, burgers, and high-end tapas plates. Farther south on Third Street, less than 10 blocks away, tourists flock to the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall in the city's historic section. To the north, over the trolley tracks that line Girard Avenue, the cracks in the sidewalks become more frequent. The condominiums become scarcer. The neighborhoods are less bustling – but for the ever-present sound of sirens.

In the middle stands Ortlieb's Jazzhaus. The narrow building announces its presence with a 20-foot-long, wooden façade that juts a few feet out, protruding into the uneven sidewalk like an attached shed. The wood has recently been repainted maroon, its cracking old powder blue replaced. The once-matching "Ortlieb's Jazzhaus" sign – which had two saxophones as Z's – is gone; a visitor won't find the word "jazz" until he looks at the paper schedules sitting on a table inside the door. Outside, a green and orange neon "Ortlieb's Beer" sign hangs over the south-side door, its glow the only clue that the building is not an abandoned apartment, an upscale drug house, or another defunct piece of the old brewery – like the rusted silo standing a few feet away.

Behind the club, past the cracked sidewalks and rickety metal fences, huge shells of buildings lurk as crumbling reminders of the area's industrial past. A blue historical marker stands just a short walk from the club's door. It tells that this was the spot where, in 1840,

before ragtime was even born, the first American lager was served at the brewing company; this claim is disputed by some historians, but it will always be true to locals here. In the space where jazz now fills the room, overall-clad brewery workers once rolled strikes and gutter balls on bowling lanes that ran just feet from where the tiny platform stage stands. But it's been generations since the brewery was king here. Now, the old-timers are here to play jazz – and not just to play it, but to try to keep it alive.

\* \* \*

The front door lets out a hollow slap every time someone walks into the foyer. Only when the door squeaks open can people out on the street finally begin to make out some of the sounds coming from inside. The entryway barely protects visitors from the cold, the harsh sounds of muffler-troubled cars roaring past, or loud arguments off in the distance. The room is a holding tank, between the outside world and the jazz world. After visitors open the second, glass-paned door and take a step up, the music pours out of the main room. The subtle shimmers of the cymbals ring more clearly, the soft notes of the tinkling piano arrive, and the thump of the bass shakes the eardrums. The tones of a saxophone fill the foyer.

Inside, deep brown, vertical wood panels line the sides of the room, the horizon seeming indefinite in the darkness. The room narrows slightly as it stretches back more than 100 feet to the kitchen. The outside light fades every time the door closes. It is always dark inside, despite the lights hanging overhead, the candles on the tables, and the white lamps mounted on the wall. The bar stretches back into the middle of the rectangular space, small stools scattered about in front of it. A moist array of dollar bills, empty pint glasses, and shiny,

wet coins cascades along the dark wooden bar top. Tables covered in white cloths swim about in a tangled maze to the side and off in the distance.

Back when brewery workers were drinking beer here, pictures of scantily clad women and beer posters lined the walls. Now, framed bits of jazz history wallpaper the room on each side, serving as reminders of a time when jazz was king and the people who played it were icons of their generations. In those fading black-and-white photographs, icons of jazz – past and present, dead and alive – keep the musicians company as they play. Sid's gold record and a photo of Mickey hang alongside John Coltrane and Miles Davis.

Halfway into the club's long corridor, the tiny box stage rises a foot off the ground. The house drum set sits on the edge of the stage closest to where the bar curls to an end. The dark, wooden bass is perched on a stand at the center of the stage, tucked back against the wall. At the far end, before the room stretches back into more tables and chairs, the piano is nearly cloaked by darkness. That's where Sid hides – his back to half the room, his downcast eyes avoiding the others in the front and to the side. His fuzzy black patch of hair blends into the darkness; his glasses only occasionally reflect a tiny shaft of light. Under his confident but gentle fingers, the piano keys sometimes tinkle playfully and other times resonate with a deep and almost mournful wooden sound.

\* \* \*

On many weeknights, the crowd at Ortlieb's is sparse. The musicians feel as if they are playing to an intimate gathering at someone's house. By the 8 p.m. start time, only a few people line the bar, many of them at the end away from the stage. Sometimes, many don't even seem to be listening. Before the first hour of the jam session is up, the crowd has often

turned over entirely, while a few clusters of people eat at tables at the far end of the room. People sitting closest the stage are more likely to be listening and clapping. The same goes for the people at the tables in front of the stage and directly around it. Some bow their heads, eyes closed as Sid tinkles over the keys and Byron shimmers his cymbals. Others lean into their seatbacks, eyes transfixed on the band, their applause rising rhythmically at the end of each solo. The people who came to chat and meet up with friends sit at the far ends of the club – the tables in the back by the kitchen and the stools closest to the door. On some evenings, the crowd is spread out at those extremes. On better nights, the centripetal force of jazz pulls everyone toward the stage.

Some nights to a large crowd, other times just to a small cluster, Byron always slowly introduces the friends he has been playing with in the Ortlieb's house band for 15 years or so now. The exact wording varies a little from night to night, but the spirit is always the same. On many nights, it's "the incomparable Sid Simmons." And then Mike Boone, "one of the greatest musicians in the world." He waits for the applause to come – sometimes long and loud, other times barely noticeable. Everyone knows they would rather be playing to a packed house every night. They always hope. "Miles Davis talked about how there are musicians who don't play instruments," Byron tells his audience. "Without you guys listening, this would be a self-indulgent industry." He isn't afraid to joke when the crowd is barely a crowd, either. "We're waiting for the other 250,000 people to show up," he says. A short time later, Mike is out on the sidewalk for a smoke and tries to grab a few passersby. "Come on in, there's a jazz club here," he yells. "Ortlieb's jazz club!"

The jazz die-hards are still coming by. But to the musicians, it seems they're not here in the numbers they used to be. That's why so many of their old haunts in Philadelphia – both the ones they played and the ones they only heard of – are gone: Natalie's, Zanzibar Blue, the Showboat, TNT Monroe's, and many more. A light breeze trickles through the opening and closing door as the trio thumps through an old Thelonious Monk tune one night. Byron plays tricks with the time, getting funky with his drum sticks, bringing out laughter from a young bassist who is filling in. Just as the laugh fades, Sid arrives right back in time with strings of playful notes that would have made Monk proud. At the bar, everyone is listening. Wearing a short-brimmed hat with a black and red band on it, a black man with a gray goatee and mustache pulls out a chair for his wife, clad in a black raincoat and tan pants. They listen intently and quietly to the music on stage. The man sips a lager, the woman a glass of red wine. A few seats down, a retired language arts teacher from a troubled suburban high school listens, sitting alone in his escape. The bar is nearly full.

Ortlieb's is one of just two all-jazz clubs left in Philadelphia – and one of the dwindling number of what once were many all-jazz joints across the country. The musicians at Ortlieb's feel like they have to go farther and farther to get gigs these days. Everyone has lost count of how many times Mickey has retired. But he's a widower now and still goes on the road sometimes, in addition to weekend gigs at Ortlieb's. Byron spends much of his time touring Europe and all parts of the states so that he can get a reliable income to help feed his wife and three children. Sid has been virtually bankrupt before and knows that, even with his wife long gone and his three children grown, he still needs to find ways to keep up with his bills. No

matter where else they go, though, the musicians always end up coming back to their home base – Ortlieb's.

## Rekindling Metafictional Insight: The Many Faces of *S*.

*Courtney Jacobs, Colorado Mountain College*

With travel ephemera and personal epistles tucked purposefully within its colorfully annotated pages, *The Ship of Theseus* sits snugly in a black sleeve emblazoned with the letter *S*. Break the paper seal confining the book to its container and the hardcover slides effortlessly into the hand, thus inaugurating a unique and somewhat unsettling reading experience. Modeled after a mid-twentieth century library book, *The Ship of Theseus* feels, looks, and smells like an artifact from academes past. The supplementary documents—postcards, letters, photos, and news clippings—overhang the novel’s weathered pages, threatening to escape; these accompaniments are delicate to the touch and reflect an eerily personal sensibility. As the first page of the book is examined, a rainbow of annotations reveals a clandestine conversation between two careful readers mutually engrossed in discovering one another’s identities and that of the novel’s enigmatic author, V.M. Straka. Under the spell of the novel’s intricate and affectionate construction, a reader may quickly discard the black sleeve proclaiming the book’s actual title, a title that seeks to label this truly unorthodox reading experience.

Ironically conceptualized by one of popular television’s most worshipped figureheads, JJ Abrams, *S*. continues, rather, to be described by readers as arduous and overly academic. Published just last year in September of 2013, the meta-novel was composed as a love-letter begging the affections of the postmodern reader, a reader very much subservient to digital culture. A deceptively simple summary printed on the text’s jacket describes the story as one

“of two readers finding each other in the margins of a book and enmeshing themselves in a deadly struggle between forces they don’t understand” (Abrams and Dorst). What the sleeve notably fails to mention is that the “novel” contained within blurs the boundaries between the fantastic and the real, between text and reality, and between reader and writer-- so much so that *S.* requires of its readers a level of attention and devotion uncommon to many contemporary works of fiction. Rejecting the platitudes of classical reading practices, *S.*’s creative, yet at times confounding, aesthetic structure, and three-fold layered narrative architecture provide insight into several central categories of postmodern ideological crisis, including fragmented subjectivity and pervasive paranoia. Each narrative layer charts the disintegration of an accepted truth, orientation, or assumption through the use of common postmodern motifs and themes. By marrying a primary text (*The Ship of Theseus*) to its own interpretation and criticism (from several fictionalized readers) within a single artifact, JJ Abrams and Doug Dorst have already begun to shatter the literary “fourth wall” and very abruptly draw attention to the common reading habits that we often take for granted: namely that personal interpretation of a text occurs outside the boundaries of the text itself. This conundrum forces readers to ask: can a story consume its own analysis? Can they become one in the same? Where does the story end and “real life” begin?

Metafiction, a genre geared toward this manner of transcendent inquiry, is particularly suited to the spirit of postmodernist thought. As it communicates both invention and familiarity through its aesthetic and narrative architecture, *S.*, and other meta-novels of its kind, fulfills one of the central tenets of its genre and time period, as articulated by Patricia Waugh in her flagship text *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*:

Any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes... artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently 'natural' or 'eternal.' (22)

Jean Francoise Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, describes these "eternal" ideologies as "metanarratives;" and his definition of postmodern knowledge is heavily reliant on the dissolution of these totalizing philosophies. By drawing attention to the ubiquitous narrative and academic conventions that readers have so come to rely on, postmodern metafiction is able to substitute stasis with fluidity, and certainty with possibility. The self-referential nature of metafiction—often manifested in multi-dimensional and multi-layered narratives, and a distinct lack of narratorial authority—cements the text itself as a point of contention between reality and fiction. I situate the genre of metafiction at the forefront of a movement that at once seeks to relieve our reliance on mammoth systemic ideologies (as Lyotard argues) *and* to simultaneously subvert the regnant notions of postmodern cynicism, commodification and banality. In his article entitled "The Novel as Absence," Timothy Bewes points out that the consistent deployment of common postmodern tropes, such as irony and intertextuality, often ensures that postmodern literature is largely interpreted in terms of misanthropy, banality and cliché (7). These tropes, I believe, very much inform contemporary reading experiences. Yet postmodern metafiction should not be consigned to the fate that Bewes foresees for all art of the period. Surprisingly written for a generation that has embraced the abridged and easily accessible, complex analog metafiction, like Abrams and Dorst's *S.*, highlights the complexity of ontological crisis through unique narrative and aesthetic

structuring that invites the reader to embrace Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarrative," as a means toward a mediating and dialogic narrative learning experience (xxvi).

For the remainder of this paper, I will investigate the three central narrative layers—the thematic, the textual or structural, and the extratextual—that guide the *S.* experience: (1) *The Ship of Theseus*, the fictionalized novel itself, written by V.M. Straka and packaged within the masqueraded hardcover library book from 1949; (2) the handwritten tale told in the margins and loose supplementary materials: the story of Jen and Eric, two university students embroiled in a detective plot to uncover the true identity of the book's author; and (3) lastly and in summation, the "meta" reading adventure experienced specifically by "us," the twenty-first century reading audience.

### **I. *The Ship of Theseus***

While many readers seem to over-look *S.*'s platform story, *The Ship of Theseus*, in favor of the exciting and dramatic detective tale divulged in the margins, the primary text, in fact, provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of a textbook postmodern protagonist, and into Absurdism, a genre that very much pervades "Straka's" prose. Carrying the same name as Abrams and Dorst's meta-creation (adding once again to the dizzying paradoxes that riddle the book), the novel's main character "S.," awakens in a daze, involuntarily it seems, reborn from a past that he cannot remember. A passage from the opening of the novel articulates this disorientation: "He wonders now if he should be feeling fear rather than the numbness of body and mind that has dampened his senses since he awoke—from what? a dream? a fugue state? a borrowed life?" (Abrams and Dorst 11). *S.* initially grasps tightly to what Lyotard coins the

fantasy of seizing reality (82). After a series of suspicious games of questions (a common Absurdist trope), S. is left to decide which people and events he will assign meaning to. This crisis of identity haunts S. throughout the novel in the form of a ghost-like letter “S” that seems to appear symbolically in the least likely of places. The image reminds him of the unforeseen forces that seems to dictate his actions with expansive marionette strings.

S. continuously grapples for comfort in meaning by attempting to forge relationships with other characters (particularly, an enticing woman named Sola) and by embracing his apparent membership in a contingent of assassins bent on fighting sociopolitical injustice. The novel’s title “ship,” unbidden, carts S. from mission to mission and, in a rather Absurdist fashion, bears no captain, yet always arrives at the correct time and location to retrieve the protagonist. The watchful gaze of the ship’s crew, an eerily anonymous company silenced by ragged black thread sewn across their mouths, also acts as impetus to S’s mounting paranoia. They provide no verbal legitimation of S.’s trials. Jerry Flieger, in his article “Postmodern Perspective: The Paranoid Eye,” points out that, “normal’ people function by making a pact with the Symbolic order, the order which guarantees that experienced reality is meaningful...” (90). In S’s universe, the Symbolic order can no longer be trusted, and is instead replaced by a receding horizon of meaning that continues to elude S’s grasp. *The Ship of Theseus*, as the core of the S. experience, cultivates the unsettling, suspicious atmosphere that seems to proliferate into the lives of the novel’s student readers.

## II. The Readers in the Margins

The story unconventionally revealed in the margins—the story of *The Ship of Theseus*’ two young readers, Jen and Eric—is anchored both physically and conceptually in Straka’s unique fiction. The tome acts as a physical canvas upon which the two students act out their blossoming relationship and piece together the ominous mystery surrounding Straka’s identity, to which they are each acting detective. By passing the book back and forth using a library locker at the inception of their relationship and then physically after they meet face-to-face, the fictional readers remind us of the dialogic import of narrative. Whilst normally, as readers, we converse silently with the words of a distant author, in S.’s case, a book becomes a ‘tin can on a string,’ a mechanism for connection and discovery.

Jen and Eric’s conversations are, expectedly, presented anachronistically; their chronology is only signaled by pen ink color pairings. The reader must carefully distinguish fabula from syuzhet by juxtaposing the plot of Jen and Eric’s detective story against their more personal and increasingly romantic banter. Their earliest dialogues, for example are written in blue and black and focus mainly on the nature of their literary inquests; while some of their final comments, envisioned in purple and red, are far more intimate. Yet, any given page in the text may contain portions of dialogue from all four conversational series and thus must be part and parceled by the reader. An amalgam of deep philosophical and academic ruminations and flippant flirtations, Jen and Eric’s dialogues employ *The Ship of Theseus* as a conceptual ballast. A comment made by a sailor on S.’s ship, for example: “B’lieve what y’want to b’lieve,” is circled and stimulates a questionably germane comment made by Jen surrounding the controversy of Straka’s identity (Abrams and Dorst 212). “Just like people with their Straka candidates...” she

ruminates (212). While some readers find this “mapping” trivial and haphazard, I read the technique not as a sign of perfunctory critical reading processes, but rather a symptom of the book’s postmodern significance. In fact, it is through these handwritten dialogues that a pervasive paranoia begins to infiltrate the book and consequently, complement the trials of the helpless S. as he struggles to create meaning and purpose.

As they delve-- or fall-- deeper into the rabbit hole of their research, Jen and Eric feel the watchful presence of a number of unseen, but still threatening, forces. Is there an anonymous group of intellectuals protecting Straka’s true identity? Or, is Eric’s former dissertation advisor whom he broke ties with attempting to steal research? Jen imagines that suited men are following her after she impulsively breaks into said professors office and she alludes compulsively to her concern. She warns Eric after he reveals worry: “—if they found you, then the suit guys can find you... Maybe they’re waiting for us to find something. I don’t know. All I know is I keep seeing them” (402). Flieger again argues that this paranoia – this fear of unseen threats – is rightly characteristic of our postmodern era, a time that gives us “the feeling we are watched everywhere, monitored and transcribed by a ubiquitous information bank” (87). The haunting images of assassins, silenced sailors, and ghostly S’s seem to drip from the pages of *The Ship of Theseus* into the minds and lives of Jen and Eric, inspiring a sense of vertigo as readers begin to lose track of the lines designating the Symbolic from the real.

### **III. The Extratextual Experience of S.**

While David James and Urmila Seshagiri claim, in their recently published article “Metamodernism: Narratives of Revolution and Continuity,” that “postmodern disenchantment

no longer dominates critical discourse,” I would argue rather that the postmodern reader’s “disenchantment” has merely been temporarily distracted and overwhelmed by a constant flow of modern technological invention and digital discourse (87). The growing interest in digital publication has lessened a readership’s respect and passion for textual artifacts. The drive to “collect” and display literature is waning-- these drives replaced with an appetite for instantaneous and compact possession and consumption. Our current dissatisfaction is now aimed at intellectual processes that require intensive effort, or abstract philosophical consideration. Is *S.* (and postmodern metafiction in general) then a swansong for the past? Or rather, is it a prescription for what Teresa Brennan has termed “the age of paranoia,” marked by a fear of efforts physical, sensual and intellectual? (qtd. in Flieger 87). The tentacles of *S.*’s narrative do in fact, reach into the digital world. A number of websites—including the “Dossier of V.M. Straka: compiled by J.W. Dominguez”—have been created to supplement any research a reader of *S.* may choose to participate in. For, and this is a central component of the ethic latent in a reading of *S.*, a reader may choose to be an active academic detective and solve the mysteries surrounding *The Ship of Theseus* and its elusive author, just as Jen and Eric attempt themselves. This choice also dictates the strategies surrounding the reading process itself.

Many readers, myself included, choose to read each page of the text in its entirety: *The Ship of Theseus* and the translator’s footnotes, Jen and Eric’s annotations and any related supplementary materials. Other readers navigate the text in portions, electing instead to read the whole of Straka’s novel first and then return to the marginal notes and loose ephemera. The task of consuming the whole of *S.* is formidable. We have an gambit of choices to make; we may elect to actively play sleuth alongside Jen and Eric, to solve the mysteries surrounding *The*

*Ship of Theseus* and its elusive author, by deciphering the surreptitious codes laid out by fictional translator F.X. Caldeira in the novel's footnotes, carefully inspecting each postcard and document for clues, or researching the names of other referenced authors and publications. Through these choices, the text rejects a typical reading experience, and instead allows the reader to participate in the formation of meaning of the text and to view the material from multiple relative perspectives. The constellations drawn within the over-all experience of *S.* and all of its narrative components are plentiful and the majority are housed within the analog experience of opening the tome itself. Readers will find dead ends; they will lose track of the mystery; they will become frustrated, confused and irritated with the characters, the material and the architecture. They will ask: can Jen and Eric be trusted? Can Straka? Can Abrams and Dorst?

*S.* reveals the power of the author's intent to confound traditional reading processes and dethrone conventional authorial status. "Most of us," claims Ihab Hassan in his article unpacking the "Trials of Postmodern Discourse," "will ruefully admit that God, King, Man, Reason, History, and the State have come and gone their way as principles of irrefragable authority; and that even Language... threatens to empty itself out, another god that failed" (442). *S.* and other metafiction of its kind, revels in this hopeless lack of static authority. Power and meaning are deferred time and time again until the reader is simply left, as a majority of the characters in Abrams and Dorst's invention are, in a state of liminal bewilderment.

Lyotard claims that postmodern knowledge "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). *S.* shares much with the likes of earlier metafictional creations like Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Calvino's *If on a Winter's*

*Night a Traveler...*, and with more recent experiments like Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves*. By textually addressing the processes that lead to their inception, these novels seek to alleviate the reader's reliance on blanket ideologies. Yet rather than abandoning its reader to a clichéd state of postmodern disdain and disillusionment, *S.* bids adieu to its audience by placing them securely in the space of possibility. Upon the conclusion of *The Ship of Theseus*, *S.* and Sola (united at last) watch from land as the title vessel sails away with unknown figures at the helm, simply allowing "their imaginations" to construct the identities of their replacement passengers (Abrams and Dorst 456). After success in solving some mysteries, not others, Jen and Eric too settle into in a pleasant ambiance of ambiguity. They seek one another's company instead of the company of the novel, or of their perhaps-imagined academic adventures. The final marginal note penned in Jen's hand reads, "Hey, put the book down. Come in here + stay" (457). Both tales end without certain victory, without pomp and circumstance, but with an air of contentment. Lyotard claims defiantly, "Let us wage a war on totality... Let us activate the differences (82). Abrams and Dorst's creation seems to raise its fist, albeit quietly, in solidarity and agreement.

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## Selected Poems

*Bill Boggs, Slippery Rock University*

### **Pantoum for Edna**

Who saw this coming, this change on the land?  
The dream denied, the truth exposed,  
Who threw I-phones into the sea  
And watched gulls sail without a wing stroke?

The dream denied, the truth exposed,  
Who pulled headphones out of ears  
And watched gulls sail air without a wing stroke,  
Felt the sweet silence of wordless prayer?

Who pulled headphones out of ears  
And listened to the lost brother,  
Felt the sweet silence of wordless prayer?  
Who walked narrow streets of an unknown town

And listened to the lost brother?  
Who refused the wine of communion?  
Who walked narrow streets of an unknown town  
And wrote the incomparable poem?

Who refused the wine of communion  
And listened to the lost brother  
And wrote the incomparable poem,  
Falling into obscurity and self-defeat?

And listened to the lost brother  
Who refused the wine of communion,  
Falling into obscurity and self-defeat,  
Drowned in the trite river's current.

Who refused the wine of communion,  
Fragmentary and illusory,  
Drowned in the trite river's current  
And fell into iambic paralysis?

Fragmentary and illusory,  
Who loved a woman a woman a woman  
And fell into iambic paralysis  
Falling into obscurity and self-defeat?

Who loved a woman a woman a woman  
And watched gulls sail air without a wing stroke,  
Falling into obscurity and self-defeat,  
Drowned in the trite river's current?

And watched gulls sail air without a wing stroke,  
Who loved a woman a woman a woman  
Drowned in the trite river's current  
Who saw this coming, this change on the land?

### **Manual Typewriter**

Old machine,  
Clunky  
Word  
Maker,

Smack  
Of letter  
Against  
Paper,

Smooth  
Slap  
Of carriage  
Return

Single  
Double  
Space and  
A half,

One font,  
Enough  
For  
All my  
Words.

## **Ice Going Over**

We stood,  
Hands on the rail,  
Early spring.  
As the Niagara  
River took  
Its famous  
Horseshoe dive  
Our words  
Became ice  
Floes gathering  
Speed, crashing  
Over the rim,  
Ice big as houses  
Over the edge,  
Crashing hard  
Below, remains  
Slipping farther  
Away, meaning  
Shattered.

## **Chorus 20**

This June moon, summer  
Solstice announced largest  
Of all  
    Moons, closest,  
A warm flesh color,  
    Blood warm,  
Like a heart fulfilled.  
Still we are far from days  
    When peace and order  
    Will reign among  
    The people,  
Without command from above.  
Still we are far from days  
    When our love openly declares  
    Its true home  
Far from days when moon  
And earth will be harmonized.  
Thinking what we want  
Only gets us  
    So far, the distance oceans  
    Are, quiet terrors of words  
Said privately made public,  
Different names appeared.  
    Are there not enough names  
    Now?  
When there is but one word  
    Primal Simplicity  
That heals—Love.  
Ah, I gaze at this fine moon,  
Knowing you gaze upward,  
    Yet two meanings  
Both ending in gentle pain.

### **Chorus 13**

Someday when the great sky  
    Opens, a brilliant light  
    And a shout echoes  
        Far and wee  
To every crevasse and knoll  
Amid a cold spring rain  
    All will be unified  
And the Tao and Buddha and Jesus  
Will come with the Great Spirit  
    Uniting all creation,  
        As a bud opens on the cherry  
    Then the apple  
Each flower, delicate ,  
    Undenied, opening.  
And the bluebird fills  
    Its nest,  
Was April that cruel?  
    Were there no rainless clouds  
    In that time?  
For heaven is not upward,  
But the lowland  
    Toward which all streams flow,  
The dust unto dust  
    My ash into ashes  
    Spirit emptied of sorrow  
Not in that solitary stone tower,  
Not in songs of dreams,  
Not in cathedral bells  
    But in that blossom dropped  
    And forgotten  
A stone for Stephen, destiny.

## Entering the Anus: The Construction of Space in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*

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What does it mean to “enter the anus” in Early Modern comedy? I have created this phrase to refer to the creation of the potential queering of space in this genre, specifically in *Epicoene* by Ben Jonson, in order to reflect the distinction between sodomy and homoeroticism. Both of these labels are partially defined by their relation to spatiality, which enables us to view them with different societal attributes. Mario DiGangi, author of “Asses and Wits: The Homoerotics of Mastery in Satiric Comedy,” separates these two categories, associating homoeroticism with social order and sodomy with social disorder in *Epicoene*: “Dauphine’s mastery over asses hinges on his ability to separate potential homoeroticism (his own) from a sodomy (Morose’s) associated with theatrical cross-dressing” (186). This separation between “private” homoeroticism and “public” sodomy affirms the material success attached to keeping non-normative behavior private, as Dauphine does, especially when contrasted with the ridicule of characters who experience an elision of the division between their private and public selves. Morose and Amorous La Foole, unlike Dauphine, and to a lesser extent, Clerimont, cannot maintain the secrecy of their socially disruptive, and therefore sodomitical, behaviors. Because of their openness to the public, whether unwitting or welcome, Morose and La Foole offer themselves up to anal discourse, wherein Morose’s repudiation of social activity suggests anal retentiveness of his space (his house), and La Foole’s sexual contact with various citizens (both male and female) indicate a exposure of the anality, or private

sphere, of sex in which an individual should mediate his sexual pursuits so that they do not come into conflict his public self.<sup>1</sup>

In order further explore the division between the public and the private, I will elaborate on the way political construction of spatiality in *Epicoene* because Jonson demonstrates that space functions as a factor of privilege. The more public a space, the more it becomes subject to intrusion by others, and for a space to be homoeroticized during the Early Modern era, that space needed to be kept in at least a somewhat private configuration; therefore, the inability for some of the men in *Epicoene* to maintain this privacy leads to their downfall while only Dauphine can uphold his privacy and its concomitant masculinity since this maintenance of privacy repudiates the social openness, whether intentional or unwitting, to which other characters like Amorous La Foole and Morose subject themselves. This spatial construct, then, reveals how the exposure of non-heteronormative experiences in the public sphere would become sodomitical because the knowledge of this deviation would indicate a threat to the social order, regardless of whether sexual activity between men actually occurred, as exemplified by Morose's marriage to Epicoene, the boy who plays his wife. Notably, as a boy in this society, his gender aligns more within the feminine realm, which contributes to a further complication of what behaviors constitute sodomy, thus creating a further divide between the sodomitical and the homoerotic.

Because bodies not only occupy spaces, but also can be public or private spaces themselves, sexual possibility signifies a social positionality. I will address the construction of

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Hocquenghem's theory of the privacy of the anus from *Homosexual Desire* will help to show that Amorous La Foole's publicized exposure of his sexual ventures overrides the sublimation of sodomitical activities.

the boy as a hybrid figure that can both erase gender distinctions and reinscribe fears of maintaining masculinity, depending on the spatial context. In *Epicoene*, Jonson presents gender as a social construct, which permits greater fluidity not only of gender, but also of sexual behavior if the male characters maintain socially acceptable boundaries to preserve their masculinity—unless they are boys, who comprise this sense of hybridity. By chipping away at the gender binary, Jonson creates the possibility for homoeroticism, a space that must remain hidden on the bodies and in the behaviors of men and boys in order to avoid the pejorative label of “sodomy” because homoerotic possibility does not indicate public acceptance. Instead, the fluidity of male sexuality must remain at least semi-private, privy to only some of the characters, in order to be performed, as illustrated by the disguises of the male characters that cross boundaries of age and gender.

### **Boys as Gender Benders: Not Always a Drag**

Boys are not men. This statement seems logical, but in the Jacobean era, boys were more closely associated with women than they were with men. Because of this label, boys who participated onstage in the theater constructed a hybrid gender, particularly during their performances, as they played the roles of women. In his work on Ben Jonson, Mark Albert Johnston focuses on the beard as a signifier of economic and social power, which “delineated the differences not only between men and women but also men and boys” (401). The concept of the beard as a prosthetic, as the article’s title suggests, reflects the detachability of the beard and the symbolic use of it to connote public status; therefore, boys became epicene objects, as exemplified by roles like the ingle, or catamite. Although I discuss ,’s ingle in greater detail later,

I want to briefly introduce this character, known simply as “Boy.” In the opening scene, he tells Clerimont about his status as an erotic object for not only Clerimont but also women: “The gentlewomen play with me and throw me o’ the bed, and carry me in to my lady, and she kisses me...and puts a peruke o’ my head, and asks me an’ I will wear her gown” (1.1.12-15). The lady attempts to feminize the ingle by attaching prosthetics—the wig and gown—to the boy; however, these accouterments can be more easily removed than the real beard of older boys would be. Thus, the boy enters a hybrid space where he can more easily put on and take off a feminized status than a masculinized one, enabling him to be used by both sexes.

In actuality, this feminization of boys was regulated by external forces in the public space. The guild system, which held public sway over what was considered appropriate for the guilds, controlled the barber-surgeons’ company, mandating that apprentices should not wear full beards, or their masters would risk a fine, showing that the “lack of beards among boys (and the term ‘boy’ itself) was artificially constructed” (Johnston 403). Artificiality opens the potential for artifice, the cloaking of a boy as a woman, so that gender becomes “defaced” in the sense that Jacobean society exhorts boys to remove a masculine trace from their bodies. *Epicoene* breaks down the gender limits of the boy-actors, but spatiality dictates this deconstruction. The space of the chin functions as a signifier of gender, thereby creating a publicly viewable site to determine an individual’s level of masculinity or femininity. Yet because boys are aligned with women, this androgyny produces a pliable gender, which can cloak their masculine selves and allow them to enter new spaces. Although *Epicoene*’s marriage to Morose indicates an extreme example, this marriage, a public and private action, becomes possible only because *Epicoene*, as a boy, can take on a feminine role; however, the revelation

of his impending manhood overrides this androgynous possibility and renders the marriage anti-heteronormative and therefore sodomitical.

The question of agency for these boys, then, indicates the restrictiveness that the public sphere imposes on them.<sup>2</sup> Onstage, however, boys could switch genders because the sign of “boy” permitted a fluid transition between masculine and feminine characters. Phyllis Rackin, author of “Androgyny, Mimesis, and Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage,” affirms that the “theater provided an arena where changing gender definitions could be displayed, deplored, or enforced and where anxieties about them could be expressed by the playwrights and be incited or repressed among their audiences” (29). Thus, when Epicoene is revealed as a boy, the shock is momentary for multiple reasons: the audience knows that Dauphine has formulated a witty scheme of some sort by tricking Morose, his uncle, into marrying Epicoene; Epicoene “herself” initially seems too good to be a real woman; and the actor himself is a boy in women’s clothing. All of these factors contribute to audiences’ anxiety not only regarding gender, but also sexuality because this flux of gender could enable the switching of sexual partners—i.e. boys dressed as women—so that what constitutes sodomy comes into question. The malleability of boy-actors refers to more than just boys as subjugated figures, but also the metatheatrical layering of beardless boys whose clothing was a prosthetic sign that allowed them to easily strip away femininity and reapply masculinity as needed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although Elizabethan politician Henry Cuffe states that boyhood is a time of “*budding and blossoming age, when our cheeks and other more hidden parts begin to be clothed with that mossie excrement of haire*” (qtd. in Greteman 143), regulatory practices of the guilds could strip boys of this particular clothing, in effect emasculating them.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston argues that the beard in Jonson’s play facilitates the “collapse” of gender (408), a point that will become dependent on Epicoene’s relation to public and private spaces throughout the play.

Since *The Children of the Queen's Revels*, a children's theater troupe, performed *Epicoene*, all of the actors themselves were beardless; therefore, when Cutbeard and Captain Otter disguise themselves, their beards are the essential (yet detachable) sign of their authority. Truewit enables this physical transformation for the others so that they can trick Morose into finding cause for divorce from Epicoene. This change, in fact, indicates a characterological metamorphosis, for Truewit claims, "I have fitted my divine and my canonist, dyed their beards and all; the knaves do not know themselves, they are so exalted and altered" (5.3.2-4). An interior shift occurs when a boy wears a beard; he is no longer a quasi-feminine creature, but rather a patriarchal figure, and this transformative agency allows Cutbeard and Otter to have the authority to dispense legal advice to Morose, a patriarchal figure himself (despite his lack of heirs). Upon removing their disguises, they are once again the smooth-cheeked boy-actors playing the parts of men, but the metatheatrical layering is stripped down even more strikingly than in the case of *Epicoene*. The shock of "false" men is more surprising than "false" women since the epistemological distance stretches further between boys and men, suggesting that gender can be fluid, at least during childhood, but that boys are nonetheless closely associated with the feminine realm. Despite this socially constructed propinquity to women, boys will become men, and this truth shapes the spaces that these boys occupy. When these characters reveal themselves, they are still playing men, but their androgynous designation as beardless boys becomes more apparent, which produces the shock that these allegedly feminized boys will acquire greater masculinity as they get older, whether they wear beards or not.

This layering of gender also denotes the reality of cross-dressing in the theater, a mode that further disrupts a binarized view of gender. Tracey Sedinger, author of *“If Sight and Shape Be True’: The Epistemology of Crossdressing on the London Stage,”* notes that a boy-actor’s performance when in women’s clothing “challenges the positivist regime of truth and appearance upon which rests the spectator’s sexuality via object choice...the crossdresser thus ruptures an epistemological/libidinal nexus that defines sexuality via object choice” (66). This argument illustrates Rackin’s idea of the theater as a space for challenging gender both within the play and among the audience. The boy-actor exerts some agency over the audience, who may respond to the boy as erotic object because he resembles a woman, rather than because he is actually a boy; thus, clothing oneself in the apparel of the other gender may instigate subconscious same-sex desires among the male spectators. On the other hand, this construction may cause female spectators to feel “same-sex” attraction for Episcene, the “woman,” which would further enmesh the gendered possibilities for that character in an intricate web that underscores the hybridity of boys. Nevertheless, this sexual rupture derives from a simulacrum, for the boy can remove his illusory womanhood more easily than he can grow a beard and attach his visible, public presence to the masculine realm. The ironic ease of switching genders via clothing compared to acquiring a physical site of masculinity (the beard) reinscribes the socially constructed nature of gender and even erotic desire, destabilizing the epistemic hold of gendered signs and rendering them arbitrary.

### **Material Currency: Penetrating Public Spaces**

So how does the ideological placement of the boy-actors, especially the Children of the Queen's Revels who performed *Epicoene*, reflect a physical counterpart of Jacobean London? According to Adam Zucker in his chapter "Ben Jonson's Gallant London," London comedy can be viewed as a way to explore "the materiality of cultural competency and wit in the theater and in the city at large" through the "interplay of comic and historical space" (55). For instance, *Epicoene* as a beardless boy can arouse comedy through the physical lack of the beard yet also reminds us of the historical practice of artificially maintaining beardlessness to preserve a strict portrayal of patriarchal authority denied to boys; hence, the boy-actor's face, a site of feminized smoothness, inscribes the comedy of *Epicoene*'s disguise. "She" cannot have much power either as a woman or as the boy he really is, and Dauphine, another boy-actor, fuels the comedy by asserting power over *Epicoene* because he has a more masculine role. Dauphine engages in a witty scheme, which he perpetuates throughout multiple spaces as he parades *Epicoene* around as a woman in both public spaces, and more importantly, the private space of Morose's house. Once Morose's private space undergoes a radical change and becomes public as characters learn more about him and his actions, his marriage to the boy becomes a public affair in spite of his anal reclusiveness. By using *Epicoene* as a physically penetrative force, Dauphine can disrupt his uncle's private space and instigate its reconstruction as a more public, or urban, space where more characters can come and go.

As the barrier of Morose's house becomes ever more permeable, he suffers, an effect attributable to his constant wish for silence. His attempted isolation obfuscates from himself the assurance of failure because of the necessity of "homosocial interdependence," which

reveals, “patriarchy cannot operate in a vacuum” (Johnston 414). Yet Morose desires to reside in a vacuum—an impossible space. In urban culture, he leaves himself bereft when he tries to shut out the noise of others, yet Truewit helps to break the boundary when he proclaims the perils of women, asserting, “I’ll tell you, sir, the monstrous hazards you shall run with a wife” (2.2.39-40). In spite of Truewit’s warnings, Morose decides to marry because he believes that his nephew Dauphine has sent Truewit to disabuse his uncle of thoughts of marriage so that he can still receive his inheritance. Although this conversation eventually leads to his marriage to Epicoene, Morose resists acceptance of his condition as husband, as when he refuses to share the erotically charged space of the marriage bed. He marries Epicoene to have his own heirs yet does not consummate the marriage. Although this repudiation of sexual intercourse with a boy should indicate his alliance with normative sexuality, Morose, *as he appears to the public*, refuses his wife; his eschewal of this heteronormative behavior indicates his refusal to occupy the “appropriate” space of a married man, a decision that spills over into his public persona to show the Londoners that he cannot act properly as a man “should.” Even prior to the marriage, Morose’s extreme isolation determines his status as an “urban monster, a metropolitan hermit” (Zucker 64). By cutting himself off from urban life, Morose deforms himself, which suggests cultural castration. His endeavor to reattach his masculinity fails when he does not enter the space of the marriage bed, and consequently, he cannot materialize a child to inherit his estate, which simultaneously severs him further from culturally generated masculinity and his personal goal to father a son. Despite the severity of the situation, this form of castration is only partial because he still retains his estate at this point, his material sign of patriarchal authority.

Although Morose's house becomes permeable, he does try to prevent the erasure of the boundary between his house and the public as a way to preserve his masculine authority; in contrast, Amorous La Foole opens his apartment to anybody willing to come inside, which indicates a desire for physical penetration of his body, a space that loses its status as private. La Foole notes that Clerimont's house is a "fine lodging, almost as delicate a lodging as mine" (1.4.4-5). This delicacy can suggest La Foole's receptivity as a feminized host, where he does not filter his company and even allows anyone to penetrate the interior of his house. Clerimont, in contrast, shows his ability to filter the boundary between his house and the public, revealing a discretion that La Foole does not have. His lack of control indicates sluttishness, a desire for urbanites to enter his house, and in essence, himself, so that he may receive the pleasure of others. When he stands outside the window, he exhorts people to visit him, and this garrulousness further contributes to his meretricious feminization. Because he wishes to receive pleasure, La Foole's desire signifies anal eroticism. In his article, "The Danger of Desire: Anal Sex and the Homo/Masculine Subject," Jeffrey Guss presents anal sexuality as a force that destabilizes masculinity: "[T]he tight impenetrability of the anus is constitutive of masculinity, and its potential for opening to receptivity becomes highly dangerous because it threatens a traditionally structured masculine gender identity" (132). La Foole's permeability, then, compromises his status as a man as he opens his apartment to the inhabitants of the city, metaphorically opening his anus to receive indiscriminate company. When Truewit warns him about Jack Daw wanting to hurt him and that he will wait for him, La Foole responds, "Why then I'll stay here" (4.5.178). In spite of the threat of penetration of the space of his body, La Foole chooses to wait for his potential enemy, evincing his attitude as a receptive figure.

Despite this reading of La Foole as a figure who receives pleasure, he also attempts to create his own pleasure by walking through the city. Zucker asserts, “La Foole is guilty of failing to contain himself, or, at least, of failing to allow his apartment to contain him” (65). La Foole becomes an object of censure because he publicizes his openness for others to come to him and for himself to navigate his body and speech through the city, demonstrating an active desire to seek out social connectivity. This active search for social “partners” further reifies his desire for anal gratification.<sup>4</sup> However, his social openness upsets the strict status of publicly masculine man, for anal pleasure flagrantly rejects heterosexist sublimation. As Guy Hocquenghem argues, “To reinvest the anus collectively and libidinally would involve a proportional weakening of the great phallic signifier, which dominates us constantly both in the small-scale hierarchies of the family and in the great social hierarchies” (103). La Foole thus displaces his masculine self because his anal receptivity overrides the conventional masculine paradigm; by breaking through to a new epistemological stance, he shifts male pleasure into the sodomitical arena because he opens himself socially and spatially to the public.

La Foole’s attempted connections, however, are proved as worthy of derision as Morose’s self-imposed isolation because La Foole cannot control himself. Clerimont refers to La Foole as a “wind-fucker” (1.4.74) as a criticism of the other’s aspiration to achieve social renown, but he is merely exposing himself to the public.<sup>5</sup> As a “wind-fucker,” La Foole presents

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4 Guss reconceptualizes the interpretation of the anus, claiming that it “functions in a social manner: pleasure taking, pleasure granting, talking, attractive, tasty, generative” (127). This interpretation allows for the reading of La Foole believing that he generates useful social connections, but in actuality, his interactions unsettle masculine normativity.

5 Jonson appears to reify Clerimont’s accusation through the very name “Amorous La Foole,” or fool for love, although in the case of La Foole, his foolishness comes more from his loquacity and indiscriminate openness, which leads to his having sexual intercourse with Epicoene, whom he believes is a woman.

himself as a “character who stands to gain little satisfaction from his rapid movements through urban space” (Zucker 65). By the time *Epicoene* was originally performed in 1609, the term “fucker” related to someone who has sexual intercourse (“Fucker”). This sexual connotation to the slur evokes a dual spatiality for La Foole’s social ambition. Zucker’s use of “rapid movements” connotes both the movements of La Foole’s body through the city as he tries to open himself as a social figure and the movement of his penis during sexual intercourse. As an eroticized figure, La Foole destroys the barriers both of his house and his body because as a man, he cannot straddle both sides of the gender binary unlike boys who can traverse and potentially rupture this binary. Thus, this public display reduces him to a caricature, another sodomitical “monster” to provide an antithesis to Morose, the other extreme. By publicizing himself, La Foole complicates the gender hybridity of boys; his publicity abrogates his masculinity despite his sexual prowess although his sexual pursuits ironically emphasize his maleness. This paradox reveals the failure to categorize what constitutes “man” because behaviors or appearances in the public sphere, whether the erotic articulations or presence (or absence) of a beard, delimit the possibility of who can be a man in Jacobean England.

Clerimont, who castigates Morose and La Foole for their extreme concerns with boundaries, presents himself as a model of controlled permeability. Through his ability to mediate information about himself, he can maintain his identity as a masculine figure despite his homoerotic relationship with his ingel because this relationship remains private, which for Clerimont, means that only few characters know about it as opposed to the publicized unsettling of gender norms that affect the lives of Morose and La Foole. When he sees Clerimont, Truewit greets Clerimont by addressing the other’s sexual proclivities: “Why, here’s

the man that can melt away his time, and never feels it! What between his mistress abroad and his ingle at home" (1.1.22-24). Truewit normalizes Clerimont's homoerotic relationship, giving it the same status as having a mistress because Clerimont does not allow his ingle to interfere with his public self. By staying at "home," the ingle remains in the filtered boundary of Clerimont's private space since "home" can connote his house rather than the public spaces of the city albeit the ingle can move about London, acting as an erotic figure for men and women. Further, since only Truewit acknowledges his relationship with the boy, Clerimont can keep the relationship semi-private as he navigates the spaces of London and of his interpersonal relationships. In "The Deconstruction of Gender in *Epicoene*," Wolfgang Müller shows that Clerimont's ability to engage in a "mixing or merging of sexual inclinations" (173) reflects the mutability of gender and does not threaten his masculinity because he holds "masculine" power in the homoerotic relationship with a boy who can encompass gender hybridity; further, he still expresses a public attraction toward women, thus preserving the arbitrary designation of an "appropriate" display of sexual behavior in the public sphere.

Conversely, the construction of boundaries may extend beyond the spatial realm according to Lena Cowen Orlin. Orlin asserts, "Many boundaries had been determined not by a logic of space but instead through a process of negotiation and redistribution" (353). Her argument divides space from negotiation and redistribution, but I argue that these forms of altering boundaries must refer to spatiality, for negotiation and redistribution require their own logic to acquire new space and its concomitant power, as in the case of Dauphine and his strategic planning. Once *Epicoene's* secret is revealed, Dauphine proposes to help with nullifying his uncle's false marriage, which causes Morose to relinquish his power:

Dauphine: Shall I have your favour perfect to me, and love hereafter?  
Morose: That and everything beside. Make thine own conditions. My whole estate is thine. (5.4.159-61)

Dauphine's scheme to trick his uncle into marrying a boy ultimately leads to Morose's transfer of his physical estate and material wealth to his nephew. This negotiation and subsequent redistribution of wealth indicates a transfer not only of material wealth, but also of power. For Zucker, spatial reconstruction has larger implications: "[T]he permeability of the boundary between public and private space becomes emblematic of an individual's position in a social hierarchy" (67). Neither Morose nor La Foole can control his boundaries, and thus, each of them loses signs of masculine power. While La Foole is feminized, Morose transfers his estate, undergoing a deeper cultural castration once he cuts himself off from his material metonym of patriarchal status.

### **Secret Spaces and Gaping Views: Homoerotic Longings and Sodomitical Presentations**

Secrecy and disguise work together to create the subterfuge that ultimately unseats Morose from his position of power and allows Dauphine to negotiate for greater power and its concomitant masculine authority. While Dauphine seems a likely candidate for a homoerotic relationship with Epicoene, this relational configuration is not sodomitical because it remains fully private, even more private than Clerimont's relationship to his ingel. Dauphine instantiates this privacy when he disguises Epicoene, thereby layering his gender-ambiguous relationship between him and Epicoene with the gender flux only boys can achieve in Jacobean England. In "Things like truths well feigned': Mimesis and Secrecy in Jonson's *Epicoene*" Reuben Sanchez claims, "Hiding or disguising the truth is a form of secrecy accomplished through imitation in

*Epicoene*" (321). Dauphine's plot hinges on the disguise of womanhood he applies to Epicoene, who mimics the other sex; on the metatheatrical level, Epicoene would be in disguise even if he were playing a "real" woman. So this mimesis, in fact, creates a necessary space for subterfuge wherein deception is required to drive not just this play, but also any Early Modern play with women characters. In *Epicoene*, the revelation of the titular character's gender, the shirking of the dress, unsettles more than the gender binary: it reconstitutes the artifice of women as beings who must deceive men in order to "be" women since males have perpetuated this artifice, and more radically, it shows that a boy can "become" a woman by applying the proper accouterments.

By using deception to his benefit through the construction of a potential bride for Morose, Dauphine deflects any public display of homoerotic longing for Epicoene. He enables this transfer of power by engaging in what Mario DiGangi terms the "homoerotics of mastery," a method of manipulation that utilizes the "homoerotic potentiality within the master-servant power structure, a potentiality that may be activated to accomplish a witty scheme" (181). This reasoning places Dauphine as master over Epicoene. Orchestrating Epicoene's transformation as a woman permits Dauphine to enact the more masculine role of their dyad because he has social power over Epicoene, and this power can signify erotic, masterful domination. Feminizing Epicoene connects him closer to the ingle, a sexual plaything who can be used discreetly by men (and women)—and Dauphine practices unparalleled discretion.

Therefore, when Truewit has potentially foiled Dauphine's scheme by trying to help him by warning Morose against marriage, Dauphine laments the possibility that he cannot execute his plan. He considers Epicoene his "entire friend, one that for the requital of such a fortune as

to marry him, would have made me very ample conditions” (2.4.39-41). This assertion can be read as erotic. The conditions are not specified, and Dauphine claims he will share the fortune with his “entire friend,” a phrase that connotes a relationship that secretly breaks prohibitions against unsanctioned sexual behavior. Thus, Dauphine opens the opportunity for his feminized friend to achieve a relational closeness that must be kept secret to avoid the public label of sodomy. Dauphine does not destabilize hegemonic heteronormativity but instead “takes the beard” from Morose, who has a public relationship with a boy. In fact, Dauphine’s plot reinstates the heteronormative structure because he “re-establishes his proper inheritance...and Epicoene’s faithful subordination” to him (DiGangi 186). Thus, in the play, the possible questioning of their homoerotic nature of their relationship is abrogated because Dauphine “fixes” everything in the public sphere and keeps his “special” relationship with Epicoene the remaining secret at the end of the play.

By keeping his possible homoerotic relationship in the private sphere, Dauphine can act as a moral agent who replaces the disorder of the marriage between his uncle and Epicoene. While Phyllis Rackin maintains that the play is a “homophobic satire” (31), as evidenced by the ridicule La Foole and Jack Daw receive when vaunting of their sexual adventures with Epicoene, DiGangi dismantles this assumption and shows that sexually based censure was a matter of space, not merely a concern for genitalia. Instead of homophobia, he encourages us to think of the Early Modern era characterized by “sodomophobia,” stating, “The category of ‘sodomy’ was deployed in early modern Europe to stigmatize people who were perceived to threaten the dominant conceptions not only of sexuality, but of gender, class, religion, or race” (DiGangi 182). Morose’s marriage presents a threat to heteronormativity, even more so than his earlier

isolation, which has prevented him from the appearance of normative conjugal relations with his wife, because the public has discovered that he has married a boy. Michel Foucault asserts that this public concern about the sexual realm has shifted over time. In fact, the origin of sexuality places an emphasis on both the public and private spheres. According to Foucault, “What was the discourse of sexuality was initially applied to wasn’t sex but the body, the sexual organs, pleasures, kinship relations, interpersonal relations, and so forth” (210). The body functions as site of pleasure, but so does the public sphere. Sexuality becomes a gauge for the exterior world, and consequently, an individual’s disruption of sexual norms constitutes a break with social order. As DiGangi asserts, “Even though Morose *has not* had sex with Epicoene, his disorderly marriage to the transvestite boy marks him as a sodomite” (186; original emphasis). The marriage becomes sodomitical because sexual intercourse is not restricted to the body; once the secret is exposed, the sham of a marriage destabilizes the gender binary, and Morose must expiate by giving up his masculine authority—his property.

Even before Dauphine reveals Morose’s marriage to Epicoene as sodomitical, Morose’s isolation enforces a disruption of social order, and he is diagnosed as melancholic. This label is itself a form of sodomy because his house has become a public space where his behavior affects the city.<sup>6</sup> Unlike at the beginning of the play, Morose can no longer hide his illness, which has previously kept him out of sustained public scrutiny. In “Purgation as the Allure of Mastery: Early Modern Medicine and the Technology of the Self,” Gail Kern Paster contextualizes early modern medicine, asserting, “As with leaving a sewer-ditch uncleaned or a

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<sup>6</sup> As with the other characters, Morose’s name suggests that his melancholic condition is an inherent part of himself; therefore, his behavior instantiates his status as a sodomite—someone who does not participate in normative behavior.

hearth unswept, allowing the body to remain insoluble, stewing unhealthily in its own juices, would soon result in a noxious, dangerous burdensomeness” (199). Morose’s humoral imbalance must be cured to save both himself and the community that has penetrated his “noxious” interior—his symbolically anal house.

Although it may seem presumptuous to medicalize a character from a Jacobean play, Morose has already received a diagnosis; I argue that his melancholy codes for psychic priapism, a condition that interprets Morose as a phallus unable to control his space. Foucault describes priapism as “a sexual erethism that is never resolved. The patient is in a state of constant convulsion, traversed by extreme attacks” (113). Unlike “healthy” characters, such as Dauphine and Clerimont, who manage their space with discretion, Morose cannot regulate his space because he has unsuccessfully tried to close off everyone at the cost of rejecting normative interpersonal behavior; his boundaries are permeable, which turns his melancholy into a condition constituting social disorder as other characters become increasingly aware of his extreme, anti-normative behavior.

While Morose assumes the status of a tumescent phallus who commits sodomy merely by being unwell, Morose’s house functions as an anus because he has penetrated his own space with his illness and opened the possibility for others to enter his house, which, like an anus, he cannot assume a sealing off from penetration as a given. This false sense of impenetrability of the house connotes the possibility for penetration of the anus by many guests, which indicates sodomy since these guests help to erode the boundary between the city and Morose’s house. Thus, Morose cannot maintain the sense of privacy that homoeroticism requires as more characters can enter his house, causing the potential for the discovery of Epicoene’s maleness

to increase. We can think of his attempted isolation as a preventive measure to ensure “proper” anality—the closing off from penetrative forces—yet this isolation still refuses heteronormativity because only when Morose opens himself to the penetration of Epicoene inside his domicile can he have the opportunity for “proper” different-sex interaction so that Morose can then assume a more acceptable public persona. Hocquenghem claims, “Whereas the phallus is essentially social, the anus is essentially private... The anus expresses privatization itself” (96). In other words, a boy has penetrated Morose’s private self, his “anal” house. Ironically, Morose must engage in a more severe form of sodomy in order to correct his humoral imbalance, which begins the moment he is introduced in the play, not when he is diagnosed. His marriage, despite its lack of consummation, is sodomitical because it has penetrated public awareness and has undone Morose as a patriarchal figure in his own house, the site of penetration. Guss notes, “Anal eroticism...is often burdened with psychological and cultural tasks that are often related to the construction and destruction of male gender identity and masculinity” (124). By publicizing this deconstruction of the gender binary, Morose becomes an unwitting agent who exposes the simulacrum of gender distinctions, for which he must pay by giving his nephew his estate.

In order to fully reinstate heteronormativity, Morose endeavors to engage in the proper response to his discovery of Epicoene as a boy. His response is nothing—once the truth is revealed, Morose does not speak. This silence signifies the end of his priapism; Morose becomes “flaccid” because he can no longer maintain masculine authority in his own home. I have already referred to his isolation as a form of cultural castration; this flaccidity is psychic, a force that has disrupted him internally and externally rather than something that merely affects

his environment; thus, he cannot recover from flaccidity, or frigidity, because he has publicized his own permanent lack of masculinity. Notably, he proclaims his impotence prior to the discovery of the gender of his boy-wife, affirming in the presence of many characters, “Utterly unabled in nature, by reason of frigidity, to perform the duties or any the least office of a husband” (5.4.43-44). This claim shows that Morose upsets the cultural construction of man even before the public discovers his sodomitical marriage because his frigidity acts as an emasculating force that rejects a heteronormative configuration of marriage. He must deny his tumescence, his manhood, to show he feels no erotic desire for his wife. To further establish his inability to reclaim any masculine status, he speechlessness once he becomes aware of the truth indicates symbolically voiding the anus—both his house and the play itself. Morose loses significance by becoming a figure whose publicized anal attraction relegates him to the space of his ideal silent woman, and only Dauphine can end the social disorder through his clever scheme.

In *Epicoene*, Ben Jonson presents spaces where gender can achieve fluidity; however, this play with gender is limited by the space it enters and the young male bodies that can inhabit it. Maintaining private or semi-private relations permits the possibility of homoeroticism, but only full privacy can lead to significantly beneficial results, as Dauphine’s plot with Epicoene to acquire his uncle’s wealth illustrates. In contrast, the more public of a display of potential same-sex relations reveals a gaping anus, the supposedly impenetrable penetrated. This penetration contributes to social dysfunction, even disorder, as it points toward the potential deconstruction of what constitutes man.

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## A Royal and Melancholy Blue

*Richard Madigan, East Stroudsburg University*

William Matthews' "Mood Indigo," from *Blues If You Want* (1989) begins with the kind of flourish Duke Ellington would have appreciated, one long extended sentence that elaborates a catalogue of places from which the blue mood of the title comes to find the poem's central character, who is perhaps an older female relative of the poem's speaker, a grandmother or a great aunt (6-7). This opening makes such a lush and bravura start that, prompted by the poem's borrowed title, one naturally thinks of the Ellington touch, some seemingly off-the-cuff introductory passage from Ellington himself at the piano, or from Johnny Hodges or Ray Nance or Jimmy Hamilton. The opening list of originating places pulls the reader deep into the poem, all the way to stanza five where the sentence finally resolves itself, and it begins to provide the poem with its bedrock selection of closely observed details that, in a relatively short span—the entire poem is only 36 lines—reveal so much about this woman's life.

From the porch; from the hayrick where her prickled  
brothers hid and chortled and slurped into their young pink  
lungs the ash-blond dusty air that lay above the bales

like low clouds; and from the squeak and suck  
of the well-pump and from the glove of rust it implied  
on her hand; from the dress parade of clothes

in her mothproofed closet; from her tiny Philco  
with its cracked speaker and Sunday litany  
(*Nick Carter, The Shadow, The Green Hornet, Sky King*);

from the loosening bud of her body; from hunger,  
as they say, and from reading; from the finger  
she used to dial her own number; from the dark

loam of the harrowed fields and from the very sky;  
it came from everywhere [...] (1 - 14)

In these opening stanzas Matthews uses color and sound and touch and memory to begin his ongoing description and characterization of the complex state of mind in which this woman has lived. He has borrowed Duke Ellington's title and also something of his complexity and contradiction in an attempt to identify and define this elusive "blue" feeling, its many-layered blue-on-top-of blue, a royal shade of indigo.

We are all a little familiar with this state of mind, although it may not come to us "from the very sky." It is familiar yet singular in its individual manifestations. "Mood indigo," as Duke Ellington has defined it in his famous composition of that name, might be loosely described by an attentive listener as a kind of melancholy loneliness, or as a companionable physic isolation, or even as a less friendly feeling that combines a tinge of pathos with frustration verging at times on despair, and with a clear intuitive understanding of the dangers of the dark. It can be all of these at once, a casual and irreducible mystery, the most ordinary kind of blues but also a feeling uncharacterizable and pervasive, so common and expected for some that, despite the fact that its true source might be something as deliberate as an imbalance in the chemistry of the brain, it becomes a steady kind of company.

For all the loneliness and occasional distress mood indigo engenders, it is also for Ellington a dignified and intellectually rarified state of mind that evokes clear echoes of his music's many statements of racial and cultural pride, suggesting, through its connection with the very dark, nearly purple shade of an African's skin, something of the particular and violent disjunctions of African peoples in the Americas. Other than in the poem's title, Matthews

makes no direct connection to Ellington or to jazz, but throughout the poem he uses Ellington's ambivalent musical definition of this mood as a defining point of reference. For a jazz fan such as Matthews, the connection is inevitable. "Mood indigo" is a state of mind that allows the woman in the poem, most of the time, to accept her emotional isolation and deprivation as a part of the natural order of things (she has never known any other way of being), without denying or suppressing a nearly equal and parallel desire for some other way of existing in the world, one which would involve to a much greater degree the agreeable company of others.

In the sixth stanza Matthews elaborates on the appearances and disappearances of this shifting state which, though never far away, has particular associations with the night:

it came from everywhere. Which is to say it was  
always there, and that it came from nowhere.

It evaporated with the dew, and at dusk when dark  
spread in the sky like water in a blotter, it spread, too,  
but it came back and curdled with milk and stung

with nettles ... (14 - 19)

The image of a blotter absorbing the water of the sky, perhaps lightly colored a shade of blue by ink, is one of many ingenious figures which the poem presents to us about the way this woman has lived her life inside this blue mood, and vice versa. Although it "evaporated with the dew," that disappearance is of course only temporary, because this blue feeling is part of an ongoing system of inner weather. When it inevitably returns, it comes carrying thorns ("stung with nettles"), and bearing a sickeningly familiar smell ("curdled with milk").

And the music is in her like this too, the way the blues always are, since "mood indigo" is first and foremost a musical mood while Matthews has Duke Ellington in mind. The woman in the poem hears the sound of these blue tones coming from everywhere: from the well-pump,

from her old Philco radio, from all the various musical sounds of a middle American farm, the same way that Ellington, one of the greatest of blues players, heard the music and felt the blues in all sorts of unlikely but familiar places, most famously while riding on a train:

[...] It was in the bleat of the lamb, the way  
a clapper is in a bell, and in the raucous, scratchy  
gossip of the crows. [...] (19-21)

Matthews animates this woman's most characteristic mood to the point where it becomes the close friend she doesn't have, a physical and even erotic presence she calls to when she uses her finger to dial her own number. When she was a girl, "mood indigo" accompanied her on the way to school, and lay down with her at night to sleep, like an imaginary lover or mooned-over crush. Its presence is so essential to her sense of herself that its automatic appearance comes to please her, so central to the texture of her life that it inhabits everything she does, even the daily chores and the implements she uses to accomplish them:

[...] It walked with her to school and lay  
with her to sleep and at last she was well pleased.  
If she were to sew, she would prick her finger with it.  
If she were to bake, it would linger in the kitchen

like an odor snarled in the deepest folds of childhood. (21-25)

Matthews does astonishing things with time and voice. As the poem's movement through time begins to accelerate from the woman's youth into her middle age, the scope and reach of her emotional life is suggested in the way that "mood indigo" comes to represent, and then to embody, some of the essential losses and sadnesses she has incurred along the way. It is as if

the reservoir of grief has been there waiting since earliest childhood for these harms to come and fill it up:

It became her dead pet, her lost love, the baby sister  
Blue and dead at birth, the chill headwaters of the river

That purred and meandered and ran and ran until  
it issued into her, as into a sea, and then she was its  
and it was wholly hers. [...] (26-30)

Like her stillborn sister, she too was “blue” at birth, and this condition has only deepened and intensified as she has grown older. There is something powerfully intimate in the way she reaches a kind of complete communion with this blue mood, depicted here in the highly charged and sexual image of a river emptying itself into the ocean. Her whole life, it seems, has been structured and plotted, like the individual movements of a musical suite, to reach this final stage of mutual accommodation. As the woman’s personality matures, so also does her identification with and representation of “mood indigo,” so that by the time she is a fully-grown adult, she and it are indistinguishable: “she is its/ and it was wholly hers.” Everywhere in these conjunctions there is darkness and there is light. The “chill headwaters” of accumulated loss have “purred and meandered” in their leisurely, musical way, creating the whole fabric of a complex emotional life, issuing into her until she has become as “a sea,” the vast basin of her entire life’s experience.

At that moment of mutual possession, the process is nearly complete. All that remains is her life’s concluding verse, signaled in the poem by the surprising and satisfying emergence of a communal “we” that will observe these final days and report on them, the poet as a child perhaps speaking for the family, old enough now to see and to remember. This intimate, plural point of view will be there to notice the woman’s slow and nearly graceful decline into

dementia, one last chamber of the indigo blue mood in which her isolation sweeps her to her feet:

[...] She kept to her room, as we  
learned to say, but now and then she'd come down  
and pass through the kitchen, and the screen door  
would close behind her with no more sound than

an envelope being sealed, and she'd walk for hours  
in the fields like a lithe blue rain, and end up  
in the barn, and one of us would go and bring her in. (30-36)

This is a beautiful and unsentimental ending to match the bravura of the poem's start. In the end, the woman has become a kind of living spirit, like a gust of wind though the silent screen door. She's almost entirely sealed inside herself, inside that quiet envelope. She's become the "lithe blue rain." As her mind deteriorates, her body remains flexible and strong, perhaps because of all it now contains. At the end, although it seems the woman's mind has been lost to senility, she's become a nearly mythic figure in the eyes of the young narrator, alive with a strange and otherworldly grace.

Duke Ellington wrote "Mood Indigo" with the great New Orleans clarinetist, Albany "Barney" Bigard, and his band recorded the song three times in October of 1930, twice for Okeh Records (on October 14<sup>th</sup> and October 30<sup>th</sup>), and once for the Brunswick label. The song was popular almost immediately, becoming what Ellington was later to call "our first big hit." In 1930, the Ellington Orchestra was nearing the end of a long stay at the Cotton Club in Harlem, and was being featured regularly on the radio broadcasts that exposed the band to a national audience and helped to establish its reputation outside of New York City. As Stuart Nicholson observes in his *A Portrait of Duke Ellington*, this was at a time when technical considerations

involving the recording studio and radio broadcasts were beginning to affect the way some of Ellington's music was conceived and arranged (Nicholson 111-113). In the case of "Black and Tan Fantasy," problems with a "mike-tone," that is, the illusion of a tone that occurs when the sounds from two instruments are pitched very closely together, ("a tone that's not there," Ellington called it), forced Ellington to reconfigure his arrangement with a low clarinet note down on the bottom, which had the effect of centering the illusory mike-tone. In October 1930, this same technique was applied to "Mood Indigo," which featured the trio of Bigard on clarinet, Arthur Whetsol on trumpet, and Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton on trombone. The resulting "upside down" arrangement was in part responsible for the magical re-creation of twilight languor which made the song an immediate success once it was broadcast over the radio. The mood that Ellington was trying to evoke—a persistent twilight melancholy that could still be in its own peculiar and haunting way comforting or even pleasurable-- was difficult to describe in music (an early title for the piece was "Dreamy Blues"), but these new considerations involving the studio and radio broadcasts and the technical problems that sometimes arose from them, assisted Ellington and helped him to capture the sound he wanted. Over time "Mood Indigo" became one of the Ellington band's signature pieces, and is as popular today as it was in the 1930s, an easily recognized jazz standard which has been recorded by hundreds of musicians of all stripes.

One of Ellington's better later versions appears on *Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins*, recorded for the Impulse label in 1962. Perhaps as a sign of his affection and respect for Hawkins, with whom he had long wanted to record, Ellington assembled an all-star septet of prominent Ellingtonians to support his guest's classic tenor saxophone. The band that day

included Ray Nance, Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney and Lawrence Brown, with Ellington at the piano, Aaron Bell on bass and Sam Woodyard playing drums. Although most of these men had known each other for years, and the session is a relaxed and happy one, Hawkins' "Mood Indigo" is surprisingly delicate and wistful, and more than a little elegiac, his own particular call across the years. It's another great jazzman's version of the royal blue mood that everyone is familiar with, but no two people experience alike.

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## Teaching Incest, the Erotic, and Lesbianism; or, The Troubles Teaching Dorothy

### Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall Be*

*Tanga*

*Christine Grogan, University of South Florida*

*In memory of Sarah Namulondo, who unexpectedly passed away in the spring of 2013.*

In March 2010, Dorothy Allison visited the University of Tampa to speak to creative-writing students, encouraging them to “sustain their ambition to go deeply into debt in order to become writers” (PEN 10). A proud product of “white-trash” culture, Allison speaks and writes with a keen awareness of socioeconomic class, as her quoted words suggest. She earned the distinction of being the first person to graduate high school in her family, and is now an accomplished writer who revisits themes of class, along with gender and sex, in her works, the most prominent of which is her semi-autobiographical 1992 *Bastard Out of Carolina*.<sup>7</sup>

Believing I had the university's stamp of approval, I incorporated *Bastard Out of Carolina* into my composition course that semester, to what turned out to be mixed reviews. I had been

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<sup>7</sup> One of many female-authored incest narratives published in the 1990s, *Bastard Out of Carolina* became a best seller and spawned an award-winning film. It established Allison as a major contemporary author, garnering the attention of the group she calls the “big boys” of literature and receiving many accolades: it was a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award and won the Ferro-Grumley prize, the ALA Award for Lesbian and Gay Writing, and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction. Allison had published with feminist, lesbian, and gay newspapers, periodicals, and presses for almost two decades, but the publication of *Bastard* moved her work to a mainstream press and readership. It received flattering reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Village Voice*. It was even discussed favorably in Katie Roiphe's “Making the Incest Scene,” an otherwise scathing attack on writers of incest narratives. Although it was mainly received as a novel written in the tradition of Southern regionalist fiction that told the story of working-class families, many reviewers also emphasized the issue of sexual abuse.

teaching composition as an adjunct at the University of Tampa, while working on my dissertation, an exploration of incest narratives in twentieth-century American literature. Sarah Namulondo, a Fulbright scholar from Uganda and my colleague and friend, had just finished her dissertation, a study of female sexuality in African women's writing. She came with me to hear Allison speak. Sarah discovered that many of the themes Allison addresses in her first novel are also concerns of the Cameroonian writer, Calixthe Beyala, most evident in her second novel, the 1988 *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* (*Tu t'appelleras Tanga*).<sup>8</sup> Sarah planned to teach Beyala's novel in her courses, African Women Writing or the African Novel, upon her return to Makerere University, Uganda's largest and second-oldest higher institution of learning. This article outlines my successes and missteps to teaching *Bastard* and Sarah's anticipated reactions to teaching *Tanga*. It should be of use to anyone interested in teaching literary representations of incest, the erotic, or lesbianism.

Both novels can be classified as trauma narratives—as novels that focus on emotionally damaged protagonists whose lives are testaments to their psycho-cultural woundings and their subsequent struggles for survival. Arguably, the most striking similarity between them is the

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<sup>8</sup> Born in Cameroon in 1961 and living in France since the age of 17, Calixthe Beyala began writing in the mid-1980s, well after the Women's Movement of the 1970s. She was one of the first African women writers to pay attention to woman-centered bodily experiences. A prolific writer, she publishes a novel every year or two. In direct contrast to the pioneering work of her Cameroonian male counterparts who focused on a nationalist consciousness following the country's independence, Beyala's narratives propose unique, if somewhat radical, responses to the situations in which women find themselves in conservative African societies in the postcolonial urban spaces. Children's and women's issues are at the heart of her writing. The critical reception of her works has been mixed: "While most critics applaud her originality, both thematic and stylistic, others are uncomfortable with her subject matter and what they feel it says about Africa...and some have openly condemned her work. For instance, [Joseph] Ndinda has pointed out that Cameroonians were, paradoxically, some of the worst critics when her first novel appeared and some even went so far as accusing her of plagiarism... an accusation that unfortunately persists with the publication of more of Beyala's work" (Nfah-Abbenyi 81). Tunde Fatunde observes, "although she claims to be a Cameroonian, her thought processes and her ideological perceptions of relationships between a man and a woman have largely been informed by Western feminism" (73).

writers' willingness to describe sensual encounters in detail despite, or as we argue because of, the backdrop of incest and sexual abuse. Our article discusses the difficulties of teaching not just the representations of incest and psychological trauma, but also the scenes that are uncomfortably erotic in their explicit descriptions of the sexually abused bodies working through the trauma. The following provides a feminist analysis of incest and the erotic as depicted in *Bastard* and *Tanga*, gesturing towards the larger implications for teaching novels about these subjects.<sup>9</sup>

To date, only one critic has discussed these two works together: in her 2003 article titled "Calixthe Beyala's Manifesto and Fictional Theory," Sonja Darlington argues that *Tanga*, like *Bastard*, is pointedly political—a "social critique" that "strongly contests illegitimacy" by "focus[ing] attention on a young female child's right to have others acknowledge her birth, a female child's right to have others value her existence, and a female child's right to control her body" (41). Furthermore, she cautions against reading these novels' protagonists as mere victims of determinism. Rather, as she states, Beyala and Allison upset traditional notions of victimhood by portraying female protagonists who exhibit agency through their imagination. This article extends Darlington's reading of these two novels and argues that these female protagonists display agency not only through their imagination, but also through engaging the physical body—the particularly vulnerable working-class female bodies—in erotic ways. One of

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<sup>9</sup> Although our discussion focuses mainly on comparisons between these two works, the differences between American and Cameroonian society should not be overlooked. We assume our readers are already familiar with the heteropatriarchal structure that confines many women in the U.S. despite the efforts of the three waves of feminism. The broader cultural structures in Africa are also ruled by heteropatriarchy, a system in which women are schooled on how to be available to men. In African societies, women are socialized to become better wives, mothers, and guardians of the family, and such a system discourages agency. But Beyala problematizes these structures to create room for resistance and renewal, encouraging women to *nego*-tiate their realities and consider the available possibilities, what Obioma Nnaemeka has called "Nego Feminism" (108).

the great challenges of teaching these books is having students come to terms with the complicated relationship victims of sexual abuse often feel toward their bodies and how abuse and arousal become associated. Before we examine the sadomasochism and lesbianism, we first look at two other topics that may trouble students—how the authors render incest and childhood sexual trauma in a “truthful” manner and how they present the mothers as complicit in, if not outright encouraging, the victimization of their daughters.

### **Writing Incest and Childhood Sexual Abuse: The Problem with Trauma**

Most of my composition students did not have much knowledge of psychological trauma or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. I found that it is important to first explain why trauma is never easily represented before discussing the difficulty with representing it through bodily images. Pointed out by many leading clinicians and theorists (namely Judith Herman, one of the most important feminist experts on trauma whose clinical work and research focus on victims of domestic and political trauma; Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, two of the most influential critics on trauma in the humanities department; and Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world’s leading authorities on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder), trauma works to disrupt the possibility of memory and narrative. It breaks down the distinction between past and present. Many clinicians now acknowledge that the phenomenon called dissociation occurs, in which the traumatic experience is encoded differently from normal memories: it bypasses perception and consciousness, stored as sensory fragments that have no linguistic or verbal components. According to van der Kolk, these traumatic memories are imprinted on the amygdala in the form of vivid sensations and images. When traumatic memories are dissociated, they often are

expressed in physical ailments. For example, children who have been victims of trauma have stored the information in a sensory-perceptual way in which a smell, sound, or color will remind them of the trauma and trigger a response.

Yet, in addition to resisting narrative, trauma also initiates narrative. A dilemma results in which one feels compelled to share one's story of trauma but is unable to translate the experience into speech. Part of the healing process is to create a coherent story of trauma where the fragments form a complete narrative, ideally narrated in the past tense, turning traumatic memory into narrative memory. Narrating trauma has been central to trauma studies since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the work of Sigmund Freud. Even the controversial-yet-inescapable figure in the genealogy of trauma theory realized that any narrative of traumatic experience will be somehow altered, changed, transformed, modified, distorted—in a word, fictionalized.

In her groundbreaking work, Caruth draws on Freud's findings and claims that literature is a privileged place for articulating what she calls "an unclaimed experience." Realizing that representations of traumatic truth are formed through figurative, rather than literal, references, Caruth, LaCapra, and others have argued that fiction seems best suited to represent an experience that defies traditional modes of communication. Issues of reference, representation, and history "have long been at the heart of literary studies, where the status of the literary text—which is always by definition possibly a fiction—is in question" (Caruth, *Critical Encounters* 2). In other words, the problematics and estrangements of language are always concerns for literary study. Literature and other works of art seek to give form to the

contradictions of existence. Figurative language may well be the only properly referential language to convey what is a radically non-linguistic event.

Although many trauma scholars and clinicians have long realized the importance of narrative in working through trauma, it is just recently that we have begun to place corporeality as central to traumatic representation. Perhaps psychological trauma's biggest paradox is that "the wound of trauma seems both distinct from and yet inextricably bound up in that of the body" (Robson 31). For decades, many clinicians contended that traumatic symptoms were caused by *physical* ailments. For example, in the 1860s, British physician John Erichsen attributed the symptoms from railway accidents to physical injuries—shock or concussion of the spine. Similarly, after dealing with World War I soldiers, the British psychologist Charles Myers credited their distress to the effects of exploding shells (hence the term "shell shock"). In other words, it was believed that what caused these men to suffer had physical origins.

Freud, however, recognized that many of these World War I soldiers were behaving like his female patients who had been diagnosed with hysteria. Furthermore, he glimpsed at the truth that these illnesses were psychological—not physical—in origin. Yet, Freud's theorization of trauma, which Caruth draws on, focuses on the image of a bodily wound. Caruth then problematically moves between bodily and psychological wounding without clearly differentiating between them. In a footnote, she admits, "it would be interesting to pursue the complexity of the relation between mind and body as it might be rethought through the problem of trauma" (qtd. in Robson 31). In recent years, Kathryn Robson, Laura Di Prete, and others take up this neglected project and build on Freud's and Caruth's work to emphasize the relation between the body and psyche.

Trauma's double status of body/mind, physical/psychic, exterior/interior, has troubled not only Freud and Caruth but contemporary trauma theorists (LaCapra, Ruth Leys, Jean Laplanche, Mark Seltzer, and Leo Bersani), who are skeptical of neurophysiological theories of trauma and note the dangers of shifting the focus of research from the mind back to the body. In their quest to position the problem within the culture, they advocate moving away from locating the pathology within the individual's body. LaCapra questions the "overly functionally specific model of the brain" (109). Likewise, Leys contends that focusing too much on the physical would be at odds with a conceptualization of trauma that accounts for social values and political realities.

As LaCapra and Leys note, contextualizing trauma within a social and political framework is critical. However, the role of corporeality should not be overlooked when formulating an approach to the study of psychological trauma and the posttraumatic. In her 2006 study on corporeality and textuality in contemporary American texts, which includes a chapter on *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Di Prete convincingly argues, "Any theoretical reflection on the ways of narrating trauma—including debates on representational distance, objectivity, and faithfulness to the psychic dynamics at work—cannot exclude corporeality as one of the central figures of this telling. Writing trauma means...speaking and writing the body, and returning to the body as a medium of self-expression and—crucially—self-empowerment" (11).

After students are made aware of the debate surrounding trauma's mind/body paradox, a brief discussion of the current efforts being made to expand the medical definition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the definition of *insidious trauma* is helpful. In 1980, thanks in large part to the efforts of feminist activists and Vietnam veterans, psychological trauma

became an official diagnosis. Included in the *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) III*, the long overdue category “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) entered the American Psychiatric Association lexicon. PTSD was originally identified as an anxiety disorder with four diagnostic criteria: 1. Traumatic event. 2. Reexperiences of the event. 3. Numbing phenomena. 4. Miscellaneous symptoms. Leys observes that “[t]he traumatic event was vaguely defined as an event that is ‘generally outside the range of usual human experience,’ and as involving a ‘recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone’” (232).

Although *DSM-IV* altered the definition of trauma to remove the stipulation that trauma be outside the bounds of the usual or normal, many clinicians and theorists (Herman, van der Kolk, Maria Root, and Laura Brown) wanted more from the *DSM 5*, published in May 2013, than it ultimately delivered. They called for a more complex definition of psychological trauma that accounts for the social structures that perpetuate female victimization. They wanted not just time-limit events recognized, but long-term, cumulative traumatic experiences. Root and Brown render a powerful feminist intervention into the politics of trauma through their conceptualization of *insidious trauma*, a term that refers to “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 106). Brown points to poverty, sexual abuse, and racism as sites of insidious trauma. These everyday traumas—often induced by the mechanics of patriarchy and colonialism—too often go overlooked, becoming normalized and obscuring the systemic relations of power at work.

For Allison and Beyala, a major concern is to break the culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse and to represent the insidious manifestations of trauma leading up to the time-limit event of incest and rape. Since the age of five, Ruth Anne Boatwright, better known as Bone, suffers many forms of severe abuse at the hands of her stepfather, Glen, culminating in the graphic rape scene found at the novel's end. The first half of this more-bitter-than-sweet *Bildungsroman* charts Bone's descent into victimhood. The first mention of abuse comes early—readers are not even 45 pages into the 300-page novel, when we first encounter Glen molesting Bone. She comes dangerously close to being raped in the front seat of Daddy Glen's Pontiac while her mother gives birth to a stillborn son. Narrated from the perspective of a character that had been rarely seen in canonical literature, *Bastard* is told entirely from the point of view of the female victim herself, who comes of age in the poor-white town of Greenville, South Carolina, in the 1950s. The events leading up to the rape scene show that Bone's body has been marked by the threat of violation long before the rape even occurs. As it tells the tale of the damage done to Bone, the female incest victim who is disempowered by age, gender, and class, *Bastard* also reveals the systems of oppression that act on Bone and the women of Bone's family, which constitute female bodies as objects that are always susceptible to rape and the way this constant, implied menace is constitutive of female identity. Allison, who relinquishes a straightforward narrative for a meandering middle in which Glen takes a back seat to Bone's search for identity, exposes the material realities of economic oppression and the romanticized view of heterosexuality in order to show the vulnerabilities they create.

Similar to Bone, Beyala's Tanga is a sexually violated girl who is subjected to father-daughter incest and other forms of abuse. Tanga's successive traumatic events include female

circumcision, incest, the subsequent killing of the baby by her father, rapes (by Hassan, Monsieur John, the Butcher, and the One-Night Stand), and forced entry into prostitution. She grows up in the slum areas of a fictive African country modeled on southern Cameroon in the 1970s. Instead of merely chronicling the life stories of her impoverished characters, Beyala shows the context in which they fit and the cultural landscape they help to create. Beyala tells Tanga's story in an outpouring of disjointed and fragmentary pieces that are devoid of chapter headings and divisions. Tanga, literally and metaphorically confined to a prison cell, tells her story to Anna-Claude, a middle-aged French professor of philosophy who travels to Africa in search of a fantasy—a handsome man named Ousmane for whom she has waited all her life.

Openly discussing sexual violence—especially father-daughter incest—in the composition classroom proved challenging. My experience confirmed what feminists in the 1970s claimed: incest is not the taboo, for it happens quite often; talking about it is (Doane and Hodges 1). I explained to my students that during second-wave feminism, discussions of sexual abuse and incest became more acceptable and the acts started to be recognized as expressions of patriarchy.<sup>10</sup> Prior to that, studies of incest usually emphasized one of three points: its infrequency, its benign or even beneficial effects, or its links to class and racial pathologies. It was productive to discuss that *Bastard* challenges the popular view that “white-trash” culture is a central site of social pathology and abjection by having Glen not come from the poor white class: his family is comfortably and *consciously* middle class, part of a patriarchal Southern

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<sup>10</sup> In *Interrogating Incest*, Vikki Bell writes, “Sociologists and anthropologists have traditionally regarded incest as disruptive of the family and therefore disruptive of the social order. By contrast, feminism has suggested that, paradoxical as it may seem, incest is actually produced and maintained by social order: the order of a male-dominated society” (48).

culture that prides itself on property ownership. For example, Glen's father owns a dairy and his brothers are lawyers and dentists. Their wives do not work outside of the home. Likewise, students should question to what extent Beyala conforms to the stereotypical portraits of postcolonial Africa as one of poverty, violence, and prostitution. Perhaps Beyala presents this desolate landscape to highlight the multiple social, economic, political, and gendered vectors that condition and constitute the female body.

Unlike Allison, who devotes twelve pages to detailing the rape of Bone, making the reader share in her pain and despair, Beyala offers only a brief description of the incest: "And so it was that the man my father who, not content to bring his mistresses home, to fiddle with them under my mother's disgusted gaze, would later rip me apart in the budding of my twelve year" (30). Tellingly, Tanga does not mention the incest again. Perhaps even more so than in the United States, talking about father-daughter incest is taboo in Cameroon and other African countries. How Beyala understates the incident is emphatic of the patriarchal privilege that men enjoy in African societies. Contrasted with the detailed descriptions of Glen, little is presented about Tanga's father, an area for further classroom exploration.

### **Bearing Witness: The Failure of the Mothers**

Perhaps not surprisingly, most students will be outraged by the mother's role in her daughter's abuse. "Is it more traumatic for [Bone] to experience Daddy Glen's physical violence or to watch her mother comfort him?" asks Ann Cvetkovich (346). My students answered resoundingly with the latter. As Allison has stated, the main focus is not only on Daddy Glen's abuse but also the "complicated, painful story of how mama had, and had not, saved me as a

girl” (qtd. in Bouson 116). In what is arguably the most chilling scene in *Bastard*—and there are plenty of them—the mother Anney comforts and hugs Glen, not Bone, after he brutally rapes her while Anney stands by watching. As the bruised and bloodied Bone regains consciousness, she notes that her mother “was holding him, his head pressed to her belly” (291). Anney, who is 15 when she gives birth to Bone, was literally unconscious during Bone’s birth, the result of a drunk-driving accident (the drunk driver being her brother-in-law). She remains metaphorically unconscious to Glen’s abuse throughout the novel. Many times she questions what Bone had done to make Glen so angry, to provoke the beatings. Likewise, Tanga’s mother, Taba, performs horrific deeds on her daughter. When Tanga is 12 years old, her mother announces that she is old enough to start providing for the entire family: “since you are here, since you are alive, have a seat on the debris of the ages; feed us with your body. We no longer know, you’ll know for us” (27). The mother then promptly places Tanga’s body on the market, expecting the “girl-child” Tanga to become a prostitute and earn money that will sustain the family. In order to prepare Tanga for the prostitution market, her mother forces her to submit to female circumcision, a necessary rite of passage for becoming a woman. In a society that expects sexual pleasure to be an exclusive entity for men, the circumcised body is seen as disciplined and worthy of getting and keeping a man.

Instead of blaming the mothers for a series of bad choices, which most students will do, a closer look should be given to why these mothers resort to such actions. This should lead to a better understanding of how Allison and Beyala reveal the lack of freedom mothers have in a male-dominated culture and the economic necessities that limit women’s choices. Although part of the narrative healing process entails someone bearing witness, as Shoshana Felman and

Dori Laub have insisted, Anney and Taba are unable to do this because they have been subjected to insidious trauma and are conditioned to perpetuate the patriarchal and colonial oppression. These novels illustrate the mothers' own victimization.

Bone has a precocious understanding of her mother's motivation. She recognizes that her mother is a product of "a patriarchal system that rewarded settled women with a small dose of respectability and, most importantly, threatened them with more hardship if they became single" (Tokarczyk 168). The stigma against having a child out of wedlock and being a single mother explains why Anney makes humiliating annual trips to the courthouse to get Bone's birth certificate legitimized and even why Anney marries Glen to her family's dismay and continues to stay with him even after it's clear that he is abusing her daughter. This compulsive need for heterosexual validation is exacerbated by Southern poverty that confines Anney's mobility. Anney remarries in part out of economic necessity, although, as we see later in the book, Glen is the one who is unable to hold down a job and at least once, Anney resorts to prostituting herself after she feeds her daughters the only food in the house—soda crackers and ketchup. Ironically, the marriage that was intended to protect Bone from class prejudice associated with illegitimacy makes it easier for the abuse to happen.

Along with Anney, most of Bone's aunts have internalized patriarchal norms to devastating effects. They believe that their ultimate validation comes from remaining attractive and bearing children for their husbands. Aunt Alma instructs Bone that "love had more to do with how pretty a body was than anyone would ever admit" (32). Her sentiments are echoed by her Aunt Ruth, who thought that "being pregnant was proof that some man thought you were pretty sometime, and the more babies [you] got, the more [you] knew [you were] worth

something” (163). Anney says she wanted to cry and hit Ruth when she said that, but Anney longs for the love of a man, even when it means turning a blind eye to her daughter’s abuse.

Bone grows up in a culture “where women were old at 25 and men never grew up at all” (Jetter 56). I had students perform a close reading of the scene where Bone almost breaks the silence of her sexual abuse to her Aunt Ruth. But even Ruth, who glimpses that all the signs of abuse are there and who speaks with the wisdom of a dying woman, is so entrenched in patriarchal norms that even in her final days, she still excuses male behavior. In a poignant scene Bone attempts to tell Ruth about the abuse: “Daddy Glen hates me,” she blurts out (122). Ruth agrees that “Glen don’t like you much,” and that he’s jealous of Bone’s relationship with Anney (123). However, like Anney and her other sisters who infantilize men, Ruth quickly excuses Glen’s behavior, claiming that it’s typical: “There’s a way he’s just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband. And that an’t so rare, I’ll tell you” (123). “Men,” she continues, “are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can. Your mama knows it as well as I do. We all do” (123). After explaining the ways of men to Bone, it is no wonder that when Ruth presses the question about Glen touching Bone, she denies the abuse. Ruth hesitatingly questions, “has Daddy Glen ever...well...touched you?” (124). While placing her hand on Bone’s parted legs, Ruth, who had been so forthright in her explanation about men, tiptoes around the issue and blushing asks, “Down here, honey. Has he ever hurt you down there?” (124). Unsurprisingly, Bone whispers no, which she repeats and then attempts to end the conversation by reducing Glen’s abuse to normal disciplining: “He just looks at me hard. Grabs me sometimes. Shakes me” (124). With

Ruth's euphemistic description and flushed cheeks, it seems that even if Bone had been ready to tell the truth, her family was not ready to listen.

Sarah anticipated that most of her students would be disappointed by the fact that instead of her own mother, Tanga's only listener is the strange white woman in her prison cell. Beyala shows how that came to be the case, how women have come to ally themselves with harmful patriarchal structures. We find out that Tanga's grandmother, Kadjaba Dongo, was gang-raped and as a result refuses to be a mother to her daughter, Taba. Taba grows up as a "lost sheep, absent and guilty of not having known how to share her mother's despair" (25). At the dawn of her teenage years, Taba denies anything to do with sexuality and motherhood. She rejects her mother's fate by blocking the symbol of motherhood, the womb, from any violation. She performs a pseudo-rape on herself by plugging her vagina with nuts, hoping to "forget about the pleasure invented and constructed in bed" (26). Taba's rejection of motherhood as a social construction of women's specificity ironically parallels her own mother's rejection of the maternal instinct. And, despite Taba's best efforts, her body is still violated by her husband who doesn't think she's worth much. Tanga's birth most likely brings to mind her cheating husband. One of two surviving children in a family of 12, Tanga is the daughter of a dysfunctional couple. Tanga's father has sex with many mistresses on his wife's bed, the same bed where he impregnates Tanga and then poisons the baby.

*Tanga* spans three generations of women who symbolize the three stages in which the matriarchal communities of Africa have been eroded as society evolved from pre-Colonial communities to post-independence disillusionment. Beyala includes information on Tanga's grandmother, Dongo, to show that she represents the pre-independence period and is a victim

of the offensive control of patriarchy. A princess in the king's court and a village beauty, Dongo is raped because she wouldn't offer her body willingly. However, Dongo comes to identify with her oppressors and gives her disowned body to anyone who will take it. She views herself as property. We see this repeated in Taba, who so readily forces Tanga into prostitution and then to undergo female circumcision. And when Tanga gives up her trade, Taba promptly turns her younger daughter over to replace Tanga.

Institutionalized heterosexuality is carried to its most egregious form in Tanga's female circumcision. Tanga explains to Anna-Claude: "I can see her still, my mother old one, shimmering in her immaculate kaba, a black scarf in her hair, crying out to every god: 'she has become a woman, she has become a woman. With that, ...she will keep any man'" (12). The importance placed on female circumcision as a way to keep a man reflects the idea of a woman as an object that is at the mercy of her family and her future husband. The circumcision makes the girl more marketable. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, who has published much scholarship on this novel, notes that the right to womanhood is here directly associated not only with sexual intercourse but also with institutional heterosexuality: "Tanga's mother's reaction demonstrates that clitoridectomy does not only define her daughter as a woman, i.e., she has crossed over from childhood to womanhood, but also captures the right that this act gives men to possess Tanga's body" (104). Thus by subjecting her to clitoridectomy, women elders, in collusion with patriarchy, diminish females, using tactics such as warning them that they will lack sexual appeal, in order to imprison them within this feminine heterosexual ideal.

Sarah expected to be asked the question posed succinctly by critic Susan Arndt: "Why, [Tanga] asks—and with her Beyala as well—do women ally themselves with men and with

patriarchal structures, even though in so doing they cause harm and suffering to other women, instead of showing solidarity with other women in order to fight back against the structures and the men who reproduce them for egotistical reasons?" (174). In an interview with Rangira Gallimore, Beyala partly answers this question. In *Tanga*, she laments the disruption of Africa's matriarchal structures, explaining that the Beti society, from which she comes, was initially a matriarchal society where women held powerful positions. She criticizes the spread of Christianity and Islam for "destructuring" the social systems: "patriarchal systems replaced the matriarchal system and the society became deeply destructured, creating new relationships between men and woman" (qtd. in Toman 122). In other words, Beyala attributes women's inability to be good mothers to the colonial efforts, which foisted Western views of gender and religion on the African peoples. As Allison does with Anney, Beyala shows Dongo and Taba as inheriting the legacy of poverty and male-domination. They believe that suffering is what they are supposed to do, and they pass it onto their daughters.

Tanga, however, literally removes herself from the sexual economy, denying that the purpose of her body is to bear children or to please men. Following in the footsteps of her mother, Tanga plugs her vagina with a "lump of clay encrusted with gravel" (102). She goes even further by claiming that she "conceal[s] a viper inside [her] vagina" that will poison whatever tries to possess it (103). She resolves never to be used by men again. By targeting her womb, Tanga removes herself from the reproductive ability, rendering herself barren. Tanga rejects motherhood when a man imposes it on her. Some readers may agree with critic Nancy Arenberg, who is upset by Tanga's self-inflicted injury, going so far as labeling it a sadomasochistic act. They may be bothered by the fact that Tanga celebrates her newfound

virginity and refuses to be burdened by pregnancy. They may fail to see the ways that Tanga demonstrates agency and that instead of merely acting out the trauma, she is also working through it.

### **Engaging the Body in Erotic Ways: Sadomasochism and Lesbianism**

At the heart of these two works is the female's struggle to preserve a relationship with her body. Working through the psychological trauma for Bone and Tanga entails learning to control their own bodies on their own terms. This empowerment comes with eroticism. Allison has admitted that "the huge issue for any incest survivor is learning to enjoy sex. It is why I do the sexually explicit writing that I do" (qtd. in Jetter 57). Both Allison and Beyala use the erotic to illustrate the different ways in which women strive towards agency. They craft these narratives that affirm a sense of female corporeality to counter the violence to which the body has been subjected.

Another challenge to teaching *Bastard* was to discuss what students found to be the disturbing link between pleasure and pain. In her exploration of masochistic tendencies and trauma, Lynda Hart observes, "whereas the sexual abuse survivor is most clearly recognizable to others through *dissociative* symptomologies, the s/m practitioner acts out these scenes in ways that repeat, reorganize, and integrate them into her present. Dissociation is replaced by *consciousness* of associations" (186). In the fantasies that Bone creates, she "embraces the erotics of power," and "moves toward a precarious, delicate borderline that tests and transgresses the line between fantasy and reality" (Hart 202). Hart further notes, "For those women whose 'selves' have been constituted in large part by a traumatic history of sexual

abuse, this borderline is often not a place to which they travel in order to risk the repetition of oppressive social structures; rather, it is the place where they find themselves located in order to repeat and transform their histories with a difference” (202). Simply put, Hart, along with Cvetkovich, believes in the therapeutic value of s/m.

Critic Michelle Tokarczyk sums up the problem: “Although Bone’s physical and sexual abuse are graphically depicted, Allison likely upset a number of readers more with her descriptions of Bone’s masturbation with a chain as she fantasizes that Daddy Glen is beating her or that she is being burned” (175). Bone’s desires, wishes, and passions are entrenched in sadomasochism. Sprinkled throughout the narrative are accounts of Bone’s masturbatory pleasures, which are fueled by fantasies of fire, violation, dry sticks, and even, as Tokarczyk notes, a chain. Allison has said that Bone “becomes excited by some of the things [Daddy Glen] does” (qtd. in Megan 79). Bone orgasms while fantasizing that she is tied to a blazing haystack, or left to starve to death as blackbirds peck at her body.

A striking feature of this work is that Allison is able to write about incest without desexualizing the female body and denying her sexual desires. There are five main accounts of Bone’s masturbation included in the novel. Charting the progression in these accounts, we see that Bone, who is first beaten by her stepfather, is able to stand up and defeat him. As the abuse escalates, so does Bone’s masturbation. In her second account, she no longer dreams about fire, but, instead, she imagines others bearing witness to Glen’s beatings. At times Bone becomes more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place. And yet, she is able to defeat Glen. In the second and one of the longer accounts, the constructive potential of her fantasies becomes an exhibitionist form of

empowerment, and her craving for someone to bear witness to her abuse becomes painfully evident:

I didn't daydream about fire anymore. Now I imagined people watching while Daddy Glen beat me, though only when it was not happening. When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or down the street, or one of my cousins, or even somebody I had seen on television. Sometimes a whole group of them would be trapped into watching. They couldn't help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I'd stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. It was scary, but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (112)

In the last account of Bone's masturbation, she longs for her mother's comfort, evident when she rocks against her mother's hip. In this final fantasy, Glen is absent and Anney provides for Bone in a way she never did in life and makes good on the promise she once made to her young daughter—that she “wouldn't let nothing happen to my little girl” (142). As many students noted, in her masturbatory fantasy, Bone constructs an alternative ending to her abuse—one in which her masturbation becomes fused with the dream of comfort that in reality her mother cannot provide. Criticized for her controversial linking of childhood sexual abuse with practices of sadomasochism, Allison has Bone move from passivity to activity by learning to enjoy her body, turning the senseless abuse into gratifying acts. Through the masturbation, which may serve as a healthy alternative to heterosexual sex, Bone is able to recreate the punishment so that she pleurably reimagines the event and phantasmatically controls it.

Likewise, some readers may view Tanga's actions as perversely sexual. In addition to labeling Tanga's plugging of her vagina as sadomasochistic, some readers may be confused by

Tanga's suckling of a boy who is not her biological son and who is close to her own age. Following her feminist triumph, Tanga decides to mother Mala, a crippled child she rescues from the streets of Iningué. In an effort to reengage her body as a site of healing, Tanga restricts her mothering role to that of a nurturer. Immediately, she makes it known that she wants him to become her child: "I want to raise you, take you to school, fix your pepe soup for you, iron your clothes. I want to teach you how to believe in Santa Claus" (74). Tanga's relationship with Mala disrupts the normative expectation that creates a category of woman as either a sexual object or reproductive machine. The period in which Tanga plays mother to Mala is the happiest in her life, because then she chooses how her body responds to its erotic and maternal demands. In breastfeeding the teenaged boy, Tanga describes:

I open my blouse. I bend down so that his mouth is at the level of my breasts. I force his lips open. He's breathing hard, snorting. I insist, he gives in and suckles, slowly, very slowly. (105)

After some reluctance, Mala learns to call Tanga *mother*, and when she next describes him breastfeeding, the young boy is reborn: "I'd take out one breast. He'd suckle. He'd fall asleep. In my happiness, I'd worry about his. At one and the same time, we were each other's saviors" (130). Tanga seeks in Mala a chance to create a loving and functional family, where she acts as an intuitive nurturer, while Mala gets a chance to experience what it means to be a child. The two children adopt a dog and while they live a nomadic life, shifting from shelter to shelter, together they make it meaningful. Perhaps the following assertion by critic Isaac V. Joslin would initiate a lively discussion of the role of Mala: "The closest [Tanga] ever gets to realizing her dream is through a drawing of [a] house given to her by the maimed beggar Mala, who plays

adopted 'son' to Tanga's 'mother,' a relationship that is as delusional as it is dysfunctional and thus mirror's [sic] Tanga's own mother" (489).

Many critics and most likely students will struggle with making sense of depictions of the maternal and the role of Mala in *Tanga*. Nfah-Abbenyi suggests that the maternal link that Tanga starts with Mala is left unfinished due to his untimely death. Instead, Tanga completes it with Anna-Claude. The sensual encounter between Tanga and Anna-Claude in particular and the theme of lesbianism in general will most likely be areas of contention for students, as they've been for most critics. Issues of homosexuality in Beyala's work have been controversial to some, and downright scandalous to others. For example, David Ndachi Tagne and Tunde Fatunde have called Beyala's work "pornographic": "A close study and analysis of Beyala's feminist discourse reveals that it is broadly provocative, raw, and 'pornographic.' Most of her novels are filled with erotic scenes in which the male and female reproductive organs are described in crude and uncouth language" (Fatunde 75). Beyala is one of the pioneers, a new generation of African women writers who have dared to write about female sexuality. Setting *Tanga* and some of her other early works in Africa, where the criminalization of homosexuality is rampant, Beyala unsurprisingly shocked the male African readership and received backlash for what they perceived to be her radical responses to female objectification.

And yet, it's not clear that Tanga and Anna-Claude are engaged in lesbian sex in the jail cell. It is important to perform close readings of the following two passages. After much hesitation, Tanga agrees to narrate her story but only if Anna-Claude becomes her, "enters" her (7). Tanga instructs Anna-Claude: "Well then, enter into me. My secret will be illuminated. But first, the white woman in you must die. Give me your hand; from now on you shall be me. You

shall be seventeen seasons old; you shall be black; your name shall be Tanga” (7). Anna-Claude agrees to it, signified by joining hands with Tanga, and readers learn by the section’s close that “Tanga’s story flowed out into her until it became her own story” (8). A third of the way into the novel, there is a more explicitly sensual scene between Tanga and Anna-Claude. Tanga promises Anna-Claude fertility, in return for Anna-Claude’s self. Anna-Claude claims that “tonight, you’ll be my Ousmane” (44). Beyala writes:

Their bodies intertwine. Anna-Claude weeps. Tanga traces grooves of tenderness on her neck and her loins. She tells her not to cry, that they have only just become acquainted with the nightmare, but that the embrace is the reality. She tells her that they will stroke their despair and that the most maternal of all love will gush forth from them. (45)

Certainly, Beyala may be portraying this experience to counter the violent, heterosexual sex that has done much damage to Tanga. As we saw with Bone and her masturbatory fantasies, Tanga’s experience with Anna-Claude may offer a healthy alternative to the dangers of heterosexual sex. However, there is never a clear rejection of heterosexuality and complete embrace of lesbianism articulated in the novel. It might be helpful to suggest to students that Beyala is not dealing in binary thinking of heterosexual and homosexual but is portraying a continuum of sexuality through her characters.<sup>11</sup>

We would also call students’ attention to the wording in these two passages. In the first one, Beyala emphasizes the women’s ethnicity. To hear Tanga’s story, Anna-Claude must kill her white self and become black. Students might pick up on the comments on postcolonialism.

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<sup>11</sup> Critic Marc Epprecht argues that in this excerpt Tanga is the “active seducer in a lesbian encounter with a co-prisoner” (148). But Beyala dismisses such labeling: “I think that those who see lesbianism in my writing are quite simply perverted since tenderness between women doesn’t necessarily imply lesbianism. How can we explain to Westerners that in traditional Africa, intimate relations between persons of the same sex are not defined as homosexual” (qtd. in Hitchcott 27).

Beyala may be privileging the black self or, as Sigrid G. Köhler suggests, a hybrid configuration. Beyala may also be implying that women cannot speak for others. Doing so comes at the expense of erasing identity and difference. In the second passage, the phrase “the most maternal of all love” should be closely examined. Instead of viewing it as lesbian love, students might identify the maternal link that makes them touch each other and tell this story of sexual violation and ultimate healing. Feeling alienated and detached from her body, Tanga’s emotional survival depends upon salvaging her creative—and maternal—capacities. At the end of the novel, when Tanga presumably has died from her wounds, the narrative presents Anna-Claude in the image of 17-year-old Tanga. By fusing the two women’s bodies, the narrator shows the importance of passing on the story that ultimately challenges the patriarchal discourse of oppression.

Unlike some of Beyala’s critics, who found her novel too lesbian, Allison’s critics (Cvetkovich, Katrina Irving, and Nick Melczarek) argued that her first novel was not lesbian enough. Unmistakably feminist, *Bastard* is unclear about the role lesbianism plays in Bone’s development. An out lesbian who has written explicitly about homosexual sex in other works, Allison has said that “being a lesbian is part of why I survived,” but she did not set out to write the lesbian Bildungsroman in *Bastard* (qtd. in Strong 97): “The book is not about growing up queer successfully, and I got the real strong impression from talking to people was, what they hoped I would write would be the lesbian biography” (qtd. in Hollibaugh 16). Perhaps Allison leaves Bone’s sexuality ambiguous because she did not want to link incest with lesbianism and thereby imply that it is the only recourse to father-daughter incest. If that were the case, she’s said, we’d have a lot more lesbians (*Two or Three Things* 45).

What is clear is that along with the potential to heal herself through masturbatory fantasies, another saving grace is the character of Aunt Raylene, who, as we learn in the last chapter, is a lesbian. Unlike her sisters, Aunt Raylene does not adhere to patriarchal practices such as marriage and pregnancy; nor does she feel less of a person for being born into poverty: “For all she was a Boatwright woman, there were ways Raylene had always been different from her sisters. She was quieter, more private, living alone with her dogs and fishing lines, and seemingly happy that way” (178). In stark contrast to her sisters, Raylene has rented the same house for most of her adult life. Commenting further on her peculiar ways, cousin Butch tells Bone that “Raylene had worked for the carnival like a man, cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls. She’d call herself Ray” (179). In one of the novel’s final disclosures, Raylene confesses to Bone that she ran off to the carnival, “yeah, but not for no man” (263). She seems to understand Anney’s dilemma in having to choose between husband and daughter because Raylene had made the woman she loved choose between herself and the woman’s child.

Significantly, it is during her stay with Raylene when Bone decides never to live again in the same house with Daddy Glen, and appropriately it is her aunt who finds the bruises on Bone and makes the abuse known to the rest of the family at Ruth’s funeral. An important lesson Raylene teaches Bone is to author a different version of her story, one that turns senseless violence into meaningful artwork. Literally making art out of the trash she collects from the river, Raylene illustrates to Bone the transformative power of the individual. Unlike her mother and other aunts who inundate Bone with not-so-subliminal messages about how to grow up to be a housewife and mother, Raylene instills a sense that heteropatriarchal ideologies can be

resisted. She teaches Bone to question a system that defines women as selfless wives who mother their husbands sometimes to the neglect of their children.

Allison drops subtle hints of Bone's budding lesbianism throughout the novel; however, the lesbian theme is understated in *Bastard*, becoming more prominent, but still unclear, in the final chapter. In the concluding scene, as she delivers Bone's birth certificate "blank, unmarked, unstamped," freeing Bone of the bastard status, Anney leaves her daughter in the care of Raylene (309). The irony is that Bone gains legitimacy through disinheritance—in addition to having no father, Bone is now left without her birth mother. As Bone rests her head on Raylene's shoulder, she thinks of her mother:

Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or to do before I was born? Once I was born, her hopes had turned, and I had climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine. What would I be like when I was fifteen, twenty, thirty? Would I be as strong as she had been, as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed? (309)

Instead of questioning why Anney doesn't leave Glen, Bone here probes a slightly different question—what makes her stay—as she seems to have some understanding that her mother is a part of a misogynistic and classist society who has endured insidious trauma. However, in place of final judgment Bone offers honest questions about her mother as well as her own emerging identity. As Bone draws Raylene closer to her, she notes that she knows who she is going to be: "I was who I was going to be, someone like [Raylene], like Mama, a Boatwright woman" (309).

Uncertain if Bone's sexuality will be formed in reaction to her mother's heterosexual subordination or her aunt's greater autonomy, in tracing her heritage through the women in her family, Bone is becoming comfortable with her "bastard" status, imagining a life that

challenges the patriarchal order in which femininity is oftentimes traumatizing. Allison's final sentence, "I wrapped my fingers in Raylene's and watched the night close in around us," suggests that Allison enables queer possibilities for her protagonist (309). The image Allison leaves us with—Bone tilting her head to lean on Raylene's shoulder, trusting her and her love—may indicate that lesbianism offers Bone a way out of the cycle of abuse.

"I can't ascribe everything that has been problematic about my life simply and easily to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much-denied class structure of our society," states Allison (qtd. in Tokarczyk 177). And yet, her first novel sheds light on these unequal power relations and provides a better understanding of why sexual abuse continues to happen. Allison's work, like Beyala's, is transgressive in that it questions the legitimacy of patriarchal, legal family structures that sometimes do not protect children as they claim. In rewriting the poor, violated female body—traditionally an easy target for patriarchal control—as a site of resistance and psychological healing, these writers transform the disabling effects of traumatic experience to an empowering story of survivorship. Teaching these works opens up intimate spaces for the examination of the formation of female subjectivity and provides a creative venue for classroom discussions about discourses of gender and trauma. These novels encourage students to participate in the more complex discussion of the therapeutic value of rewriting the body.

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