

# EAPSU Online: A Journal of Critical and Creative Work

Published by the English Association of Pennsylvania State  
Universities

Volume 1, Fall 2004

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## **EAPSU Online: A Journal of Critical and Creative Work**

The English Association of Pennsylvania State Universities was established in 1980 when a group of English faculty from several of the state universities in Pennsylvania met at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (then Indiana College), desiring to create some kind of network of like-minded individuals. Their goals were many, including political, artistic, and social affiliations. Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education is a loose organization of 14 universities in the state, who share a common Chancellor and Board of Governors but not much else. These organizers of EAPSU (then called EAPSCU, since not all of the colleges in the System were yet universities) sought to forge an alliance, a professional association devoted to both faculty and students. In fact, membership in the association is automatic for all PASSHE faculty and English majors, annual dues being paid by the English departments.

EAPSU began holding its annual conference the next year, 1981, at Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. The archives show that nearly 100 faculty and students attended, paying the \$5.00 conference registration fee. Since 1981 EAPSU has held an annual conference each year, growing steadily in numbers and attracting presenters and participants from an increasingly larger region. Attendance and participation is not limited to Pennsylvania state faculty; we have had presenters from as far away as the west coast. Students also present their work at the fall conference, and this has been both a strength and a weakness of the organization.

In 1997, Michael Bibby at Shippensburg University, organized the first undergraduate student conference, recognizing the need and desire of undergraduate English majors to become more acquainted with the professional responsibilities of the field. With poet Li Young Li as the guest speaker, the conference was a great success, and now EAPSU co-sponsors an annual spring conference for English majors.

Part of EAPSU's tradition has been to publish the annual Proceedings of the conference, and for many years this was done in hard copy (to the great expense of the hosting institutions). Although we moved to electronic/digital media a few years ago, members of EAPSU repeatedly brought up the issue of publishing some kind of peer-reviewed journal. Since EAPSU operates on a shoestring

(annual dues bring in only \$1400), this endeavor has only been a dream until now. 2004 marks the first year that EAPSU will publish an online peer-reviewed journal.

Committing to making this work, the association has put together its first issue, which is a collection of critical essays (both on literature and pedagogy) and some creative work (short stories and poems). We send the “call” to the organization but also to the CFP at University of Pennsylvania. We, therefore, received a fairly large number of submissions from as far away as California.

Each essay, story, or poem appearing in this first issue underwent a blind review process of at least two readers (many, three). As the editor, I sent the essays out to faculty across the System as well as contacts at other institutions outside of Pennsylvania. In some cases, if I could not find a scholar in a certain area with the system, I sought authors of similar articles (content specialists) whom I did not know, and asked them to serve as reviewers. I personally thank the many individuals who helped us to get this first issue off the ground by reviewing essays for us. A special thanks to my many helpful colleagues in the English department here at Shippensburg, who served as third readers in a few cases on very short notice.

Our acceptance rate has come out to approximately 1 in 4 (25%) acceptance rate. We trust that as the journal grows, we will have more submissions and that the quality of our work will continue to increase. I trust, however, that you will enjoy the work presented here, which covers a variety of subjects. You will find essays of literary theory, criticism, and pedagogy, as well as essays that suggest new approaches for the writing classroom, and a sprinkling of creative writing keeps things interesting. In short, this issue represents EAPSU well: we are creative teacher/scholars. Although the journal is not limited to the work by members of the English Association of Pennsylvania State Universities, this issue does contain the same variety and quality that characterizes our English departments across Pennsylvania.

What will you find here in *EAPSU ONLINE*? We lead off the issue with an excellent essay by Danette diMarco on using the film *Sankofa* to explore postcolonial theories of submission and subversion. W. C. Harris’s important essay on Rita Mae Brown’s novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* questions its place in the gay and lesbian literary canon. Cyprus writer Amy Promodrou’s story “We Don’t Shake the Angel” will \_\_\_\_\_, and then Rita Colanzi’s essay on using restaurant

reviews in the writing class should inspire some delicious creativity in the classroom. Two haunting poems by Martha Wickelhaus precede Cami Nelson Hewett's essay on Julia Alvarez's *The Time of Butterflies*. Lynn Pifer's essay on Ellen Douglas's *Cant' Quit you, Baby* and racism is followed by Christopher (Kit) Kelen's story, "A Message in a Bottle." Elyssa Warkentin's essay on Chaucer takes a 21<sup>st</sup> century look at a Middle English tale, and two poems by Danielle Jones will encourage repeat reading. This first issue ends with a teacher-to-teacher account of a senior seminar experience with travel writing by Dev Hathaway and a packed theoretical discussion of the "new" genre of the epic contemporary novel by Antony Adolph. \*\*

Thank you to all of you who submitted your work for this issue, and thank you to all of you who reviewed it. It has been my pleasure to put this together.

Kim Martin Long, Editor and EAPSU President  
*Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania*

## Contributors

**Antony Adolf** has held numerous positions at scholarly and creative journals, including *Safundi*, *Event* and *Mindfire Renewed* since receiving his B.A. in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago and his M.A., also in English, from the University of British Columbia. His work has appeared in journals and books throughout North America and Europe, and he has lectured widely on literary, philosophic and linguistic topics on both continents. His current research interests include literary multilingualisms and the politics of language as well as gnostic approaches to cognition.

**Rita M. Colanzi** teaches in the English department of West Chester University and is currently editing an interdisciplinary reader and rhetoric on food and culture. Included among her conference presentations are a study of the rhetoric of food in Augustine's *Confessions* and, for the upcoming 2004 MLA Convention, an analysis of how the language of food in Langston Hughes's poetry serves as a medium for interrogating and reimagining the American Dream. Also at the 2004 MLA Convention, she will deliver a paper in which she examines both apprentice plays and master works by Tennessee Williams in light of John-Paul Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's conflicting views on freedom. She has published on Williams's drama in the *Journal of Modern Literature* and in *Modern Drama* and is working on a book manuscript in which she reads Williams's plays within the context of Sartre's and de Beauvoir's philosophies.

**Danette DiMarco** is an Associate Professor of English at Slippery Rock University. She has published in journals like *Sagetrieb*, *Mosaic*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and in collections like *What Really Works* (Christopher-Gordon Press). She has also collaboratively produced work with Nancy A. Barta-Smith that has been included in *Eloquent Images* (MIT Press). Currently, she and Barta-Smith are writing a first-year composition textbook.

**John H. Hanson** is assistant professor in the English Department at West Chester University. A veteran journalist, Hanson holds a PhD in Mass Communication from the Florida State University, an M.A. degree in journalism from Syracuse University, and a B.A. degree in Social Sciences from the University of Liberia. Before coming to West Chester, Hanson taught at several other places and served as Section Editor and Copy Editor for the Asbury Park Press in



Neptune, N.J. He has worked for the Associated Press, the Philadelphia Daily News and the Syracuse (NY) Herald Journal.

**W. C. Harris** is assistant professor of English at Shippensburg University, where he specializes in American literature (pre-1900) and gay and lesbian studies. His articles on American literature have appeared in *American Literary History*, *The Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, and *Arizona Quarterly*. Forthcoming publications include an essay on the TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (in *Queer TV*, McFarland Press, 2005) and the book *E Pluribus Unum: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Constitutional Paradox* (University of Iowa Press, 2005).

**Dev Hathaway** is the author of a short story collection, *The Widow's Boy* (Lynx House) and a book of non-fiction, *Skylarking on Honeysuckle Road* (Juniper Press). Recent short stories of his appear in a limited edition book hand-made by Jan Ruby and in *The Gettysburg Review*. He teaches creative writing at Shippensburg, where he is Professor of English.

**Cami Nelson Hewett** completed BA and MA degrees in English at Brigham Young University, focusing her studies on American Literature. She has taught composition for both Brigham Young University and for the University of North Texas. Currently, she studies and publishes on the side while teaching yoga and tending her energetic eight-month-old son.

**Danielle Jones**, poet and multimedia artist, creates works in print, sculpture and electronic mediums. She is currently writing a creative dissertation toward a PhD in English Literature from SUNY-Albany. She has published, presented, and been recognized in a variety of forums including winning a poetry prize from the Academy of American Poets, presenting her work at the International Electronic Poetry Conference, and most recently, her poetry has been featured in *MindFire Magazine*.

**Christopher Kelen** teaches cultural studies and creative writing in the English department at the University of Macau. The most recent of five published volumes of poetry are *Republics* (2000) and *New Territories* (2003). In addition to poetry Kelen publishes in a range of theoretical areas, including writing pedagogy, ethics, rhetoric, cultural and literary studies and various intersections of these. The principal investigator in the University of Macau's "Poems and Stories of Macao Research Project," Kelen edits the university's on-line journal *Writing Macao: Creative Text and Teaching*.

**Lynn Pifer** is a Professor of English in the Department of Languages and Literature at Mansfield University. Her research interests include Southern literature and literature of the Civil Rights Movement. Her most recent article, on one of Ellen Douglas's earliest stories, "I Just Love Carrie Lee," appeared in *Making Connections*.

**Amy Promodrou** received her MA from Southern Connecticut State University in May of 2004. She received the Academic Excellence in Leadership scholarship to the University of Bridgeport, where she also won the Award for Excellence in Creative Writing. She is beginning a PhD program this fall, and her publications include "Conceptualizing Literacy in the Classroom: The Role of Reader-Response Theory in the Construction of Meaning" in the *Cyprus International Journal of Management*, and "Girl Flights" and "For a Cross" in *Flair: A Student Journal of Literature and the Arts in Cyprus*.

**Elyssa Warkentin** is working on her PhD in English at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, where she also teaches a course on critical reading and thinking. Her areas of specialization are gender theory and Victorian literature, but her research interests range from Chaucerian literature to postmodern transgender studies. Her dissertation project investigates the narratological confluence of two 1888 British literary phenomena: the Jack the Ripper murders and the emergence of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories.

**Martha Wickelhaus** received her MFA at the University of Alabama. She has a chapbook *In the Blue, In the Sky* and has published poems in such magazines as *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, and *College English*. She teaches on the side at Shippensburg University.

**Rehistoricizing the Past Through Film:  
Considering the Possibilities of Haile Gerima's *Sankofa***

Danette DiMarco, Slippery Rock University

Nearly three decades ago, Hadyn White proposed a theory that challenged the prevalent belief that history was monolithic and objective. In so doing, he provided teachers and scholars with a concept that now, by many, has been accepted as second nature, that history is a perception or philosophy. Years after White's insistence upon the perceptual aspect of history, I still find myself making efforts to get my students to not only understand that there are multiple histories based on varying perceptions, but that some histories historically have been submerged. Such ideas are crucial, especially, in the world literature course that necessarily focuses on postcolonial issues.

This essay focuses on the theoretical issues around which an instructor may design a discussion when the class views Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa*. A rich text that dialogues with familiar literature by often-taught authors like Chinua Achebe, Jomo Kenyatta, or Nadine Gordimer or lesser known literatures by writers like Zoe Wicomb, Tsitsi Dangaremba, or Bessie Head, *Sankofa* enables students to use not just the power of the word but of the eye. In critiquing this particular visual representation of diasporic experiences, they learn to confront the political nature of submersion and subversion.

Like the famous choreographer Debbie Allen who worked for years to see to the production of *Amistad*, Haile Gerima searched for well over a decade for the funds to complete his controversial film. For instructors unfamiliar with *Sankofa*, a brief synopsis follows. Its major figure, Mona, is an African-American model who travels to Ghana on a photo shoot that will take place on the grounds

of a former slave castle. While there, she becomes curious about the history of the castle, follows a tour group inside, and has an experience similar to one of time travel, suddenly living out her life as Shola, a slave, who is transported through the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas. Shola serves as a storyteller for the bulk of the film and relates to the audience the terrors often times associated with plantation life. Eventually, Shola/Mona is reawakened in the African slave castle, having learned of the importance of remembering history in a contemporary world.

In an interview with *Sankofa's* director Haile Gerima, Pamela Woolford asks, "Do you feel like there's any hope for changing what people believe is history?" (93). Gerima responds, "Whites wrote a history of Whites having freed Black people, which makes Black people people who never freed themselves (93) . . . . I think, by bringing forth the censored information . . . . a true culture, a democratic culture, can heal society by juxtaposing two histories of a people" (94). I would argue that *Sankofa* reveals the complexity of this double meeting. The techniques used in the film demonstrate the ways that submerged histories of those colonized are not static, rather they are constructed and maintained by oppressors to naturalize a certain version of history. In part, when recognized as constructions, the colonized's and colonizer's positions emerge as performances each influencing the other. According to Gerima, the title *Sankofa*, which suggests dynamism and self-motivation, is appropriate; "it comes from the Akan language mean[ing] 'returning to your roots, recapturing what you've lost and then moving forward'" (Muhammad 2). For students studying the importance of reclaiming histories, Gerima's words and his execution of them through ideas in his film are critical.

Near the beginning of *Sankofa*, students encounter a black, African guide who leads a group of white tourists around the grounds of a former slave castle in Ghana and relays its history. The guide states:

Right over there a row of ships were in line. They were docked waiting for the human cargo not only for this castle but for several bigger castles along the coast. Many of the ships would be waiting for days until the holding places in the dungeons were filled up.

The account is noteworthy for what it does not include. There is no mention of the colonial foundation upon which such a history was written; there is no overt attention to the violent and repressive nature of such a history; there is no comment about the ways that people taken or left behind came to understand the experience. In effect, such a narrative elides alternative versions of the colonialist history and dehistoricizes the past. In "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies this type of history making, i.e., one that erases violence and repression, as contingent to the continued celebration of the modern world. He claims, "[w]hat effectively is played down [in such narratives]. . . in histories that either implicitly or explicitly celebrate the advent of the modern state and the idea of citizenship[,] is the repression and violence that are as instrumental in the victory of the modern as is the persuasive power of its rhetorical strategies" (386-387). The modern state that Chakrabarty speaks of is one that relegates alternative histories to sub-altern status. Through the advent of a postcolonial project (like the making of a film or the penning of a piece of literature), people begin to "write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies that attend [the colonial, modern project] . . . ." (Chakrabarty 386).

Gerima writes ambivalence and resistance “into the history of modernity” by including the character Sankofa, “the self-appointed leader of the castle,” and instructors might ask students to compare the impact of his story with the guide’s. A major point that might be foregrounded is that Sankofa’s story ultimately dominates, while the guard’s narrative becomes background noise. When Sankofa speaks and exposes the realities of violence and repression that took place on the castle grounds he rehistoricizes the dehistoricized. As Sankofa walks upon the castle grounds, he shouts to the bystanders in Akan: “Here is sacred ground, covered with the blood of people who suffered. It is from here that our people were snatched and taken by the white man . . . . It was genocide. They treated us with contempt . . . . Blood has been spilled here.” While the tour guide speaks around the issue of “genocide” and spilled blood, Sankofa categorically speaks of the ships waiting for “human cargo.” While the tour guide speaks in English, the language of the colonizers, Sankofa shouts in Akan. By speaking in an indigenous tongue, he symbolizes that which has been historically repressed and metonymically makes manifest, to use Homi Bhabha’s words, the “uncontrolled fear and fantasy of the colonizer” (206) by revealing the ways that colonial ideology had to take away languages to maintain its power. Thus, Sankofa assuages the colonial ideology perpetuated on the castle grounds and unveils the elusive and constructed nature of static binaries. He makes it known that it is he who the oppressor must manage and silence to ensure the repetition of these attitudes.

At first, Sankofa’s exposure of the temporality of colonialist discourse creates a sense of panic in those around Sankofa, especially the black, African guards and the white tourists, evidenced in their eyes and silence when the camera pans across their faces. However, when Sankofa crosses a usually well-

defined boundary and reveals too much about the bloody history of the castle, their silence gives over to the use of force. The military guards who protect the property repeatedly manage him. Twice they physically remove him from the view of the tourists. In each case, the camera identifies the gleam of phallic rifles as they strategically point at (but do not touch) Sankofa's throat, the place from where his subversive words originate. Bhabha argues that panic "speaks in the temporal caesura between symbol and sign, politicizing the narrative" (203) and points out that it is the space "between" the symbol and the sign where rebel agency is located. Sankofa, as a physical and psychological site of insurgency (he is, after all, a contemporary presence walking around on the historical castle grounds) is not simply an object discoursed about, "a form of negative consciousness" (Bhabha 206). He operates "between" because he negotiates the realities of a contemporary postcoloniality with a very real colonial history.

Another important comparison that students might discuss is Sankofa's performance in relation to Mona's metamorphosis into Shola. The relationship is important because Mona's physical and spiritual transmogrification must be contained within the liminality that Sankofa exposes, otherwise the film could be accused of attempting to find a syncretic solution to her metamorphosis within the parameters of an essentialist colonial discourse, which the inner segment of the film focuses on. She and others are repeatedly victimized there. In other words, if Sankofa is the site by which postcolonial agency is afforded Mona, her experience as the slave Shola is that which she must experience before she can return to the present. Mona must journey into her past to be able to overtly recognize the ways that colonialist history naturalized the manichean allegory that maintained her continued her static objectification as an African-American

model.<sup>1</sup> The space opened by Sankofa gives Mona the opportunity to not remain, to use Abdul R. JanMohamed words, “a prisoner of the projected [colonial] image” (20), especially in the lens of the photographer’s camera.

Viewers first meet Mona on a photo shoot. She dons a leopard-print bathing suit, and writhes, as though in sexual ecstasy, upon the sand. The photographer repeatedly takes shots of her as he repeats, “Work for the camera, Mona.” The objectification of Mona is apparent--and the camera’s “scopophilic” gaze, as Laura Mulvey might label it, attempts to maintain that static identification, trapping her in time. Even the patterned bathing suit condemns her to the exotic and bestial. But Mona’s “writhing” could also be read in other ways, specifically in terms of dance. And an article worth discussing in relation to this idea might be Wilson Harris’s “The Limbo Gateway.”

Harris argues that limbo as dance “reflects a certain kind of gateway of threshold to a new world” (379). He asserts this since the complete retrieval of an African past cannot be purely reclaimed because that past has been changed and/or erased with dislocation. The symbolic gateway that limbo signifies is the Middle Passage, which epitomizes the movement from Africa to the Americas; and the power of limbo is that it recognizes that journey as “the renaissance of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures” (380). In addition, Harris writes that limbo “. . . implies a profound art of compensation which seeks to replay a dismemberment of tribes” (381). Through his own recall of childhood memories, Harris tells of the dancers in his home of British Guiana, some of whom performed on stilts while others “performed spread-eagled on the

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul R. Janmohamd identifies the Manichean Allegory as that economy which operates in order to use the native as a reflection or “mirror” of the “colonialist’s self-image” in “The Economy of Manichean Allegory.” Such an economy obviously maintains fixed oppositions.



ground" (379). Such a split between dancers--high and low--demonstrates the symbolic separation or "dismemberment of tribes" of which he speaks.

Harris's analysis enhances an understanding of Mona's confrontation with the clash between alternative histories. Mona consciously erases her African heritage at the beginning of the film. She is caught up in being a model who, by being exoticized, can be compared with the surface beauty of Ghana's landscape. Her role is written for her by white, masculinist modes of thought, identified in the men on the shoot who work around her. And Sankofa's warnings to her suggest that something remains hidden from her. These soundings by him--to "return to her past", her "source," to "claim" and "possess" it--initiate her journey through a Middle Passage where she can (and does) adopt a new "sensibility" that allows her to negotiate her African and American histories. Although Mona does not specifically limbo in the photo shoot scene that I mentioned earlier, she does perform close to the ground (which is necessary in limbo). She also turns and assumes a spread-eagle position because (so it seems) of the photographer's words: "[M]ore sex, Mona, a little more sex . . . . [L]et the camera do it to you Mona." While her performance is seemingly locked within an object-subject relationship indicated by the high camera angle used on her as opposed to the low camera angle used on the white photographer, her movements may be a foreshadowing of her metamorphosis. In a sense, Mona's *dancing* (with Sankofa's drums in the background) indicates a sort of political resistance.

Soon after this scene, Mona is transported, indicated by the shot: the camera moves forward over the water toward the Americas. Later, near the conclusion of the film, the camera pulls back and moves across the water, again noting not only her physical but her psychological return. Upon this return, Mona's

change is immediately noted. She emerges naked from the dungeon, as though out of the birth canal. And, in resistance to old codes that perpetuated her earlier static objectification, Mona walks past the photographer, unacknowledging his superficial scoldings about her being late. Mona has escaped his surveillance, and, to use Bhabha words, “It is not that the voice of authority is at a loss for words. It is, rather, that the colonial discourse has reached that point when, faced with the hybridity of its objects, the *presence* of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert” (112).

Besides focusing on Mona’s spiritual awakening, students may critique the stories that she tells when she is the slave, Shola, who works and lives on the LaFayette Plantation. During such a critique, instructors may choose to discuss the role of the African *griot*. Shola narrates the inner segment of the film, in part acting like a *griot* and sharing her perceptions of master/slave and slave/slave relations with the film’s audience. Toby Clark identifies the *griot* as “the village historian [in West African societies] who recount[s] the communities past with a pointed critique of the present” (144). Similarly, the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene understands the *griot* as the witness and recorder of all goings-on in the tribe, individual and communal. In effect, Sembene sees the *griot* as acting out the “living memory and conscience of his [in this case her] people” (Clark 144).

Specifically, Shola’s storytelling about Joe, one of the head slaves on the plantation, records the realities by which Euro-imperial ideology identify racial difference as essentially rather than culturally inscribed. The examples about the colonizers that she provides demonstrate “that when most European thinkers celebrated humanity or culture they were principally celebrating ideas and values they ascribed to their own national culture, or to Europe as distinct from the Orient, Africa, and even the Americas” (Said 44). In her cataloguing of Joe’s

experiences, it becomes obvious that no matter how hard he tries to assimilate to Catholic codes he will never be valued because of his mixed blood.

Joe acts metaphorically, eliding instead of exposing and displacing colonial ideology. His mimicry is representative of Fanon's "white mask," which is yet another important concept that could be defined and contemplated. Repeatedly, the camera cuts to Joe confessing his sins to a priest and (trying to) purge his difference through prayer. Joe's characterization is threatened by stereotyping in the modern sense unless viewers seek to understand him in an alternative way. Bhabha points out the need to reconsider the ways that we interpret stereotyping within a postcolonial project. He argues that it be examined not necessarily as an attempt to normalize but as an attempt to reveal the "process of subjectification" (67), which may bring about the displacement rather than the dismissal of the stereotype. He asserts that "[t]o judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*" (67). Hence, if we consider Gerima's use of stereotyping through the lens of Bhabha, we can understand Joe as fictive strategy who opens up a discursive space of ambivalence and who simultaneously touches the fantasy and fear of the colonizer. To be read more than a static representation of colonial discourse, Joe's mimicry must be understood as not only assimilation but subversion; he is a convert who is feared because of his difference.

The place in the film where students may perceive Joe's mimicry as not simply assimilation but subversion, an act of "camouflage" (words from Lacan and borrowed by Bhabha), is in his vomiting of the poison given to him directly by Lucy and indirectly by Shango. This act of poisoning and purging is crucial since both the colonized and colonizer are equally responsible for Joe's agony.

While it is Lucy who physically poisons Joe, it is the colonial discourse that has psychically disabled him. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that “[i]n the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit then up” (43). Perhaps Joe is some sort of symbol for this very decolonizing process.

Even more than Joe, another character--Shango--incurs mimicry to expose the temporality and constructedness of oppression, hence rehistoricizing the past. While Joe’s mimicry seems to place him in exile, Shango’s mimicry is more readily subversive, permitting him a type of variable agency. In one scene Shango appropriates the Catholic sacrament of marriage and oversees the pseudo-marriage of Joe and Lucy. In this brief segment, Shango not only mocks Joe for his ineffectiveness in potential slave uprisings, he also calls attention to the way the marriage ceremony is inscribed with patriarchal property laws: “Joe, I *give* you this woman” (my emphasis). Shango’s discourse, similar to Sankofa’s, intimates the repressed anger and violence of colonialist practice. Throughout the inner segment Shango repeats, “The snake shall have whatever is in the frog’s belly,” and his words echo Fanon’s discussion of the dehumanization of the native by the settler. Fanon argues that settler discourse labels the native by using “zoological terms,” “speak[ing] of the yellow man’s reptilian motions . . . . [I]n exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary” (42). In mimicking the language use of the colonizer, Shango exposes the temporality and constructedness of that which has been oppressed. Shango, whose name invokes the Yoruban deity of storms, assists Shola on her journey to also dig up the violence and repression inherent in colonialist ideology and history.

Gerima’s film *Sankofa* could be said to examine the ways that dehistoricized renderings of past colonial events necessarily erase the violent means by which

its ideal culture is maintained. The film calls attention to the fact that a postcolonial art must do more than just “aim to displace a hyperreal Europe from the center toward which all historical imagination currently gravitates”(Chakrabarty 387). Rather, it “will have to seek out relentlessly this connection between violence and idealism . . . ” (Chakrabarty 387). Of course, before students can focus on the processes of rehistoricization, they must be able to recognize that multiple histories exist and that some have been submerged and dehistoricized. *Sankofa* is one text that instructor’s might add to a world literature syllabus in order to bring about a productive discussion of such critical issues.

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**Dr. Molly Feelgood; or, How I Can't Learn to Stop Worrying and Love  
*Rubyfruit Jungle***

W. C. Harris

Anyone who has taught *Rubyfruit Jungle* knows that student responses, like reader responses in general, are uniformly enthusiastic, often glowing. An overwhelming majority of students single it out as “my favorite book in this class.” if not “the best book I’ve ever read”—and this from students not given to superlatives, infrequent or inactive readers who rarely seem to be moved by literature. Molly Bolt, the novel’s plucky protagonist, charms the socks off readers with hardly an exception, regardless of background, sexuality, or gender.

Rita Mae Brown is a highly successful, openly lesbian writer. Many of her novels, including *Rubyfruit Jungle*, feature lesbian content. Several of them are bestsellers, but *Rubyfruit*—first issued in 1973 by Daughters Publishing, a small lesbian press, and picked up by Bantam in 1977—has been continuously in print for thirty years. An achievement for any novel, this sort of longevity is sadly rare and especially commendable for a gay or lesbian title. There’s certainly nothing wrong with a good read, and Brown’s long-term success is remarkable. Still, it’s worth thinking about the cost at which accessibility is gained in *Rubyfruit Jungle*, particularly since it is a cost most readers fail to realize. That cost is especially visible against the background of both the Feminist and the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movements of the early 1970s. Sadly, *Rubyfruit Jungle* takes the liberationist impulse of those movements—the rejection of socially prescribed gender roles and sexualities—and ends up selling out what might *seem* to be its primary audience in order to garner the attention of wider audiences:

adolescents, heterosexual men and women. Whether intentionally or not, this is a novel that everyone can read, and Molly Bolt is a character nearly everyone can identify with—an odd state of affairs for a book that’s also considered one of the staples of 20<sup>th</sup>-century lesbian literature. How does Brown manage to speak to lesbians at the same time she speaks—and quite fluently, it would seem—to gay men, straight women, bisexuals, and straight men?

Molly Bolt is an attractive character in part because she says what is on her mind; she uses profanity, she is sexually frank. But she’s also a fundamentally (almost pathologically) *evasive* character: Molly is the nonconformist *par excellence*. *Rubyfruit* is an evasive novel, written in the heat of the feminist and gay liberationist early 70s, when all roles, identities, and labels seemed utterly prescriptive, inherently repressive, tainted with history, indistinguishable from the patriarchy that perpetuated them. *Rubyfruit Jungle* gets readers excited because it taps into the ultimate solipsistic fantasy: being oneself, answering to no one, being allowed to explore one’s world and identity without boundaries, without being forced to define, to make choices. By examining some of the rhetorical strategies Brown uses to give her novel the widest possible appeal—and looking more closely at precisely where Molly Bolt’s outlook diverges from feminists like Adrienne Rich and gay liberationists like Carl Wittman and the Radicalesbians—this paper argues that *Rubyfruit Jungle* attracts readers with the lure of a utopian space, which in the end cannot be imagined.

Brown’s novel has received very little critical attention, that is, aside from the original industry reviews and the perfunctory, rarely analytical inclusion in histories of lesbian literature.<sup>2</sup> From a literary critical perspective, this neglect is

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<sup>2</sup> The only substantive critical readings I have been able to discover are those by Louise Kawada,



unfortunate, for literary criticism discerns—in high and low culture, regardless of the so-called literary merit—the inner mechanism of textual desire, the solutions to hard cultural problems that narrative often seeks under other auspices. One of the only serious critical assessments of *Rubyfruit Jungle* was made in the mid-1980s by Leslie Fishbein, who offers a corrective for what she sees as the wrongheaded view of the novel's contemporary critics that the novel is a "celebration of lesbian feminism" (155).

The novel is completely narcissistic and selfish. It is an utterly individualistic tale that has no social consciousness or sense of commitment to a lesbian community. When lesbians are portrayed in groups, they are viewed as butches or femmes, as sexual predators. . . . The novel never evokes lesbian support networks or genuine gay friendships. The only oppression it seeks to correct is Molly's own. In that sense, *Rubyfruit Jungle* becomes the perfect document of the ME generation: it takes the new selfishness and makes it both gay and good. (158-59)

Fishbein's observations are well grounded: Molly makes a number of friends during her picaresque journey, but she retains few; she sleeps with both women and men, though she says she enjoys sex with women more. Relationships with women provide Molly some of her deepest insights into her own identity; yet still she refuses to commit to any community—straight or gay. Beneath a prickly exterior of maverick sexual humor, denial of community is perhaps her core value. This is nonconformity in the strongest possible sense. In Molly's own words, "'You are for sure getting yourself screwed on rules other people make'" (70). More than simply an antidote to somber and parodic representations of

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Judith Roof, and Leslie Fishbein. Among these, Fishbein takes issue with the novel's reputation as one of the greatest contributions to lesbian writing.

lesbianism of the past (*The Well of Loneliness* is a prominent example), *Rubyfruit Jungle* rejects the concept of roles altogether.

Molly Bolt might appear to be a lesbian, but she identifies herself as such only once, and she has heterosexual relationships throughout the novel. When the women with whom she has relationships describe themselves as lesbians, Molly asks why they have to “give it a name.” When a lesbian approaches Molly in a gay bar, asking whether she’s a “butch” or a “femme,” Molly denounces these terms as she does all other labels. Molly has arrived at the bar with Calvin, a gay African-American homeless ex-football-player, who is the first person she meets upon arriving in New York City, with no place to stay herself:

“All I want is a drink or two,” [says Calvin] “then I have to out and hustle for a place to stay tonight. Too damn cold in that car. Who knows, maybe some lady will be kind and put you up without having you put out. Oh, here comes a bull and she’s heading straight for you. Christ, go to bed with her and she’ll crush you.”

Sure enough this diesel dyke barrels down on me, slams on her brakes and bellows, “Hi there. My name is Mighty Mo. You must be new around here. . . .”

[After brief banter, Mo asks Molly,] “. . . are you butch or femme?”

I looked to Calvin but here wasn’t time to give me a clue for this one. “I beg your pardon.”

“Now don’t be coy with Mighty Mo, you Southern belle. They have butches and femmes down below the Mason-Dixon line, don’t they? You’re a looker, baby, and I’d like to get to know you,

but if you're a butch then it'd be like holding hands with your brother, now wouldn't it?"

"Your tough luck, Mo. Sorry." Sorry my ass. Lucky she spilled the beans.

"You sure fooled me. I thought you were femme. What's this world coming to when you can't tell the butches from the femmes." . . . She slapped me on the back fraternally and sauntered off.

"What the flying fuck is this?" [Molly asks Calvin.]

"A lot of these chicks divide up into butch and femme, male-female. some people don't, but this bar is into heavy roles and it's the only bar I know for women. I though you knew about that stuff or I wouldn't have sprung it on you."

"That's the craziest, dumbass think I ever heard tell of. What's the point of being a lesbian if a woman is going to look and act like an imitation man? Hell, I want a man, I'll get the real thing, not one of these chippies. I mean, Calvin, the whole point of being gay is because you love women. You don't like men that look like women, do you?"

"Oh, me, I'm not picky as long as he has a big cock. I'm a bit of a size queen."

"Goddammit. I'm not either one. Now what the fuck do I do?"

"Since you're here, you'd better choose sides for a warm bed. . . . It's not that bad for one night."

“It seems to me that if I say I’m femme, then the Mighty Moes of the world will descend upon me, but if I say I’m butch, then I have to pay for drinks. Either way I get screwed.”

“The human condition.” (146-48)

This scene resounds with dissonance and, like the rest of the novel, reveals more about the fragility of its philosophical stance than it means to. Most noticeable to gay readers, perhaps, is the inconsistency of Molly’s comprehension of gay and lesbian slang. Molly employs certain terms with ease (“diesel dyke” and “bull”) yet is inexplicably ignorant of basic argot like “butch” and “femme.” Similarly, the novel’s attempts at camp humor (much of it male) are either solecisms or jarringly dissonant: Molly claims she could “beat out Bette Davis for acting awards,” and elsewhere calls a closeted lesbian a “‘closet fairy’” (129, 128).<sup>3</sup> Brown is carefully punching tickets, attempting to garner a wide and diverse audience. As with the overdetermined “underclass” characterization of Calvin (gay *and* black *and* homeless *and* ex-football-player?), Molly’s selective ignorance of lesbian slang in the bar scene suggests a certain opportunism in Brown’s approach—speaking to communities in their own language but playing the outsider. This is the anti-alliance position Fishbein speaks of, but Brown’s endorsement of it creates strong doubts about the wisdom and integrity of honoring *Rubyfruit* as a treasured work of lesbian literature, at least one treasured *by* lesbians.

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<sup>3</sup> Although calling a woman Molly suspects of being a lesbian a “closet fairy” may be the most egregious example, the following also show Brown’s appropriation of gay (male) argot and camp humor (128): “‘She’s been down with everything but the Titanic’” (80); “‘Honey, I don’t know whether to go blind, shit, or run for my life’” (119); “‘Better wear your chastity belt’ / ‘Haven’s got one. Do you think B.O. will do the trick?’” (166).

The final exchange between Molly and Calvin is revealing in a different way: “if I say I’m femme then the Mighty Moes of the world will descend upon me, but if I say I’m butch then I have to pay for the drinks. Either way I get screwed,” to which Calvin responds, “The human condition.” Calvin’s terse reply smacks of gay-bar humor about the grim reality of Molly’s currently homeless condition. Given the fact that *Rubyfruit* is not one of those novels that calls into question its protagonist’s point of view, and given Molly’s clear possession of center stage in this scene, it seems that Brown expects us to be shocked by Calvin’s brutal objectivity and revolted by his acceptance of role-playing. Nonetheless, Calvin’s words hit home, despite their throwaway delivery. The notion that having to “choos[e] sides” is the “human condition” touches on a reality that Brown, at least Molly, seems determined to avoid: the roles and identities and labels that social and intimate lives spend so much time negotiating. In the immediate context choosing sides may be a matter of expediency (“for a warm bed”), but—wise-old-queen humor aside—choosing sides is, as Molly repeatedly finds, a human compulsion. Her insistence on “the real thing, not one of these chippies” is, as Jonathan Dollimore has pointed out, an extension of the “charge of inauthenticity to one’s own kind” (94). Of course, Molly refutes the very terms of Dollimore’s reading: the lesbians in the bar on Eighth Avenue are not own “own kind”; rather, she herself, Molly would insist, belongs only to *her own* kind. This claim to membership in a class of one’s own is epitomized by what might be the novel’s watch cry: “I can’t like anybody if I don’t like myself” (36). Liking oneself in this context appears to depend on being not just authentic but uniquely so; for, to Molly’s eye, butch and femme lesbians are playing parts that are not better than those of heterosexual women

and men. They are still acting. Molly claims that only she is not acting a role, being herself—in short, truly authentic.

What is most fascinating about this scene is that Calvin, though dismissed by Molly's uncompromising individualism, seems to speak the truth, a truth that resonates longer than Molly's own "free to be me" diatribes. Earlier in the novel, when one of Molly's female lovers inquires whether "'you're queer'" Molly lashes out: "'So now I wear this label "Queer" emblazoned across my chest. Or I could always carve a scarlet "L" on my forehead. Why does everyone have to put you in a box and nail the lid on it. I don't know what I am. . . Do I have to be something?'" (107). Calvin said "yes"—and I would argue, some part of Brown herself, though outvoted, agrees with him. Mighty Mo speaks what has to many in the Gay Liberation movement a damaging heterosexist myth but what seems more of a politically incorrect truth: Mighty Mo knows what she wants: a femme. And it is a waste of her time to pursue another butch. While one might say Mo has internalized a restrictive paradigm (which was a compulsory code of social behavior for pre-Stonewall lesbians), the fact that *this* butch prefers only femmes does not mean that all butches feel the same. As Calvin, the self-proclaimed "size queen" implies, everyone has their predilections; being butch is Mo's. Further, it is interesting that Brown overlooks the possibility that exists at the heart of an apparently stagnant milieu: Mighty Mo has to ask Molly about her role; that is, roles are not always legible, determinable—and by extension, not *determinate*. A role does not define the extent of a person or dictate in perpetuity the full range of her behavior. Although Mo might have *assumed* Molly was a femme, this is, as Mo says, a "'world [in which] you can't tell the butches from the femmes.'" Once again, minor characters in the novel demonstrate an elasticity about gender and sexual roles, and a variability within those roles,

which Molly repudiates and of which the novel seems to remain wholly ignorant.

While Molly's desire to transcend anything that resembles the current social construct may seem naively idealistic, in 1973, when the novel was first published, such idealism seemed to hold serious promise for fundamental and wide-reaching social and political change in the eyes of both feminists and men and women within the Gay Liberation movement. Certainly, an indictment of the existing social order and the gender roles it inculcates could be found in a statement by almost any Gay Liberation group. Take, for instance, Carl Wittman's "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto," one of the movement's founding documents:

We are children of a straight society. We will think straight, and that is part of our oppression. One of the most fucked up of straight concepts is inequity. Straight (also, white, male, capitalist) thinking sees things always in terms of order and comparison. A is before B, B is after A. . . . this idea gets extended to male/female, on top/on bottom, spouse/nonspouse, heterosexual/homosexual, boss/worker, rich/poor, white/black. Our social institutions cause and reflect this verbal hierarchy.

We have lived in these institutions all our lives, so naturally we mimic the roles. . . . [W]e are becoming free enough to shed these roles which we've picked up from the institutions that have imprisoned us. (161)

Words like these echo throughout the 70s, from Wittman's 1970 manifesto to Adrienne Rich's landmark 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." The list of institutions rejected by queer and feminist

liberationist critiques for inculcating a limited set of restrictive roles usually began with marriage and the nuclear family, both of which dictate heterosexuality as the normative paradigm. Marriage is shunned, to use Wittman's concise Marxist formulation, for its encouragement of "properties attitudes" (162), and justifiably so. Unsurprisingly—though it seems from our present perspective, problematically—this critique ends up questioning not just prescribed gender roles and sexual identities but also the viability of *any* concept of gender or identity. Molly Bolt's insistence on sexual freedom is consistent with Wittman's attack on monogamy: marriage makes "promises about the future, which we have no right to make and which prevent us from . . . growing" (162). Worse yet, marriage is founded upon "inflexible roles. . . which do not reflect us at the moment but are inherited through mimicry. We have to define for ourselves a new pluralistic, role-free social structure" (162). Despite these similarities, however, Rita Mae Brown goes farther than any Gay Liberation activist in asserting independence from community in any form—farther than Katz (author of "Smash Phallic Imperialism") or separatist groups like the Radicalesbians ("Leaving Gay Men Behind"). Even in writings of the most radical separatist, one finds some commitment to a common cause, to a polity of the like-minded.<sup>4</sup>

While there is surely fault to be found with institutionalized heterosexuality, the difficulty lies in getting outside the system, being able even to *think* outside it. The real difficulty for these liberationists was theorizing not just a viable, non-essentialist form of social construction beyond the present one,

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<sup>4</sup> Brown's vision is more exacting even than other "radical utopias" discussed by Diane Crowder—both those from the early 1970s which "envision a world where gender does not exist" and those from the mid-to-late 70s, during which we "find a proliferation of lesbian and feminist utopias depicting attractive worlds, but which are often based upon a philosophy—essentialism—that deprives readers of any realistic means of attaining the better world" (240, 244).



but even a new set of concepts. Wittman's discussion of bisexuality is a case in point:

The reason so few of us are bisexual is because society made such a big stink about homosexuality that we got forced into seeing ourselves as either straight or nonstraight. Also, many gays got turned off to the ways men are supposed to relate to women and vice-versa, which is pretty fucked up. Gays will begin to get turned onto women when 1) it's something we do because we want to, and not because we should; 2) when women's liberation has changed the nature of heterosexual relationships.

We continue to call ourselves homosexual, rather than bisexual, even if we do make it with the opposite sex also, because saying "Oh, I'm Bi" is a cop out for a gay. We get told it's okay to sleep with women, too, and that's still putting homosexuality down. We'll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it's an issue. Then we'll begin to be complete people. (159)<sup>5</sup>

In language deliciously of its time, Wittman makes an early and laudable insight into the shared animus of gay and lesbian liberation and feminism. But this insight is not without its logical problems: for one, if bisexuality is the inherent human condition, that does little to obviate the distinctions on which the objectionable categories are based. Bisexuality is no less predicated on essentialism than hetero- or homosexuality; how is assuming everyone is

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<sup>5</sup> Similar credos to Wittman's can be found in a number of other liberation-era writings: "We want to reach the homosexual entombed in you [heterosexuals], to liberate our brothers and sisters, locked in the prisons of your skulls. We want you to understand what it is to be our kind of outcast—but also to understand our kind of love, to hunger for your own sex. Because unless you understand this, you will continue to look at us with uncomprehending eyes, fake liberal smiles; you will be incapable of loving us. *We will never go straight until you go gay*" (Shelley 34; emphasis added).

bisexual an improvement over assuming everyone is straight? While the second paragraph above is on one level a prescient comment on the divergence (or at least complex situation) between sexuality and sexual activity, it also pinpoints, perhaps unconsciously, the counterintuitive catch-22 that Molly Bolt demands. Gay men find themselves, in Wittman's world, in the confusion dilemma of identifying as gay *in spite of their present sexual activity* in order to further the movement (gay liberation) that somehow is attempting to pave the way for an adequate recognition of bisexuality. The idea of a sect dedicated to its own eradication may seem odd, though not uncommon. What is worrisome, however, is the disingenuousness Wittman would ask of men, whatever their sexual preference, the dishonesty upon which the gay liberation movement seems here to be founded: being bisexual but pretending to be gay for the sake of gaining political critical mass. And if one is actively bisexual, in what sense is saying "I'm bisexual" a "copy out"? The referent "we" in the second paragraph continues to slip in the last two sentences: "We'll continue to be gay until everyone has forgotten that it's an issue. Then we'll begin to be complete people." Is Wittman suggesting that men who currently identify as gay are simply in denial, or only shamming, refraining from sex with women until gay men—who they're (it seems) pretending to be—have won equity? By comparison, Brown's take on bisexuality is less confusion than Wittman's. After having sex with her long-time friend Leroy, Molly makes a hedging declaration ("maybe I'm queer") but immediately commits to sleeping with "twenty or thirty men and twenty or thirty women before I decide" (70).

A world without labels and roles is a very pleasant fantasy, but it's largely that. Reality, at least the reality of women's and lesbians' lives even today, doesn't work that way. The one ground on which Fishbein seems to praise the

novel is its moving beyond the “stereotype of lesbianism being a parody of straight life” (156): “Denied knowledge of nurturing friendship and support networks among lesbians by the distortions of existing lesbian literature and the historical denial of lesbianism, lesbian culture in the ‘old days’ parodied straight culture in its emphasis on butch and femme” (155). Yet the praise is merely perfunctory, for Fishbein is quick to point out that, despite a commitment to “celebrati[ng] . . . the joys of lesbian life,” lesbians are viewed by Molly and by extension Brown herself “as butches and femmes, as sexual predators” (158-59). Any illusions the novel has in terms of transcending parodic depictions of lesbianism are undone by its remaining mired in both the argot and the concepts of lesbianism as parody. Furthermore, while “butch” and “femme” certainly do not exhaust the possibilities of lesbian relationships and social roles, these images of the self are still emphatically operative. Lesbians still reference, enact, and embrace these stereotypes. but they play within them, as well as outside them. They key—not visible in 1973 and perhaps not yet in 1984 when Fishbein writes—is not to fall into the trap of assuming that roles like butch and femme are finally definitive, that once chosen or even flirted with, they stick irrevocably and define the shape of one’s inner and outer lives indefinitely. Butch and femme roles might stand for any set of identitarian positions (sexual and binary, or otherwise); and like being a submissive leather bottom or a dominant foot fetishist, these positions continue to structure, in various permutations, human sexual lives. They do not provide a pattern which those lives would otherwise lack; they provide a pattern, and pleasure is taken in what they contain as well as what they allow.

Certainly, not everyone commits to a discrete sexual identity, nor should they be compelled to. By the same token, while in a perfect world no one would

be judged or categorized according to arbitrary categories, they are. The last thirty years have raised awareness of the roles, binarisms, and their arbitrary character, yet there seems to be little chance of roles themselves disappearing altogether. Those are the categories we have to work with; if we throw them out, where do we go from here? How do we talk about ourselves, negotiate our lives and desires in terms that anyone but each individual would, by him- or herself, understand? Furthermore, in casting aside labels like “lesbian” and “feminist,” don’t we risk losing sight of the tremendous amount of work still to be done in advocating for and guaranteeing nondiscrimination and equal treatment? Ultimately, the weakness of this vision is not Brown’s alone but that of a movement. What neither Brown nor Wittman foresees—perhaps what neither would accept—is the notion that *consciousness* of hierarchy permits subversion and transformation of the system on its own terms.<sup>6</sup>

Does any of this bring us closer, then, to grasping *Rubyfruit*’s relevance for and popularity with present-day readers—both straight and GLBT youth. “Crossover” enthusiasm of straight readers manifest, on one level, the rejection of previous generations’ attitudes toward homosexuality; at the same time, it signals two pitfalls—one for gay and lesbian literature, and the other for the readers themselves. The debate on the meanings and conditions of mainstream success for gay and lesbian writers deserves further elaboration (though critics of such success can rest easy, given the lack of sincere support from the major

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<sup>6</sup> In his analysis of *Rubyfruit Jungle* and other gay and lesbian novels, Jonathan Dollimore concludes that “binary oppositions are a “violent hierarchy” [Derrida] where one of the two terms forcefully governs the other. A crucial stage in their deconstruction involves an overturning, an inversion that brings “low what was high.” The political effect of “ignoring this stage, of trying to jump beyond the hierarchy into a world quite free of it, is simply to leave it intact in the only world we have.” Dollimore sees the “reversal of the authentic/inauthentic opposition in *Rubyfruit Jungle*” as an example of “overturning” in this sense. He says that it is one of several states in a “process of resistance, one whose effects can never be guaranteed” (98). I agree with Dollimore’s critique of “trying to jump beyond . . . hierarchy into a world quite free of it,” but I think he has misapplied that critique in the case of *Rubyfruit*. A more sophisticated response—not jumping beyond but working within—motivates Caryl Churchill’s play *Cloud Nine* (1981).

publishing houses).<sup>7</sup> Still, what does it mean when one of the most popular lesbian novels of the last fifty years continually eschews alliances, acknowledges no sense of community with lesbians or women—even though straight women and gay men constitute a generous segment of its readership? Could the novel’s popularity across identitarian lines imply a commitment to assimilation, despite its vociferous individualism? The issues here are complex enough to merit further discussion, but *Rubyfruit Jungle*’s ambivalence toward community in any form is relevant to the current crisis of gay and lesbian publishing and concomitant issues of where gay and lesbian literature belongs, to whom it’s marketed, and what sorts of narratives and genres various publishing houses *are* willing to support (erotica, crime novels, boy-gets-boy novels, self-help books).<sup>8</sup> Also worth considering in this context is the success of lesbian novelist Sarah Waters, whose most compelling and well crafted narratives (*Fingersmith* and *Affinity*) are also those in which lesbianism or sexuality is not the central or constant focus (as opposed to *Tipping the Velvet*), nineteenth-century narratives that bracket modern standards of sexual identification and depict women who love women as agents in plots of suspense and intrigue. It is difficult—and unnecessary?—to separate the power of Waters’s storytelling from the attractiveness of a world in which lesbians are not just lesbians (as if that were an impoverished space).

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Woelz’s afterword to *M2M: New Literary Fiction* is a cogent intervention in this long-standing debate. Woelz notes that after nearly two decades (the 1980s and 90s) of mainstream publishing support for gay and lesbian authors, most houses have “deemed [gay and lesbian readers] an unprofitable market segment”: “All three critically acclaimed gay short fiction anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s no longer exist, almost all periodicals venues for gay short fiction have dried up, and many (if not all) of the mainstream publishing houses have either abandoned gay-themed titles altogether or so drastically reduced support for them that it amounts to the same thing” (322).

<sup>8</sup> Woelz has commented astutely on the current situation of gay and lesbian publishing, whereby the gay and lesbian market is deluged almost entirely with genre fiction (particularly erotica, romance, and self-help) while queer literary fiction (which publishers have deemed unprofitable) becomes increasingly more scarce.

Finally, to what extent can *Rubyfruit*'s popularity with straight readers, as well as twenty-something gay and lesbian readers, be attributed to the mirroring of American social culture and personal identity, for the last thirty years, in a static notion of individuality without connection, alliance, or responsibility to anything beyond the self? Far from advocating any single moral structure, or anything as ludicrous as "family values," I merely cite a growing inability to connect any two elements, to recognize context or relation—indeed, a discouragement from doing so.<sup>9</sup>

What would a world without roles, without identities, look like? How would it function? Such a space certainly never gets realized in the novel; how could it, when it's cognitively unintuitable? It is understandable that, from the vantage point of the early 70s, the possibilities of working within the roles we're to some extent stuck with might have seemed slim to none. What's worrisome about the enthusiasm of the novel's *present-day* readers is that their sympathies for Molly's fight to "just be herself" are unconnected to the feminist and gay liberation critiques of patriarchy and the politics of gender roles. Without a sense of the complicated history of liberationism in the feminist and lesbian movements of the past thirty years, these new readers of *Rubyfruit Jungle* are encouraged to indulge in the most counterproductive sort of escapism: one radically unconnected with the world in which identities and labels still exist, the world in which any transformation of identity will have to be tested, if not developed in the first place. The question for contemporary readers of the novel is one that's unpopular to bring up, unlikely to be taken seriously, much less unanswered: Does Molly bolt's rebellion against everything—reminiscent of

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Feel-Good Curriculum*, Maureen Stout analyzes pernicious trends in American educational methods over the last decade, including the cult of self-esteem, the devaluation of knowledge, and the fetishizing of individualism at the cost of any notion of community. Of particular interest here are Chapter One ("What is School for Anyway?") and Chapter Seven ("Too Many Degrees of Separation").

Holden Caulfield's finding phoniness where he looks—constitute a substantive insight that can be put to use in transforming or simply navigating social reality, or is this just another trapdoor opening into the oubliette of feeling good about oneself for being unique in a culture where individuality has become the only mode of being?

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## **“We Don’t Shake the Angel”**

Amy Promodrou

I am trying to remember how eighteen years of life become focused and solid every time I step off of K.L.M into the dust of Cyprus; how eighteen years of life somehow fix themselves in space as soon as hot, wet air hits my neck and coats my throat—when heat lifts up my hair. Going back to Cyprus every summer reminds me of the one summer before I left in 93, the summer I turned eighteen. It is an age pointed and framed the way things always are before a major change, and going back the summer I turned twenty-six was no different. Suddenly, stepping off onto the wide iron ladder that would lead to a crowded shuttle bus became a step that could melt years, a step that could singly take eight years of my life in Connecticut—eight years of study, degrees, awards, assistantships, even marriage—and turn them into dust not unlike the fine, strange powder that settled on every part of life in Cyprus.

On the shuttle bus I stood gripping a red iron pole and balancing with difficulty as the bus made its way through stationary airplanes to the small arrival terminal in Larnaca Airport. I could smell the pinch of sweat and travel that clung to everyone, the musty dampness matting hair beneath armpits and thighs. I pictured the reunion with my parents; how I would notice that my father’s skin had taken on a lighter tinge of gray, how my mother’s hair looked young and blonde and flipped-up in the newest style. When we got home, I knew my dad would drink Dewers from the duty free, and my mom would heat up egg-lemon soup and boiled chicken while I burnt off nervous energy and jet lag by unpacking scented pot holders.

On the way home, I was shocked at first at how much water was in the normally-dry Aliji (the Salt Lake). It had rained that winter for the first time in a ten-year drought, and I was surprised when my mother said the desalination plant was up and running. This would be the first year that water would not be rationed. I looked out of the window to my left and saw that the Tekke Mosque looked larger despite its distance. It rose behind palm trees that bordered the far side of the lake: the solid breath of a Turkish presence over-looking pink flamingos that had gathered for the krill, just beyond carob trees that spotted the roadside darkly.

Once home, I stepped into our living room and felt the comfort of the wide, high ceilings and shadows. Most rooms in Cypriot houses were spacious in order to trap the cool air, and ours was no different—the whole of the lower house spread wide over brown tiles made to look like hard-wood floors. My mother had decorated with rich burgundies and golds, and various gems and minerals littered white shelves. This year, I brought her snowflake obsidian, which she placed next to an old black-and-white photo of herself at twenty-three with my then-three-year-old brother. The picture had been taken by my dad's Uncle Niko, a photographer who liked to smooth away the imperfections of his family subjects.

While my father smoked the Terrytons I had brought, I began to unpack some things and pulled out a beige handcrafted angel that I had picked up for my mother. Its dress was made of various bits of frayed material, tangled up and mop-like. I had picked it up on a Christmas whim, its tweaked halo having tweaked my own decision not to buy it. As I pulled it out, a shower of fine, golden dust and threads settled around my face and hair, and I exhaled sharply.

“What is this thing?” my father asked, in English. My mother came into the room, shook out the angel, and after a few futile attempts to dust it off, finally placed it on the love-seat in the sitting room, wiping off flecks of beige and white that had gathered on the tip of her nose. A tip only slightly longer than the one that curled itself upwards in the black-and-white photo above her.

As we sat around that first evening, our conversation changed from stilted, awkward silences to a build-up of words that rushed to fill the spaces between soup and whiskey. My mom, who didn’t drink, sipped some wine this night and topics centering around airplane food gradually lifted and were replaced by promises of what we would talk about at some distant point over the next two-and-a-half months. In my family, there was much dead weight and power in the promise of conversation. My father would wield the threat of a “kouventa” (a talk) by drawing it out and lengthening it, deliberately stretching it over lazy summer evenings, knowing the real power accumulated in stagnant, empty build-up. Because not much was actually said. We knew there were serious things that we needed to talk about—coming back to Cyprus permanently next year, bringing my husband, Daniel, with me, finding a job for both of us in Cyprus, making sure Daniel—a very white and very blonde American—would fit in and be happy with us dark, xenophobic Cypriots. But my dad assured me we had time; of course, there was no need to talk about all this tonight. With me jet-lagged and edgy and musty. The smell of travel in my armpits and thighs. We had time.

I took a shower once my parents were asleep and tried to lather up some soap with hard water. I already missed my jet-propelled Connecticut showers as I quickly noticed that the large amount of rainfall during the winter had obviously done nothing for the water pressure now. But I stayed in there for

longer than I should have, coaxing shampoo out of stubborn, stringy hair, no doubt draining more water than I should from the tanks that sat up on the roof. Before I went to bed I spent some time wandering around the house, stood for a time in the kitchen and looked at the clock, tried to think about what time it was in Connecticut. It was seven o'clock in the evening there, seven hours behind. Daniel would be watching *Friends*.

Upstairs I lay in bed, unable to sleep. My old room was exactly as I had left it eight years ago. I thought about when Panikko had slept over the week my parents went to Prague. About kissing him, his upper lip always wet with soft, dark hair. I was always surprised by how viciously he kissed, how desperately he threw himself at me as though trying to break something, as though I hadn't already given in. And the year before that with Michali—the first time on one of the hills near Aliji—only a black suede shirt to protect us from dirt and grass, only my knees to bear silent testimony as red and brown scabs bent slowly backwards, falling silently away.

The next day was taken up with visiting, an afternoon social ritual I would repeat throughout the summer. This particular afternoon, my mother and I were to pick up my grandmother and go to visit my great-aunt Alithea, her sister. When I saw my grandmother, I was not surprised by how unchanged she appeared. She hadn't changed at all in the last year or in the last twenty years. Other family members say she had aged when her son, Harry, was in the army during the Turkish invasion of 1974, and she seemed to spend each year after that growing into the lines that had creased earlier around her eyes and around the edges of her mouth. Her dark, red-brown hair still arranged itself in thick, short waves, and she was dressed in black as she had been since the death of her

eldest daughter five years ago. She kissed me on both cheeks and smiled, though her expression remained aptly muted as she thanked God I'd arrived safely: "Thoxase o Theos." We got into the car, and I asked my mother to drive because I was not quite up to maneuvering her car (with no power steering) around the narrow streets on what was still for me the wrong side of the road.

I hadn't seen my great-aunt and uncle in over six years. I remember my Uncle Andros as a short, skulking older man with white hair, tan skin, and deep laugh lines that wrapped around both temples. As a child I was never comfortable around him and seemed to know instinctively that I couldn't trust the way his eyes lingered a split-second too long on my ten-year-old legs. I remember my Aunt Alithea as an older, round-faced woman with short, coarse hair and open, searching eyes. She would always cling to my upper arm and fiercely pull me down to face her until our eyes were level. Then she'd ask the questions: "How are you doing in school? Why haven't you learned to speak Greek properly yet? It's because you don't have any Greek friends, do you?" Then, turning to my mother, "She's friends with the Charlies?" This was the nickname given to Cypriots born in England and now living in Cyprus. Almost all were Londoners and had an accent when they spoke Greek—the butt of many Cypriot jokes. I dreaded, in a way, having to speak Greek to her now; I still spoke in stilted sentences a language made even more foreign by having lived for eight years in Connecticut. I spoke a version of Grenglish--mostly English words with Greek thrown in. I had never really learned the tenses, and so I spoke Greek the way I spoke English, bending Greek verbs so that they painfully followed the English system of grammar, changing endings at random until the people I spoke to chided, corrected, winced.

My Aunt Alithea and my Uncle Andros lived just beyond the Salt Lake, in what was once the Turkish section of Larnaca. When we arrived I saw a familiar rusty railing encircling a familiar white marbled verandah. I got out of the car and climbed the three or four steps past the jasmine tree to where my Aunt was waiting for me. But I was not prepared for how much sickness and old age had changed her. Never a tall woman, she now stood bent to no more than four feet. Her back curved sharply so that her shoulders seemed like reluctant guards standing silently, sullenly at her sides. Her blouse hung in folds; two points still pulled themselves up where breasts had once been. Her age and height and the shock-white of her hair embarrassed me. I had to bend almost double to kiss her. She still had the same searching grip, the same questions, only now they were directed at my husband. She turned to my grandmother: “En kalos?” (“Is he good?” — the concept of “kalos” being the stamp of approval granted most foreigners who married into Cypriot families). My grandmother’s nod was not enough to satisfy her though, as she indicated through bent lips, but she waved us towards the white plastic table and chairs where we were to sit.

My uncle was already seated in one of the chairs. I avoided having to kiss him by taking the long way around the table. But I had to sit next to him in the only chair available after my mother and grandmother were seated. I swept away the dust that had settled in the chair next to him. The sand that came from the Aliji. My aunt introduced a Bulgarian woman who had come to stand awkwardly at her side. The hired help. Alithea asked if we wanted anything to drink, and sent the woman to the kitchen. My uncle watched her go. Although faded because of Alzheimer’s, he was not much changed. His was now a teetering lechery; a desire that seemed somehow beyond him swelled, waned, and caught itself between moments of sharp attentiveness and vacancy that

flecked, then dulled, in his eyes. His movements were those of an astronaut's in zero gravity: slow, probing movements, as though he alone was under water. I watched awkwardly while the line of ash on his cigarette grew and then broke off into a gray power that settled on his pants.

Suddenly, I was bored with everyone around me. I thought of that night, later on, when I would see my best friend, Elia, and we would get drunk and play surrealist word games before going out (where spacious hammocks and altruistic boats adored radiant hairlines and absolute Ohios). I wondered if the barman at the Rock Garden still lit the bar on fire, their signature tourist attraction. Then, at twenty-six, I would step away and grab my purse against me in case it caught fire. I would cover my pint of Carlsberg so no ice that the barman had thrown above his head could contaminate my beer. At twenty-six, I would mentally map out an exit before a group of loud men, fresh off a tour bus, could get too rowdy. But at eighteen, I would see only the pattern of ink that spread itself between a barman's shoulder blades; I'd forget to step back, get burnt.

It seemed that my grandmother had been waiting for something. While we all sipped our coffee, she pulled out a picture from her purse. "It's from Niko," my grandmother said as she handed it to my aunt. "He told me to give it to you." It was an old photograph of Alithea when she was just about eighteen. The woman in the picture had, of course, the smooth perfection to her features and the porcelain skin that most of my relatives in my uncle's photos shared. She had a self-consciousness also that was common to all photographs from an age that viewed pictures as occasions. But beyond this, beyond the artificial pose as she looked over her shoulder, she had the beauty of an old Hollywood actress, the look in her eyes a lazy searching. Alithea looked at it and tisked a few times,



trying to dismiss it at first, but then looking more intently as though in spite of herself, a silent pleasure temporarily smoothing out the wrinkled forehead. She stared for a long time, as if embarrassed to be oddly proud of something so alien.

“You see?” she said to her husband as she passed it around. “You see what a thing you had? What a beautiful woman you had?” Her continual nodding silently implied the question, “And you didn’t even know it?”

My uncle snapped to attention and his brown lips sneered. “What, you?” He laughed. “Bloody nuisance,” he said, looking sideways at me. He held his Greek coffee out in front of him, holding the small handle daintily between thumb and forefinger. “I tell you a story of a blind man,” my uncle said, as he settled more deeply into his chair. “This blind man he could always tell the color of any woman’s . . .” here the “w” was thick, “. . . of any woman’s knickers, no matter how far away he was being. And the bloody bastard, he was right! Always bloody right.” He looked at the four women around the table, waiting for us to laugh with him.

“How do you know?” His wife rolled her eyes at us and attempted a dry laugh. “Did these women let you see to check if he was right?”

“Of course they let me see, what they didn’t let me see? Bloody stupid woman.” He put his coffee down on the table, forgetting to take a sip.

My grandmother told a story then about how someone had once said that people are like figs: they only get sweeter with age. We all laughed, and nodded, like that was something we could look forward to, like we all agreed. When my grandmother laughed, she covered her breast with one hand, as if it was a sin, front teeth clamping down hard on a red lip that threatened to stretch too widely.

When we got home, I got dressed to go out. As I came downstairs, my father asked, "Where are you going?" His eyebrows wrinkled into a mistrusting crease.

"The Blue Barrel," I said (the local pub).

"Who are you going with?"

"Elia." I humored him. I told him. Because I wasn't eighteen, I didn't need to lie.

"When are we going to talk?" he asked. (Tha kouventiasoume.)

"I don't know," I said, squirming, straining to hear the sound of Elia's car outside.

"Avrio," he said; it was always tomorrow, and this promise, this un-event, was still enough to make me uneasy. A dead weight accumulating behind all that was left unsaid.

At eighteen, I would tell him I would be home by twelve. At eighteen I would not get home until four o'clock in the morning. At twenty-six, I kissed my father on the cheek and said nothing, glad for all he did not know.

I walked out of the door, feeling the cool, wet air in my mouth. I walked towards Elia's car, and our smiles met across the street as we felt the promise of all that has not yet happened. The promise in all the dust that collects. And smiling, as if it was a sin.

## From Reviews to Ethnographies of Restaurants:

### The Culture of Food in the Writing and Literature Class

Rita Colanzi

Addressing his brother, Secondo, in the film Big Night, Primo emphatically indicts Pascal's, their competitor's extravagant restaurant, ablaze with neon lights, pyrotechnical displays, a screaming red color scheme, and entrees smothered in red sauce: Do you know what happens in that restaurant every night? RAPE! RAPE! . . . The rape of cuisine." Primo and Secondo's modest, tasteful dining establishment, Paradise, which serves authentic Italian regional dishes, is being eaten alive by the highly competitive monolith Pascal's, which peddles a commercialized version of Italian cuisine. While this film may be viewed and studied for a variety of purposes, it suggests two food-related projects for the writing and literature class: the restaurant review and an ethnographic study of a restaurant. By analyzing each of the two restaurants in Big Night in regard to criteria such as food, particularly how truly authentic the Italian cuisine may be, service, décor, and atmosphere, students become acquainted with the process of reviewing a restaurant. From an ethnographic perspective, students can study the culture of each restaurant. In doing so, they may focus, for example, on ethnicity by considering the extent to which the restaurants reflect the owners' immigrant heritage and the extent to which they reveal the immigrants' assimilation into mainstream American culture and their acceptance of the practices of capitalistic enterprise. Students can approach this study of ethnicity, for instance, by focusing on the restaurants' material culture: the objects or artifacts found in the restaurants, including food, and the physical

buildings themselves. The material culture alone speaks to the issue of ethnic identity and the extent to which it is compromised in America.

I envision the restaurant review and ethnographic study for the college writing or literature class as collaborative projects, involving teams of three or four students who will travel to the restaurant site, either to assess its merits and shortcomings or to derive a sense of its culture. Based in fieldwork, these assignments emphasize that the classroom is not simply the space contained within the walls of the University but is life itself; they challenge students to investigate experience, to pose questions, to solve problems, and to create knowledge. In essence, the projects invite active learning and build community among the participants. In reviewing a restaurant or studying it from an ethnographic perspective, students learn how to be astute observers of experience; they increase their capacity to think analytically and critically; they develop written and oral communication skills; and as the film Big Night and other works that we will consider demonstrate, they become sensitized to issues of diversity—all in the process of working with something that is both familiar to them and, in most cases, enjoyable: Food.

While a restaurant review may be incorporated into a literature course in conjunction with film and literature that deal with food and the dining experience, I include it in my writing classes. I begin with a brief discussion of what it means to review something and introduce types of reviews and rhetorical terms, such as criteria, judgment, and evidence, which are essential to the review process. I emphasize that reviews are persuasive essays, since their writers support with evidence both their thesis, which is their overall judgment or claim about the restaurant, and the evaluations that they make in regard to the specific criteria on which they base their review. I emphasize that the rhetorical

strategies that they employ in their restaurant reviews will aid them in composing other types of reviews and other forms of persuasive writing.

To introduce the class to the restaurant review as both an enjoyable and a serious academic enterprise, I begin by having them read an article from the Philadelphia Inquirer entitled "The Cheesesteak Project," written by Craig LaBan, the newspaper's restaurant critic, in which he describes mentoring four students from Lower Merion High School who worked collaboratively to determine the answer to the question, "Who makes the best cheesesteak?" (9). LaBan explains that the project was not what it may have appeared to be on the surface: a project for "slackers"; it involved hard work. Before they even sampled the fifty-two steaks that they consumed in four days at twenty-three eateries in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the team had to agree on the criteria that they would use and the types of steaks that they would assess. Having my class read and discuss the article familiarizes them with the critical terminology necessary for reviewing a restaurant and whets their appetite for the project.

Not only did this encounter with food introduce the four seniors to the review process and the work of a serious restaurant critic, but it also started at least one of them, Tommy Conry, thinking about his cultural identity, as illustrated by the following excerpt from his cheesesteak diary (yes, in addition to reviewing the eateries, the four seniors kept a journal detailing their experiences):

*I have known the true greatness of Cheese Whiz mixed with fried onions and fried-up steak, because I have Philly running through my veins (along with lots of cholesterol). . . . Now that I am about to head out to the Midwest for college, only now that I am leaving the world of cheesesteaks behind, can I reflect on how lucky I was. (LaBan 9)*

The cheesesteak helps to define Tommy Conry's cultural heritage. It marks him as a native of the Philadelphia area and connects him with the region's history and culture.

The next step in the process of preparing the class to review restaurants is for them to form groups, which at this point do not necessarily have to be the ones that will work on the review itself. After reading sample restaurant reviews from the Philadelphia Inquirer, each group analyzes one review in response to questions on a worksheet that I have developed (see appendix A).<sup>10</sup> The questions ask them to locate in the review any background information on the restaurant and its owners, to determine if the background is necessary or extraneous to the review, to identify criteria that the critic uses to evaluate the restaurant, to find judgments that the reviewer makes in regard to each criteria, and to uncover the evidence he or she includes to support each judgment. The students also determine whether there is an overall evaluation of the restaurant stated explicitly or whether the thesis is implicit. The final question asks the teams for their response to the review: They identify what they consider to be effective and/or ineffective about the review and explain the reasons for their judgments. As a class, we then discuss the findings of the various groups, during the course of which, we develop together lists of criteria that the groups may consider when evaluating a restaurant.

After completing the preliminary work of introducing students to the critical terminology and rhetorical strategies for writing a review, I ask them to form teams for the project and decide on a restaurant to visit. I allow students to choose those with whom they want to work, but I make appropriate assignments

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<sup>10</sup> A conversation with a colleague, Pamela Main, who discussed with me how she teaches the review process and specifically how she uses a grid with the terms "Criteria," "Judgment," and "Evidence," and my reading of John Trimbur's The Call to Write, brief 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2002) were influential in my developing the analysis worksheet.

for students who do not readily find teammates. Before they begin their fieldwork, I encourage the groups to take detailed notes about each aspect of their dining experience and to try to obtain a copy of the menu, which may prove useful as they write their review. I allow in-class time for the teams to work on the project. By the day of the scheduled in-class workshop, they must have dined at the restaurant and they must come to class with their prewriting, that is, all the notes that they have accumulated while doing their fieldwork. The in-class workshop also enables me to confer with each team to address their concerns and to ask them questions that may guide them in assessing the restaurant that they visited and composing a review of it. In addition to the in-class workshops, students also must schedule out-of class-meetings to complete work on the project. I reserve one class for a revision workshop, during which the groups exchange drafts and offer one another feedback. They look particularly for whether the review is based on sufficient criteria, whether the writers not only describe their dining experience but also make judgments in regard to the criteria, whether the judgments are well supported with evidence, and whether the overall evaluation is consistent with the criteria, judgments, and evidence contained in the review.

In conjunction with this collaborative assignment, each group member completes an evaluation form to assess his or her work on the project and that of the other group members (see appendix B). The peer evaluation helps the group to ensure that each member does his or her fair share of the work and cooperates with the other group members. I take the evaluations into account when I grade the group projects.

Before the groups submit to me their review essays, I schedule an in-class presentation of their work. One member may read the review to the class, or all

members may take turns delivering parts of it. Most groups choose the latter option. During the presentations, class members write their responses on a comment sheet that I created. Based on the number of groups involved in the project, I divide the form into sections that provide a designated space for written comments on each group's review (see appendix C). I have found that the comment sheet actively involves audience members with the presentations; it encourages them to listen attentively and to respond thoughtfully to each group's work. In assessing the presentation, class members keep in mind the same criteria that they used to critique initial drafts during the revision workshop. After each group's presentation, their classmates offer comments and pose questions. The group can use this feedback to revise their review further before submitting it. The in-class presentations enable students to sharpen their listening and oral communication skills, to improve their ability to think critically about their own writing and that of others, and to develop an appreciation for one another's work.

The impetus for my devising another food-related writing assignment, the ethnography, began with a brief conversation with a colleague at West Chester.<sup>11</sup> During an orientation program prior to the start of the semester, I discussed with her my work with restaurant reviews. I remember the colleague commenting on issues of language and class in regard to restaurants. In doing so, she reminded me that the restaurant is a cultural site that is ripe for study from a variety of perspectives. Her brief comments led me to review mentally various food-related readings and films that give insight into the culture of restaurants. Moreover, I began to talk with my students about restaurant culture, even as I was initiating them into the review process.

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to acknowledge Professor Victoria Tischio of West Chester University whose comments led to my devising this project.



For example, we began to explore whether age determines how well diners are treated. In discussing with the groups their overall dining experiences, I invariably encounter students who have had poor experiences based in part on the quality of the service that they received. When I question the groups about whether their age may have determined how they were treated, in some cases, the students believe that it did. In their review, one group wrote about this issue:

“Hi my name is \_\_\_\_ I will be your server for this evening . . . ,” we overheard our waitress say to two recently seated businessmen dressed in suits, joined by two elderly women. Astonished, we looked at each other and asked one another why did we not get that kind of a greeting? [sic] We can only assume that it had to do with our age. Other events that went on throughout the night provided us with proof to [sic] our assumption. For example, a little while after we were seated, our waitress asked, “Are you guys’ [sic] freshmen?” After we informed her that we were, she immediately asked if we were in a sorority. Then she carried on about her days as a sorority girl. We assumed that after she knew our age, she immediately put her guard down and felt she did not have to formally serve us. Never finding out what there was for dessert is another example of our [sic] age discrimination. After dinner we thought the waitress would show us a dessert menu or bring out a dessert tray, but instead we were given our check. We concluded that the waitress thought because we are college students we do not have a lot of money, and might not have wanted to spend the

extra money on dessert. (Cardaciotto, Dubin, and Harris 5-6)

In describing what they perceived to be age discrimination, the writers make the choice first to mention the male diners before the women in the group that received quality service, to emphasize that the men were wearing suits, and to assume that they are businessmen, probably based on how they were dressed. While the writers neglect to mention the women's attire, they call attention to their age, but refrain from doing so in regard to the men. The rhetorical choices that the writers make in describing service at the restaurant call attention to issues of gender.

We might ask if others shared their perceptions of the male and female diners in the restaurant, particularly its staff.

To heighten students' awareness of the roles that age and gender may play in their dining experience, I point to a passage from one of the reviews that they analyzed "Moshulu Encore a Tad Wobbly," which was written by former *Philadelphia Inquirer* restaurant critic Elaine Tait and was published in the September 29, 1996, issue of the paper. Towards the end of her review of the "steel cargo ship" turned restaurant (S6), which was closed after the collapse of the pier where it was located and which has just recently reopened, Tait rehearses a scene that may speak to how gender is negotiated at the restaurant. She attributes the "splendid" service that she received to the fact that she was recognized and then proceeds to describe how three other female diners were treated:

What I couldn't help noticing, however, was the table of three attractive middle-aged women seated at the banquette to my right. Having paid their check, the women were ready to leave, but the

table that a staff member had moved to permit them to be seated needed to be moved again to let them depart comfortably.

Two servers dressed in the Moshulu's impressive navel-officer uniforms, walked by, oblivious to one woman's struggle to free her two friends. That told me that, for the time being at least, service here is mechanical rather than personal. (S6)

Of course, more examples of this sort would be needed to make any meaningful determinations about the influence of gender or age on the dining experience at the restaurant.

As I continued to think about restaurants as cultural communities and about their relationship with American culture at large, I began to devise the ethnographic project. This assignment can be employed in either the writing or literature class. Like the restaurant review, the ethnography is a collaborative project. According to Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, authors of *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, a very useful introduction to ethnography and one of seven books in the series *The Ethnographer's Toolkit*, "ethnography seldom is done by lone researchers"; rather, "ethnographers assemble research teams, establish partnerships with individuals and institutions in the field, and work collaboratively with a wide range of people and organizations to solve mutually defined problems" (xvii). Thus, assigning an ethnography is a good option for instructors who wish to promote collaborative learning.

What exactly is ethnography? According to Le Compte and Schensul, ethnography is "writing about the *culture* of groups of people" (21). The authors add that "[c]ulture is not an individual trait. . . . By definition, culture consists of group patterns of behavior and beliefs which persist over time" (21). Beverly

Moss, who conducted an ethnographic study of literacy in the African American church, provides a very accessible discussion of ethnographic research in her essay "Ethnography and Composition." She notes that the "ultimate goal" of an ethnographer is "to describe a particular community so that an outsider sees it as a native would and so that the community studied can be compared to other communities" (155). The anthropologist Clifford Geertz undoubtedly would dispute her contention that we see the culture as a native would. In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," the first chapter of his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz argues that "anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a 'native' makes first order ones: it's *his* culture.)" (15). However, Geertz argues for the merit of ethnography, emphasizing that the "claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement . . ." (16).

Fieldwork is at the heart of ethnography. Ethnographers immerse themselves in the particular culture to be studied. Certainly, one visit to a restaurant is insufficient time in which to make significant strides in reducing the puzzlement about a culture. But given that students' budgets are limited, one visit will have to suffice to at least introduce them to the concept of an ethnographic study and to have them collect data about the restaurant's culture. Their interpretations of the data will indeed be tenuous. To begin to understand a culture, an ethnographer would collect information over an extended period of time and would check all the methods of data collection against each other before drawing conclusions. This cross checking of data is a process that ethnographers

refer to as “triangulation” (Moss 159-60; LeCompte and Schensul 130-31). To allow for more observation of a restaurant, a group, which may consist of four students, could divide into two subgroups. Each would dine at the restaurant on a separate occasion and then come together to compare notes. This would at least provide the group with more exposure to the culture than they would have if they went as a whole. Or possibly, two groups in the class could commit to studying the same restaurant so that two to four visits to the site would be possible.

As we noted, Moss emphasizes the ethnographer’s interest in comparing communities. After completing their fieldwork at the restaurants, the ethnographic teams in the composition or literature class can compare their data with that of other groups to see how the cultures of the various restaurants are similar to and/or different from one another. In addition, they can compare the cultures of the restaurants to the broader American culture of which they are a part.

What specifically should the groups look for when they proceed to do their ethnographies? Beverly Moss opted for a “topic oriented ethnography,” which “narrows the focus to one or more aspects of life known to exist in a community” (155). Her topic, as we saw, was literacy in the African American community. Having the groups approach the restaurant with one or more topics in mind would be more productive and focused than other approaches, such as the “comprehensive-oriented ethnography,” which, as Moss explains, “seeks to document or describe a total way of life” (155).<sup>12</sup>

In addition to general background on ethnography, readings and films that encourage students to be observers of experience and that suggest various

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<sup>12</sup> See Hymes 22-24 for a discussion of “three types of ethnographic inquiry”: “comprehensive,” “topic-oriented,” and “hypothesis-oriented.”

subjects to investigate at the restaurant may be introduced to the class prior to the beginning of fieldwork. Films and literary works that deal with restaurants are appropriate for the literature class while essays on restaurant culture and ethnography, editorial commentaries about restaurants, and reviews of restaurants, for the composition class. Obviously, the lines are not clearly drawn here. What is used in one course may also be introduced in the other. We will examine some readings and how they may be employed in preparing students to write ethnographies. Instructors who decide to include this assignment in their courses may find other suitable readings as well.

Elaine Tait's review of the Moshulu and the excerpt from the students' review that was quoted above call attention to the subjects of gender and age in regard to restaurants. Students may study restaurants to determine answers to questions such as the following: How do restaurant personnel interact with male and female guests in the restaurant? How do male and female workers or male and female diners relate to one another? How do female workers or diners interact with other females and male workers or diners, with other men? Are there notable differences in how the genders are perceived and treated? What age groups work and dine at the restaurant? How do staff members interact with the various age groups who dine there? How do workers of different ages interact with one another? How do diners of different ages relate to each other? Are there notable differences in how different age groups are perceived and treated?

A commentary from the January 30, 2003, *Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled "Table for One" also addresses the issue of age. According to the author Sylvia Auerbach, "the DiStefano family, owners of Victor's, have known, for the past 15 years, to expect [Dorothy] every Friday night." Dorothy is an eighty-two-year-

old diner who takes great pleasure in “table hop[ping]” and socializing with guests; however, her difficulty maneuvering about and her failing eyesight are impeding her ability to do so. Auerbach adds that the “DiStefanos and their staff realized what these Friday nights meant to [Dorothy]” and were aware of her physical difficulties; therefore, “about three years ago, the DiStefanos gave [Dorothy] her Friday night ‘assignment’”: “a booth near the entrance so that she could ‘visit’ with diners close by.” This article is worth considering, since it calls into question assumptions that we may have about how the elderly are treated at restaurants. We, along with the student ethnographers, may not expect the level of care and concern that the DeStefanos and their staff accord to Dorothy. This article invites students to think about assumptions that they may bring with them into the restaurants that they study and to work against letting those assumptions influence what they observe and how they interpret their data.

Janice Witherspoon Neuleib and Maurice A. Scharton write about this problem in the section “Excavating Our Assumptions,” which appears in their essay “Writing Others, Writing Ourselves: Ethnography and the Writing Center.” In conducting an ethnographic study of their writing center, the authors “consider Foucault’s archeological approach,” an approach that “asks what assumptions lie behind any theory, system, or institution” (57). In excavating their assumptions, the two researchers are concerned, for example, with those that shaped the type of Writing Center that they created and those that influence how they conduct their ethnography of it (57). Certainly works, such as “Table for One,” can be used in the composition or literature class to initiate discussion about assumptions that students may bring with them into the field and about how those assumptions may influence their approach to ethnography and their interpretation of data.

In addition to the subject of gender and age, the groups may decide to study race relations at the restaurant. In "A Stark Lesson in Racism," a commentary published in the February 21, 2003, Philadelphia Inquirer, Christopher Nicholson remembers how at age eighteen he made the acquaintance of civil-rights activist Bayard Rustin, who recently was at the center of controversy in West Chester, Pennsylvania, about whether a new high school in the town should be named after him. Nicholson remembers going with Rustin in 1946 to a restaurant in West Chester: "Usually menus would be offered or the day's specials recited. No one approached us that day. Nothing happened. We waited. And waited. And waited more, ignored but not overlooked. No one spoke to us." Subsequently, they were refused service at two other restaurants in the town. Racism is also the subject of Howard Kohn's article "Service with a Sneer," published in the November 6, 1994, edition of the *New York Times Magazine*. Kohn details alleged instances of racial discrimination at Denny's restaurants, and particularly the cases of eighteen teenagers, most of whom were members of the N.A.A.C.P. Youth Council in San Jose, who "were told they would have to pay for their food on ordering," and the case of "six young black Secret Service officers," who were ignored by their white waitress in a Denny's in Annapolis, Maryland while their fifteen white colleagues received prompt service (44). Howard writes that, according to one of the cooks, "steaming hot breakfasts for the six officers had been sitting for more than half an hour on a serving counter and had been pointedly ignored by the waitress" (47). Both the teenagers and the agents sued Denny's. Nicholson's commentary and Kohn's article may be used to introduce the subject of race in regard to restaurant culture. As they study their restaurants, students may ask questions such as the following: What racial groups dine at the restaurant? Which work at the



restaurant and in what capacities? How do staff members relate to diners of different races? How do staff members of different races interact with one another? How does management treat staff members of different races? How do diners of different races relate to one another? How do members of the same race interact with one another? Are there notable differences in regard to relations between the races and among members of the same race at the restaurant?

In his poem, "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," Langston Hughes sensitizes us to issues of both race and class. The poem centers on an advertisement that describes the new Waldorf Astoria, including the types of food served at its restaurant. The poem opens with lines from the advertisement that beckon prospective clientele: "Fine living . . . a la carte?? / Come to the Waldorf-Astoria!" (143). Ironically, Hughes directs the invitation to those for whom it is not intended, those marginalized because of their low class status or their race: in Hughes's words, "HUNGRY ONES," "ROOMERS," "EVICTED FAMILIES," and "NEGROES" (143-45). In the section on the homeless, he lists some of the fine fare served at the Waldorf-Astoria:

GUMBO CREOLE  
CRABMEAT IN CASSOLETTE  
BROILED BRISKET OF BEEF  
SMALL ONIONS IN CREAM  
WATERCRESS SALAD  
PEACH MELBA (144)

This aspect of the hotel's material culture reflects the chasm between the hotel's privileged clientele and the disenfranchised groups to whom Hughes addresses his poem. Interestingly, Hughes capitalizes every letter of every word in the

menu and in the names of each marginalized group. While this rhetorical strategy showcases the menu, it also emphasizes that those who are not invited to sample the fine cuisine equally deserve attention and a place at the table.

Another work that focuses on race relations and class stratification is the poem “Restaurant” by Maxine Hong Kingston. The speaker of the poem describes the mundane, laborious activities that she and her coworkers perform until the early morning hours in the kitchen, which is located in the basement of a fine dining establishment. She employs a childlike imagination to portray the effects of the back-breaking work upon her: “In this basement, / I lose my size. I am a bent-over / child, Gretel or Jill . . .” In doing so, she creates an image of stunted growth, of a nascent imaginative self hopelessly grounded by social constrictions. As she and the worker to whom she addresses the poem come up from the lower depths of the restaurant into the night, they “wonder at the clean diners behind glass in candlelight” (856). Kingston creates an underclass apart from the pristine aboveground world of the privileged diners. Moreover, word choices such as “China cap,” “Mulattos,” and “Black so-called musician” suggest that the underclass is multiracial and comprised specifically of races that have been disenfranchised (855-56). Thus, the poem can be used to discuss issues of both race and class in regard to the culture of a restaurant.

Mitchell Fox’s commentary “Town Square Still Hums—Indoors over Caffeine,” which appeared in the March 9, 2003, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, offers a different perspective on social class. An unemployed worker who frequents Starbucks, Fox finds a receptive atmosphere during his protracted stay at the coffee shop each weekday, despite the fact that he usually buys only one Tall Coffee and on some days eats a lunch there that he packs from home. Undoubtedly operating under the assumption that he would be “given the

bum's rush from an enterprise [he was] not knowingly benefiting" (L8), Fox discovers the antithesis: "The green-smocked young people working behind the counter didn't lift an eyebrow when I pulled out my homemade bagel sandwich and ate it for lunch. Starbucks seems perfectly content just filling the seats, providing a comfortable atmosphere for fellowship" (L1). Like the commentary on how the elderly diner was treated at Victor's, this piece can be used to call attention to preconceived ideas or assumptions that the groups may have at the outset of their ethnographic studies. As they examine their restaurants in regard to class issues, the groups may ask questions such as these: What classes dine at the restaurant? Do the different classes of diners interact with one another? If so, what is the nature of those interactions? How do diners of the same class relate to one another? Are there different classes of workers at the restaurant? Do the different classes of workers interact with one another? If so, what is the nature of those interactions? How do workers of the same class relate to one another? How does management treat workers? With which classes of workers do diners interact? How would you describe those encounters? Which classes of workers do diners never see? Why? How do workers and management relate to diners of different classes? Are there notable differences in regard to relations between the classes and among members of the same class at the restaurant?

As we noted at the beginning of this essay, the film *Big Night* may be used in either the literature or composition class to heighten awareness of the role that ethnicity plays in the restaurant community. As students begin their fieldwork, they may ask some of the following questions: Does the restaurant feature the cuisine of a particular ethnic group? How authentic is the cuisine? Has the ethnic restaurant made any concessions to American culture? What can we learn about ethnicity from considering the restaurant's material culture—for example,

its physical structure, décor, table settings, menu, and food? Does the restaurant misrepresent specific ethnic groups or promote ethnic stereotypes? If so, what accounts for the misrepresentations or stereotypes? What ethnic groups dine at the restaurant, and which work there? Which positions do workers of various ethnicities hold? In regard to diners, staff, and management, how do members of particular ethnic groups interact with one another and with those of different ethnicities? To determine the answers to some of their questions about class, race, or ethnicity at the restaurants where they conduct fieldwork, the groups may have to interview guests, workers, and management.

For the literature class, a work that can be taught in conjunction with *Big Night* is the play *The Art of Dining* by Tina Howe. This drama introduces us to Ellen and Cal, a married couple who have gone into debt to open in their home The Golden Carousel, a gourmet restaurant that is attracting a steady stream of upscale clientele. Cal's economic concerns and apprehensions about the new venture are dramatized by his compulsively eating everything that he comes across in Ellen's kitchen, including raw items. The couple can be juxtaposed to Primo and Secondo in *Big Night*, whose restaurant, an experiment in authentic Italian cuisine, is tottering on the brink of bankruptcy. Like Primo, Ellen is the master chef while her husband Cal, like Secondo, manages the business. In regard to the issue of class, a major difference exists between the two men. Having given up a lucrative law practice to run the restaurant and to serve as its maitre d' and waiter, Cal has moved down the social ladder while Secondo attempts to move from the bottom up as an immigrant anxious to succeed in America. Cal's change in social status is negligible compared to the precarious position of Secondo and his brother Primo who struggle as immigrants to find their place in America and who, unlike Cal, have not chosen their class status. In

response to the play, students can write a restaurant review of The Golden Carousel, at which the dining experience is so extraordinary that by the end of the drama guests, who are overwhelmed by “private grief” and at odds with or disconnected from one another, unite around a “*flaming platter*” of “CREPES CAROUSELS” (125-26), which Cal has created with some advice from Ellen and which Ellen helps him to serve. The recreation of a primitive dining ritual and Ellen and Cal’s role reversal dissipate conflicts, blur divisions and class lines to bring the play to a harmonious close. From an ethnographic perspective, the movement of diners in the restaurant from civilized society to a pre-civilized condition that releases them from the internal and external obstacles that separate them, particularly those that are gender-related, prompts us to investigate both cultural settings and to compare them with each other and with American culture at large. It invites us to rethink what constitutes civilization and to identify what constrains members of the civilized society of the restaurant and of the broader culture from achieving solidarity.

In considering the restaurant from an ethnographic viewpoint, students can study its material culture, noting for example, gourmet menu items, such as “Belgian Oxtail Soup,” “Bille Bi,” “Veal Prince Orloff,” and “Roast Duckling in Wine with Green Grapes” (79), the restaurant’s “*wonderfully elegant*” design that includes a “*high tin ceiling, arched windows and masses of hanging plants*” along with a “*pair of restored carousel horses with flashing gold manes or hooves*” (59), and classical music selections, such as “J. S. Bach’s Sonata No. 3 in E major for violin and harpsichord,” that fill the air (73)—all of which bespeak a highbrow culture and call attention to class issues. In comparing the culture of this restaurant with that of Primo and Secondo’s dining establishment and examining both restaurants in

connection with American culture as a whole, students may consider why this venture into fine dining succeeds while the brothers' experiment with Italian cuisine fails. Issues of class and ethnicity may be relevant in addressing this question.

Students also may examine the conversation of diners and staff to get a sense of the restaurant's culture and what it suggests about society at large. They can zero in, for example, on the food-related conversation of a couple, Hannah and Paul Galt, which initially is at cross purposes and signals the divide between them and then takes on sexual connotations as their ordering from a menu becomes a type of sexual foreplay and their arriving at the point of placing their orders, sexual consummation. Later their conversation devolves into questions of infidelity that are at least temporarily resolved as they toast their next meal. Another set of diners at the restaurant is comprised of three women who have various relationships with food: "*Herrick Simmons, a hearty eater, Nessa Vox, a guilty eater, and Tony Stassio, a noneater who's on a perpetual diet*" (87). In one scene, as Herrick and Nessa press Tony, who obviously suffers from an eating disorder, to sample their food, Nessa uses Tony's reluctance to comply as an excuse to refuse to finish her meal without blatantly identifying herself as someone who has a conflicting relationship with food and her body. In a later scene, the women fret about the size, shape, and overall appearance of their breasts. In both scenes, their conversation articulates how they define themselves according to their body image. Students can study the language of the guests to determine what it reveals about the types of diners who frequent the restaurant, about the culture of the restaurant itself, and about what it may suggest about the broader culture, particularly in regard to gender relations and women's perceptions of and relationships with their bodies.

Language alone can be the focus of an ethnographic study. The title of Craig LaBan's review "What Exquisite Food! What Rude Waiters!"—a review which appeared in the September 13, 1998, edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer—signals how language is employed by the staff of Ciboulette, an upscale restaurant in Philadelphia. For example, La Ban notes that the waiter, without invitation, proceeded to guess the age of LaBan's dining partner, who was celebrating a birthday, but that the waiter in question gave an estimate that was "too high" (S1). Adding insult to injury, the server then remarked, "'You must have that disease where you age much faster than you really are'" (S1). When he called to ask directions to Ciboulette, an editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer was treated to a diatribe by a staff member who insisted that the restaurant is not located on the second floor of the Bellevue but "'is really on the first floor'" because "'[t]hat's what it's called in Europe'" (S4). The snobbish remark speaks to issues of class at the restaurant. LaBan not only characterizes the language and behavior of the waiters as "rude" but also refers to the service as "pretentious" (S1). Speaking about the incivility that she encountered as she struggled to make reservations and to be served in a timely fashion at restaurants in Philadelphia, Karen Heller observes in her article "Eating Out, with Reservations" that the "dining experience [in the City] now involves healthy portions of humiliation. If you're not getting gastronomic sadism along with your sea-salt encrusted cod, then the establishment has fallen on hard times." The language and behavior of the staff at Ciboulette and at the restaurants that Heller frequents may prompt students to ask whether the incivility is characteristic only of the specific restaurant cultures in question or whether it is reflective of a pattern of behavior in the culture at large. Students may be better

able to address this question after they complete their fieldwork at specific restaurants and compare their data.

As we move from Ciboulette to the Morning Glory Diner, we shift from incivility to comfortable familiarity. In his review entitled "Morning Glory Is Just What Diner Devotees Would Order," published on September 20, 1998, in the Philadelphia Inquirer, LaBan records the following interchange between himself and the staff:

"What's good for lunch, Sam?" [Sam is the owner of the diner.]

"Me," she says, scooping whipped cream onto a biscuit.

"What else?"

"Her," she says, pointing a spatula to the waitress with curly blond tresses.

"Get the macaroni, hon," says the waitress. "You're going to love me." (S1, S4).

While LaBan undoubtedly includes the dialogue in his review to accentuate the diner's friendly, relaxed atmosphere, the dialogue's sexual connotations call attention to gender issues at the restaurant. Noting what is said, in what context, and in what tone, student ethnographers may record the conversations of various groups at the restaurant, such as that of diners, of staff members and diners, of management and diners, of management and staff, of staff members, and of those in management. They may pay particular attention to how language choices relate to issues of diversity.

Another approach to an ethnography of a restaurant may be to observe what social or political agendas inform its culture. In his review of the White Dog Cafe entitled "A Credible Kitchen to Accompany Meaty Politics," which he wrote for the July 16, 2000, issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, LaBan characterizes



the restaurant as a “bastion of liberal activism” (M1). This political orientation becomes evident just from considering the material culture of the restaurant. For example, LaBan notes that in the bathroom, whose door was “marked ‘Democrats,’” he found the head of ex-special prosecutor Ken Starr “in mural form hovering over the comfort station, giant and bespectacled, his investigator’s cheeks flush with anticipation. ‘He’s watching you,’ [read] a message on the wall” (M1). La Ban emphasizes that at White Dog “they . . . wear a laundry list of causes on their sleeve. Many of them are more than worthy—supporting local farms, fighting cruelty to animals, fostering ASIDS education, multicultural understanding and Habitat for Humanity” (M4).

There are a number of readings, particularly on the subject of McDonald’s, that can be used to prepare students to do an ethnographic study of a fast-food restaurant. The impoverished, isolated narrator of poet Ruth Stone’s “At McDonald’s in Rutland” comes to the fast-food restaurant “to be near people” (58), but the scene that she paints at the McDonald’s heightens her estrangement from herself and others and her inability to take control of her life:

Sometimes looking at all the people who don’t  
notice, they just drive up and get out of their cars  
and come in. It’s so easy to stand in line.  
It’s so easy to line up at the counter.  
Habit, pattern, sleepwalking like barnacles  
that thought they were going somewhere  
without knowing they were growing  
into barnacles . . . (59)

The mechanized world that Stone details is similar to the portrait of McDonald’s in sociologist George Ritzer’s book *The McDonaldization of Society*.

He examines how McDonald's method of operation and its guiding principles have influenced many aspects of society at large. Readings from this book may encourage students to think about the relationship of the restaurant that they observe to the broader culture of which it is a part.

Other works on McDonald's also link it to American culture at large. In "Rituals at McDonald's," Conrad P. Kottak claims that the fast-food chain has "incorporat[ed]—wittingly or unwittingly—many of the ritual and symbolic aspects of religion" (82). According to Kottak, McDonald's is one of the "institutions [that is] also taking over the functions of formal religion" (82). Outlining in "The Ethnography of Big Mac" his ideas for conducting an ethnographic study of McDonald's material culture, David Gerald Orr argues that "[i]nstead of dismissing the vast amounts of ephemeral material culture produced annually by McDonald's as "insignificant and valueless: why not examine it, consider it soberly as a reflection of our own goals and aspirations, and at least, look at it" (378). Included in the types of material culture that he proposes to study are the architecture of McDonald's—under the heading of which he lists "façade" and "interior décor" — television commercials for McDonald's, food, packaging, "ephemeral material" that "contain illusions and fantasies" (among this material are, for example, "giveaway drinking glasses" with "colorful decals," depicting various McDonald's characters, such as Grimace or Hamburglar; McDonaldland toys; and Ronald McDonald himself). Rather than assign this specialized essay to students in my writing and literature, who probably would not find it stimulating to read, I would call attention to the focus of Orr's research, since students may choose to pursue their own ethnographic study of material culture at McDonald's or another restaurant.

A selection of the aforementioned works can be used to get students thinking about topics to pursue and specific approaches to conducting ethnographic fieldwork. A group may decide to study the restaurant in relation to several topics or just one. Even if group members are intent on examining one topic, they should begin their fieldwork with several in mind, in the event that as novice ethnographers they all too soon come to a dead end or in the event that during their one-day visit to the restaurant, there is indeed little to note in regard to their topic.

Beverly Moss calls attention to the importance of gaining “access” to the community to be studied (158). While reviewing a restaurant does not necessitate students’ informing the owner or manager of their intent, the ethnographic study probably does call for formal permission from the subjects of the study because, for example, students may want to conduct interviews with workers or guests, use various audio-visual devices, and stay for a protracted period of time. Thus, students should contact in advance the restaurant at which they plan to do fieldwork to obtain necessary permissions. They also should have more than one restaurant in mind as a possible research site in case management at their chosen site is not amenable to their project.

Students also need to decide on methods of data collection. Included among possible research methods are taking notes on what they observe; interviewing diners, workers, managers, owners; photographing, videotaping, and/or tape-recording daily life in the restaurant; distributing to guests, staff, or management surveys or questionnaires that relate to the specific topics that the groups are studying; and collecting or gaining access to some of the restaurant's material culture, such as menus, receipts, business cards, giveaway items,

matchboxes, reservation lists, work assignment sheets, inventory or order forms.<sup>13</sup>

After the groups have amassed sufficient data about the restaurants, what do they do with it all? In “Thick Description, Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” the first chapter of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz insists that it is not enough to thinly describe a culture, that is, to amass and report observations, but rather, he argues for the need to thickly describe it, to figure out what it means, to “[construct] a reading of what happens.” (18). According to Geertz, “[i]t is not against a body of uninterrupted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar” (16). Following this interpretive approach, I would ask students to sift through the data, to examine what they discover through the various means that they use to collect it, to compare their findings against each other, and to figure out what it all means, what the data is saying about life in the restaurant community that they observed. They then would write collaboratively an account or story of their reading of the culture. Linda Brodkey maintains that no matter what methodology ethnographers use to report data, “ethnography inevitably deals with narrative of lived experience” (46). By virtue of its involving reading, interpreting, and narrating, ethnography is well suited for the writing or literature class.

Much as I do with the restaurant reviews, I would allow in-class time for group work on the project, for revision of initial drafts, and for oral presentations of the ethnographies. It would be helpful to allow time for the various groups to

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<sup>13</sup> Moss 139 and LeCompte and Schensul 129-39 enumerate methods such as these and others.

interact with each other in order to share both the data that they collected during their fieldwork and their interpretations of the specific restaurant communities that they observed. The interchange would be particularly useful as the members of each group begin to think about the relationship of the restaurant community that they studied to the culture at large. In conducting fieldwork and writing their narratives, I would ask each team to reflect on the connection between the two cultures. As a result of sharing with other groups their data and interpretations of it, group members may be better able to substantiate their claims, or they may find their conclusions questionable. Either way, the group would be refining and strengthening their account of the restaurant community that they studied and their views on its relationship to the broader American culture in which it is situated.

Is it valid to look at the restaurant community as a microcosm of the larger society of which it is a part? Speaking about distant cultures that ethnographers examine, Geertz cautions against “regarding a remote locality as the world in a teacup” (23). The connection between a specific restaurant that students may study and American culture at large is more intimate, but even here it would be wrong to suggest that the restaurant provides the key to understanding the broader culture. Moreover, given the fact that students may visit the site only once, the conclusions that they draw are far from definitive. While Geertz cautions against viewing a particular culture in microcosmic terms, he does not preclude connecting what he learns about a culture with the world beyond it. He argues, “social actions are comments on more than themselves; . . . where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues . . . because they are made to” (23). It is worth encouraging students to at least consider how far they can take their findings

about restaurant communities. It is useful for them to ask what the restaurant culture may reveal about the broader culture, about, for instance, its values and beliefs, its social structure, its economy, its politics, its problems and concerns. As we noted, sociologist George Ritzner sees McDonald's "as the major example . . . of a wide- ranging process" that he terms McDonaldization: "*the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world*" (1). Hence, restaurant culture not only reflects society at large but also influences it. At the conclusion of Kohn's article on racial discrimination at Denny's, parents and lawyers of the youths who encountered racism at a Denny's in San Jose relate the case to the broader culture. Speaking about the civil rights movement in which he participated, one parent Reginald Braddock observes, "I had gotten complacent in my life, and this woke me up. We didn't complete the job 30 years ago, and I realize now it's going to take more than my lifetime to complete it'" (81). In *Big Night* what we observe in Primo and Secondo's restaurant, Paradise, and in their competitor's establishment, Pascal's, propels us beyond the confines of the restaurants to think, for example, about the American capitalistic system and the extent to which it corrupts and dehumanizes those enmeshed in it, about ethnicity in America, and about whether the price of succeeding in America is that we sacrifice who we are, ethnically and otherwise.

Admittedly, one visit to a restaurant barely scratches the surface of the ethnographic enterprise. Nonetheless, students will make some discoveries about the specific community that they study and perhaps about themselves and the larger culture of which they are a part. As Clifford Geertz reminds us, "it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something" (20).

## Appendix A

### Analyzing a Restaurant Review

1. Does the reviewer provide any background information about the restaurant and/or its owners? Do you think that this information is necessary? Why or why not?

2. What criteria does the reviewer use in evaluating the restaurant?

(For example, if I were reviewing a movie, I might consider some of the following criteria: acting, directing, screenplay, camera work, special effects, and music.)

3. In regard to each of the criteria, what judgments does the reviewer make, and on what evidence does the reviewer base the judgment?

(For example, if I evaluated a particular restaurant in regard to the quality of its service, which is a criterion of evaluation, I might make the judgment that service at the restaurant is poor. My judgment might be based on evidence such as the following: that the waiter was very slow in taking my order and in bringing me my check, that he spilt food on me twice, and that he answered my questions rather abruptly.)

4. What is the reviewer's overall evaluation of the restaurant? (Does the reviewer state it explicitly? If so, write the sentence or sentences that give the overall evaluation. If the overall evaluation is implied rather than stated outright, what enabled you to figure it out?)



5. In your opinion, what is the most effective part of the review? Why? What is the least effective part? Why?

## **Appendix B**

### **Procedures for the Collaborative Assignment**

1. An effective group is one in which all the members contribute equally to the planning and writing of the assignment and collaborate to revise, edit, and proofread one another's work. The amount of work for which each group member is responsible depends on the size of the group. If a group is comprised of three members, for example, each will write  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the essay; if it has four members, each will compose  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the essay.

2. Be sure to include in the heading of the paper the names of all the group members.

3. An uncooperative group member places an unfair burden upon the others in the group.

If a group member does not do his or her fair share of the work (that is, if this person does little or no work at all), the other members may fire this individual from the

group. The group simply would exclude the member's name from the heading of the paper. In turn, the member would receive a "No Passing" grade for the assignment.

4. Each group member is responsible for completing the evaluation form, which is located below, and for submitting it on the day that the final draft of the essay is due. The comments on the evaluation form will help to determine the grade for the assignment

-----

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Identify the parts of the essay that you wrote (be very specific, and remember to attach to the completed project your prewriting and rough drafts with your name on them).

2. Evaluate your fellow group members, including yourself.

List your name and the names of the others in your group.

Beside each name, give your assessment of the group member's performance by assigning a letter grade:

Also include written comments about the work of each group member.

A = worked extremely well

B = did good work

C = did satisfactory work

D = did poor work

F = did very little work or none at all

## **Appendix C**

### **Oral Presentations of the Restaurant Reviews**

**Group 1**

**Group 2**

Comments:

Comments:

**Group 3**

Comments:

**Group 4**

Comments:

**Group 5**

Comments:

**Group 6**

Comments:

**Group 7**

Comments:

**Group 8**

Comments:



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## Poetry by Martha Wickelhaus

### Shopping at K-Mart

I'm on a mission bigger than  
The marches, the vigils, the buttons  
And signs. My shopping list tight  
In my hand. I'm in Pennsylvania imagining  
Iraq, buying supplies for a relief package:  
Four bars of soap; four bath towels (not white);  
Four toothbrushes (Adult size); toothpaste,  
Shampoo, brush, comb, fingernail clippers,  
Essentials for a day in a bombed-out life.  
Then one item, contraband, I can't resist:  
Lotion for hands rough  
from wringing and prayer. I imagine  
the woman opening the box,  
Finding the bottle and sniffing,  
Through the reek of fire and the dead,  
The fragrance of peach blossoms.

## Vincent's Crows

"I still felt very sad and continued to feel  
the storm which threatens you weighing  
on me too."

Van Gogh, letter to Theo

Always when I see Van Gogh's

*Wheatfield with Crows*

I can't tell whether the birds have  
been frightened off by the painter's  
stance, or if they've homed in  
on his painterly solace  
to irritate the landscape.

Whether they're about light  
passing out of the world,  
or hunger filling the fattened  
bellies of hell's messengers.

No doubt he found more than one  
way to see those black slashes  
maiming the blue over Auvers.

Forget biography, that story's  
been heard over and over, but

what was it that day the painter's

ears filled with the wicked

cacophony of crows.

What last thoughts

before the blinding darkness

of birds and the coming storm?

## Critiquing the Bourgeois Family: Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*

Cami Hewett

Bernard Deiderich recounts General Trujillo's January 1961 visit to the site where the Mirabal sisters' jeep tumbled over a cliff, carrying their already clubbed lifeless bodies. Diederich records Trujillo's lament to his entourage that the sisters were "'Such good women, and so defenseless!'" (71). 'Defenseless' in the hands of his hired assassins, surely. This statement implies that the Mirabal sisters, who acted quite capably in the underground opposition to Trujillo's dictatorship, needed defense because they were women. Throughout his 31-year reign, Trujillo idealized "such good women[s]" virginal beauty at his carnivals and celebrations, but treated women as if they were "so defenseless" without him as their patriarch. Such privileging of the male as the protector of 'defenseless' women reinforces a patriarchal gender hierarchy in the society, and is evident within traditional Dominican families in Alvarez's novel. Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* critiques gender hierarchy in the bourgeois family structure by depicting the Mirabal sisters' revolutionary families in opposition to Trujillo's regime, and, by extension, to patriarchal domination in marriage. This essay will specifically support that argument by exploring the following: 1) Trujillo as macho, surveying his behavior of dominion as relevant to Alvarez's novel; 2) machismo in conjunction with the bourgeois family model, investigating connections between Trujillo's, and traditional Dominican, patriarchal family structure; and 3) the Mirabal sisters' revolutionary marriages, highlighting Alvarez's depiction of family structures that are radical for their time as they seek to overcome traditional bourgeois gender hierarchy.

Before we proceed, it is important to briefly note that this essay makes an effort to tie research of Trujillo's real life behavior in with Alvarez's portrayal of his behavior in her fictional novel. As with any border where fiction and reality interlace, there can arise confusion as to what is real, and what is merely conjecture. Alvarez freely acknowledges her novel as a work of fiction, stating that the women in the novel are "the Mirabals of my creation" (324), though she emphasizes her desires to be true to their spirits. However, Alvarez points out the distinct advantages of exploring the Mirabals through fiction: "I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart" (324). My argument fits here: in the meeting of her fictional portrayal of the Mirabals with Trujillo's behavior as a dictator of the Dominican Republic—their intersection reveals truth about the human heart and the family structures in which it exists. "Obviously, these sisters, who fought one tyrant, have served as models for women fighting against injustices of all kinds" (324), Alvarez continues. Many of these injustices are perpetuated by the patriarchal, bourgeois family structure, of which, I argue, Trujillo served as a figurehead during his dictatorship.

### **Trujillo as Macho**

Alvarez's novel specifically highlights Trujillo—his macho regime and his domineering treatment of women—as a signifier for gender relations in larger Dominican society. By depicting Trujillo's oppressive and sexually offensive methods of enforcing his power on the Mirabal family, Alvarez implies that Trujillo's dominance of the country, and of women, parallels the dominance that

patriarchal men exercise over their families in adherence with traditional bourgeois family structure. According to Lauren Derby, a prominent scholar on gender and state spectacle during the Trujillo regime, Trujillo constantly felt he had to prove himself as an acceptable member of the higher Dominican classes during his dictatorship. Citing his rather scandalous 'possession' of Lina Lovatón as signifying his newfound "social acceptance" among prominent members of society (1118), Derby notes that Trujillo succeeded in conquering this caste by taking their women for his mistresses, playing the role of the quintessential macho.

How does being macho affect the family structure, marriage, and fatherhood? Derby records the "mythic dimensions" of Trujillo's masculinity: "exemplary father, husband [. . .] and above all lover" (1117), all of which have to do with elements of family life. Providing in Latino culture a basic sense of gender identity and cultural heritage, machismo has both positive and negative connotations in American culture. Notably, the majority of these connotations have to do with sexuality, and by extension, family. Many books on the topic contain stories of Latino men recounting their journey to manhood in relation to their sexuality. For instance, Matthew Guttman defines a macho man as one who has "got kids all over" (221). Denotatively, macho generally indicates being male, but connotatively, macho or machismo (the attitude of being macho), typically evokes notions of male chauvinism, sexual prowess, and belligerence. In *Hombres y Machos*, however, Alfredo Mirandé holds that a man may be macho, but not necessarily express negative connotations of machismo by being machista, which he defines as "sexist" (143). According to Ray González, macho is "the catchword for Latino adult manhood" (xiii), such that "to be macho is to be male" (Anaya 59). Nevertheless, machismo generally bears a connotation of male dominance.

For example, in *The Latino Male*, David Abalos describes that in his hometown, a male proves his manhood through having the “ability to penetrate a woman” (11)—enjoying “sexuality as pleasure *from* women not *with* women” (10, emphasis in original)—and through controlling his family as “a provider, protector, and impregnator” (28). Definitions of macho and machismo in relation to Trujillo’s behavior are fundamental to this literary argument concerning the bourgeois family structure because that structure is based on a gender hierarchy, which similarly privileges men over women. Additionally, these definitions and connotations are useful for understanding the basic structure of gender relations in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo’s regime, when Alvarez’s novel is set. Trujillo’s regime as it is portrayed in Alvarez’s novel becomes important as a high profile signifier of hierarchical gender relations, which, this essay argues, are the object of Alvarez’s critique as she depicts families that successfully defy such male dominated gender relations.

Trujillo’s rhetorically potent image in Dominican culture and even the strength of his dictatorship rest on convincing the people that he possesses the strength and sexual prowess to be a macho man and thus an able ruler. To establish his power, Trujillo appallingly oppressed the Dominican people both politically, through his secret police forces, and economically, through enforced disenfranchisement. Detailed historical accounts of such tyranny are beyond the scope of this literary argument; however, it is important to note that a chief license for Trujillo to carry out such atrocities lies in both exercising and reinforcing his persona of domineering masculinity. Additionally, Trujillo maintained his macho aura by continually conquering and impregnating the most beautiful women in the land. According to Derby, Trujillo “legitimized himself through the *conquista* of women of superior status—a logic in which the



bigger the women, the bigger the man” (1117, italics in original). Trujillo treated women like commodities for trade and display (1125–26); for, in having beautiful women as icons for his regime, Trujillo both endowed it with a sense of elegance, and inflated his macho ethos as a lover by possessing them (1117). Alvarez demonstrates Trujillo’s attempted conquista of Minerva at the Discovery Day Dance to which Trujillo invites Minerva’s father, with a specific request “that *la señorita* Minerva Mirabal not fail to show” (90, italics in original). Although her father encourages her to cooperate with Trujillo at the party, Minerva postpones dancing with Trujillo by claiming a headache; soon however, Don Manuel de Moya, the ‘Secretary of state’ whose “real job is rounding up pretty girls for El Jefe to try out” finally whisks Minerva out onto the floor (Alvarez 94). When Don Manuel promptly hands her off to Trujillo, who “doesn’t wait for an answer, but pulls [her] to him” (98), Minerva begins her plea to attend law school, hoping to override her father’s refusal to allow her (which desire goes against her father’s wishes). Instantly dominating Minerva, Trujillo immediately commences speaking suggestively into her ear, and then, Minerva narrates: “He holds me out in his arms, his eyes moving over my body, exploring it rudely with his glances. ‘I am speaking of the national treasure in my arms,’ he says, smiling” (98). Trujillo continues in response to her petition for admittance to the university in the capital, “‘I could see our national treasure on a regular basis. Perhaps, I could conquer this jewel as El Conquistador conquered our island’” (99). Through these words, Alvarez emphasizes Trujillo’s objectification of Minerva as a ‘treasure,’ which he colonially claims for the ‘nation,’ and Alvarez’s references to Trujillo’s conquering Minerva exemplify Trujillo’s dominance simply because he is male and has authority in the country. Hence, a woman like Minerva feels compelled to submit to his whims in order to achieve her dreams of attending

law school: “I see now how easily it happens. You give in on little things, and soon you’re serving in his government, marching in his parades, sleeping in his bed” (99). However, refusing to be conquered, Minerva ends her painfully disgusting dance in Jefe’s arms by slapping his made up face in response to his explicitly suggestive words and vulgar actions (100). In the echo of this shocking slap rings Alvarez’s critique of male dominated hierarchy within society, particularly as it is reinforced by negatively macho paradigms.

Along with showing off a macho persona, it was essential for the vitality of Trujillo’s regime that he be seen as the patriarchal leader of his country—even the father figure of the Dominican Republic—because that position automatically granted him power to make and enforce rules. Derby writes that Trujillo’s World’s Fair in 1955 “presented a family model of state authority in which obedience to the patriarchal father was naturalized” (1125). Male dominance in a country or in a family, such that the ‘father’ of either is the most powerful person, represents that gender-based power hierarchy to which the bourgeois family structure adheres. Trujillo’s stance as the father and supreme personage of the country vis-à-vis women implies a hierarchy that fundamentally disempowers and denigrates women. Such a structure is reminiscent of the Victorian bourgeois notion of separate spheres, which seats the husband superior to his wife because he possesses the money, the education, and the social status to rule the family. In her novel, Alvarez depicts such patriarchal power structures evident in the Mirabal household—as in the nation—by writing Enrique Mirabal as the authoritarian father and “trujillista” (179), or ‘mini Trujillo,’ of the family.

### **Machismo and the Bourgeois Family Model**

Marxist author Michele Barrett defines patriarchy as “a particular form of household organization in which the father dominate[s] other members of an extended kinship network and control[s] the economic production of the household” (10). Certainly this definition applies to Enrique Mirabal’s household, as he dominates his daughters and wife, by dictating their work at home and in the family store, as well as their ability to attend school. When his marriage and family life grow strained through quarreling with his wife, and resisting Minerva’s challenges to his authority, Enrique resorts to enforcing his dominance of the family in ways he gruffly terms “cosas de los hombres” (Alvarez 92). Those “cosas” involve routinely asserting himself as the head of the household, and creating an illicit household over which to preside as well. Alvarez clearly depicts the Mirabal family as structured according to Victorian separate spheres philosophy: Enrique works in the store or in the fields during the day and shadows his mistress at night, while his wife stays at home caring for the children. However, when Enrique is at home, he enforces his authority as the father by refusing to allow his daughters to attend school or parties without his express permission.

The University of Toronto’s “Cultural Profiles Project” reports, “Dominicans adhere to very traditional gender roles. Men and boys are expected to demonstrate *machismo*, or maleness [. . .] It is socially acceptable for a man to have relationships with a succession of women or even several women at the same time” (paragraph 4, italics in original). Readers learn through Minerva’s eyes of Enrique’s affair with a woman who lives on the edge of the Mirabal farm property. Ostensibly making rounds each night to gather information from his farmers, Enrique has instead been visiting this unnamed woman, who has given

birth to another four of his daughters. Significantly connecting common Dominican citizens' macho behavior and Trujillo's macho behavior, Alvarez implies that Enrique's routine of conquering and impregnating this woman reminds Minerva of the Dictator's sexually promiscuous behavior; consequently, Minerva derisively labels her father a "trujillista" (179). The machismo-buttrressing practice of Dominican men possessing wives as well as women in 'casas chicas' could be construed as evidence of Trujillo's inserting himself into Dominican family life (Alvarez 311)—creating "family triangles" (Derby 1115) that reinforce the destructive ideology of patriarchal gender hierarchy. Emphasizing Enrique's need to preserve his patriarchal authority, Alvarez depicts his confrontation with Minerva after she encounters him during one of his visits to his mistress. When Enrique returns home, he furiously knocks on Minerva's bedroom door and demands that she meet him outside. Alvarez emphasizes Enrique's exertion of male dominance, writing, "His voice through the door was commanding" (89). Standing opposite to Enrique that night, Minerva's presence defies his infidelity to her mother, and Minerva narrates the violent fury he displays at having his dictatorial 'masculine prowess'<sup>14</sup> challenged: "There was no warning it was coming. His hand slammed into the side of my face as it never had before on any part of my body [. . .] 'That's to remind you that you owe your father some respect!'" (89). Alvarez's depiction of this incident provides a basis for her critique of gender hierarchy in families and in marriages, as it forces the reader to consider why Enrique, as the patriarchal father, inherently owned the prerogative to violently abuse Minerva merely because she was a female, his daughter, and an obstacle in his way. Through this incident, Alvarez shows the disintegration of inherent patriarchal authority in

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<sup>14</sup> Derby employs the phrase "masculine prowess" as another term for "machismo" (1116).

Minerva's eyes as she realizes that her verbal denial of respect, in a voice "as sure and commanding as his," literally strips him of that authority: "I saw his shoulders droop. I heard him sigh. Right then and there, it hit me harder than his slap: I was much stronger than Papá, [sic] Mamá was much stronger. He was the weakest one of all. It was he who would have the hardest time living with the shabby choices he's made" (89). Here Alvarez shows how Enrique's need to enforce his authority socially alienates him from his family. Voiced in Minerva's eye opening recognition, this passage expresses Alvarez's commentary on the frailty of a male dominated social system. Because the scene in which Minerva slaps Trujillo directly follows her confrontation with her father as described above, the text order implies that Minerva's disillusionment with the results of patriarchal hierarchy, as evident in her father's behavior, allows her to literally return her father's slap on the leader of the society as he attempts to sexually enforce his dominance over her.

Alvarez's depiction of Enrique's virtually absent relationship with his wife also prompts the reader to question the vitality of the bourgeois family arrangement itself. For instance, Enrique never confers with his wife about decisions that affect their family; he and she are utterly unconnected until after his arrest and physical demise. Such a marriage does not foster much meaningful interaction between the partners: it socially alienates men by encouraging them to seek sexual and emotional fulfillment outside the marriage, and laces women into effective "concubinage [. . .] and a rigid set of unattainable gender-role expectations" (Derby 1115). Traditional female gender roles as sponsored by this arrangement are unattainable for most women because they are contradictory, advocating an "honor/shame morality:" women are to be virginal and pure, always desiring good, yet they are also to be sexually submissive to domineering

men like Trujillo or Enrique (1120). Through examining each of the four Mirabal sisters' marriages, Alvarez's critique of hierarchical gender roles in that arrangement becomes apparent.

Of the four Mirabal sisters, Dedé's marriage most closely imitates her parents' in that her cousin/husband Jaimito entirely dominates her. Personifying Barrett's definition of patriarchy (as mentioned previously), Jaimito controls Dedé's associations, her political beliefs, her interactions with her family, her childbearing, and her association with her children. He also controls their economic endeavors as he decides to open a restaurant and then an ice cream business, both of which fail wretchedly. Jaimito embodies the macho attitude from Dedé's viewpoint as he "brands" each of his boys with his name for their first names (Alvarez 124). When her three revolutionary sisters approach her to seek her help in hiding contraband weapons in Jaimito's fields, Dedé feels compelled to act only with permission, and observes that she doesn't have the "kind of marriage" that will allow her to think for herself (176–77). Alvarez emphasizes in this instance Dedé's contradictory roles as a woman in that she must submit to her husband, but that she also feels a desire to assist her sisters as they work to overthrow Trujillo's domineering regime, and by implication, the male-dominated family structure it signifies. Although Dedé considers joining the revolution, she lacks the courage to join her sisters because Jaimito threatens to leave her, and she feels finally unable to stand alone. Interestingly, however, as her family members begin disappearing, Jaimito consents to assist the Mirabal sisters—not as revolutionaries, but as family. It is at that point that Dedé senses that "the power was shifting in their marriage" toward a partnership more than a hierarchy (194).

## **Revolutionary Families Revolutionize Family Structure**

Just as Dedé's marriage gained vaguely more equal footing between the sexes when she and Jaimito began assisting the revolutionary Mirabal sisters, Alvarez's text implies that the families involved in the uprising against Trujillo not only attempted to rebel against his government, but also against his hierarchical views of family. Revolutionary families like Minerva and Manolo, María Teresa and Leandro, and eventually Patria and Pedrito reform the patriarchy-based bourgeois family structure into one of equality and partnership by radically redrawing the traditionally paradoxical women's roles to include not only domestic family life, but also political power and social consciousness.

Minerva and María Teresa defy traditional women's roles as defined by the bourgeois family arrangement and Cult of True Womanhood, which limit women's behavior to "purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Cronin 13) by leaving their home to seek education, and by refusing to submit to Trujillo's dictatorship or family structure. Following Victorian tradition (as that was the time when the bourgeois family structure reached its height of popularity), women were ideally to remain in the home, without formal education or outside work. They were to be pious and pure angels of the hearth, domestically raising their children and submissively serving their husbands. Having lived in America since the age of ten, Alvarez would have been familiar with these traditional roles of womanhood because of the prevailing bourgeois family structure in America. Alvarez demonstrates her awareness of traditional women's roles, as reinforced by Trujillo's machismo, by depicting protagonists who depart from those roles.

Testing tradition, Minerva continually plagues her father with requests to attend law school, challenging both traditional women's roles and the reigning

patriarchy of the Mirabal home. She also refuses to submit to Trujillo's illicit advances—contrary to what would have been expected of any woman in the country at the time—and, consequently, she is not given a license to use her law degree upon graduation. Such denial of a practicing license is Trujillo's attempt to force Minerva into submission by not permitting her to use her degree. Further spurning Trujillo's government and larger social formations of the bourgeois family, Minerva marries Manolo, a committed revolutionary, and joins the underground opposition to the dictatorship. Alvarez depicts Minerva and Manolo working together to overthrow the government by transporting and hiding weapons, transmitting messages to other revolutionaries, and building bombs to assist the invasion. In their marriage they share code names and coded language as they work toward a common goal. Shortly after the birth of their first child, readers learn that Manolo has indulged into the stereotypical macho role by pursuing a mistress. Alvarez does not excuse Manolo from this transgression and she makes clear from Minerva's "wracking sob[s]" (139), and the trauma it causes to their marriage, that it is not a minor fault. She does imply, however, three essential differences in Manolo's infidelity that separate him from Enrique's category of "trujillista." First, Manolo's extramarital relationship does not linger like Enrique's—he does not support a "casa chica" family separate from Minerva. Second, Manolo's transgression does not remain a secret, to the two are able to reconcile it, whereas Enrique never confesses to his wife and daughters that he is the father of another family, refusing to recognize them formally, although his family is aware of their existence. Third, Manolo moves beyond the affair, unshackling himself from such negative macho behavior, where Enrique remains locked in his affairs. Following Manolo's illicit liaison, he



and Minerva reconcile, care for their children, and advance as a team in the anti-Trujillo revolution.

Following Minerva's example, María Teresa also earns a college degree, and participates in the revolution with her husband Leandro, whom she meets at Minerva's home, and who introduces her to the revolutionary underground. María Teresa balances political activity with domesticity—a combination that requires more strength than submissiveness. She chiefly demonstrates her strength when she is in prison for political uprising with Minerva and longing for her daughter Jacqueline. Alvarez writes María Teresa's reflections about whether her husband is still alive, and she spends her days "daydreaming about my Jacqui—wondering is she was walking yet, if she was still getting the rash between her little fingers" (233). Yet, Alvarez also demonstrates María Teresa's strength in prison. There, she uses her long, thick hair to carry messages from outside to the inmates, and she refuses to allow herself to be broken by the prison guards' torture (254). Much like Minerva and Manolo's marriage, María Teresa and Leandro work together to create a family and a vernacular uprising against Trujillo.

Unlike Minerva and María Teresa, Patria begins her marriage along the same track that Dedé later follows. At the young age of sixteen, Patria marries a traditional Dominican man, Pedrito, who takes great pride in his lands and house as longtime family possessions. From her early school days, Patria had dreamed of becoming a nun; instead, she married quite young, and appeared to gladly embrace the values of true womanhood, particularly that of piety. Likely the deciding factor in her choosing to marry Pedrito was that she saw her "earthly groom" as "the next best thing to Jesus" (48). Patria embodies submissiveness, as she is content to fulfill Pedrito's two "hungers" when he

comes home for lunch (51), and domesticity as she bears many children and constantly cares for them. Years later, after surviving a terrifying bombing at a mountain retreat where she watched a young boy about the age of her oldest son die (162), Patria joins the revolution with her sisters and, therefore, begins to seek more partnership in her marriage. Initially, Pedrito refuses to allow the Mirabal sisters to have meetings in his home because his lands might be confiscated by the secret police, but Patria invites them into their house. As Patria leaves submissiveness behind, Pedrito finally sees the strength of her resolve and consents to assist the Mirabal sisters in their work to overthrow the government. When Patria joins the underground movement, her marriage relationship evolves from one where the husband has complete and unswerving authority to one where they compromise. From that point, their marriage becomes one of teamwork as together they bury weaponry in the family fields and organize a chapter of revolutionaries, holding meetings and even building bombs in their ancient home.

Alvarez's text makes plain that the three revolutionary Mirabal sisters did not defy traditional women's roles in terms of marriage, motherhood, or marital happiness. Each of them married, rejoiced in their relationships with their husbands, and enjoyed caring for their children. They were committed to their families. When their husbands were incarcerated, they curled their hair and visited them weekly to keep their spirits up, claiming that they "can't desert the men," even though they knew their visits were perilous (282). However, Alvarez critiques the bourgeois family arrangement by showing that Minerva, María Teresa, and Patria transcend the gender hierarchy preached by that structure, by participating equally with their husbands in revolutionary activities. Although she writes that a dictator is "pantheistic," and tries "to insert a little piece of

himself in every one of [his subjects]" (311), Alvarez shows her female characters gaining social and spiritual power from surmounting the male dominance and equalizing in marriage the gender hierarchy that Trujillo models. Whereas Derby implies that Trujillo 'displayed' women as commodities or objects (1117, 1125–26), Alvarez illustrates how Manolo, Leandro, and finally Pedrito treat their wives as comrades. By freely participating with their wives and children as partners and friends, these husbands and fathers in Alvarez's text are socially integrated into their families, rather than socially alienated through to enforcing a gender hierarchy in order to preserve their positions in their homes. On one level, then, rebelling against Trujillo means opposing his political regime, which these families certainly did. However, on a deeper, more personal level, Alvarez shows that rebelling against Trujillo means reforming marital and family relations on the basis of gender equality instead of gender hierarchy. In her text, Alvarez does not necessarily voice judgment about which sort of marriage is better, seeing as maintaining a traditional marriage allowed Dedé to survive while revolutionary marriage led to the other sisters' deaths. However, in depicting the equal participation and happiness evident in Minerva, María Teresa, and Patria's marriages—as foiled by the absence of equality and joy in Enrique's and Dedé's marriages—Alvarez critiques the gender hierarchy evident in traditional bourgeois gender roles and marriage.

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## Literary Journalism as Memorable, Reality Literature

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When the Clinton Administration deployed American troops to the East African nation of Somalia in 1997, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* dispatched reporter Mark Bowden<sup>1</sup> to cover the military conflict. His acclaimed newspaper articles, including the reporting of the dramatic raid on the Somalian capital of Mogadishu, were published concurrently on the newspaper's philly.com website, and later became a Penguin Books bestseller, *Blackhawk Down*.<sup>2</sup> Bowden's story of America's military blunder also was turned into an Emmy Award-winning CNN network documentary and a blockbuster movie by the same title.

The success of Bowden's work could be attributed to the literary technique he employed. Instead of using only the traditional, straightforward techniques of news writing, Bowden borrowed storytelling and other literary techniques of fiction writers to provide in-depth coverage of the Battle of Mogadishu which claimed the lives of 18 American soldiers and left 73 others wounded. The Somalian toll was estimated at 500 dead and more than 1,000 injured.

Once dubbed "the new journalism," Literary Journalism is not really new. Its practitioners have included Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Ernest Hemmingway (1899-1961). Other well known literary journalists include John Steinbeck, Lillian Ross, A.J. Liebling, Norman Miller, Truman

Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion. Because of the success of *Blackhawk Down*, Bowden is probably the best-known 21<sup>st</sup> century literary journalist in the country.

At a time when reality TV shows have captivated Americans, the works of Bowden and other famous literary journalists have reignited not only interest in literary journalism but have sparked debate among journalists and creative writers about whether literary journalism is journalism or “reality” literature.

This paper specifically addresses these questions:

- Is literary journalism a unique genre, a hybrid form or a specific style of writing?
- Should literary journalism be recognized in academia and offered as a legitimate curriculum?

To begin, it might be helpful to establish a working definition of literary journalism. Author Ronald Weber in *The Literature of Fact* defines literary journalism as “nonfiction with a literary purpose.”<sup>4</sup> Ben Yagoda in *Art of Fact*, describes this form of writing as “journalism that is thoughtfully, artfully, and valuably innovative.”<sup>5</sup> Writing in *American Journalism Review*, Chris Harvey describes it as “creative reportage.”<sup>6</sup> And Seymour Krim defines it as journalism that is artistic and literary.<sup>7</sup> In essence, literary journalism can be defined as non-fiction writing that combines the reportorial skills of journalism with the form, style, and narrative construction usually associated with fiction. Today, literary journalism is published in *Harpers*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Magazine*, *Atlantic*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Village Voice*, *Monthly*, *Esquire* and other news and literary magazines, Sunday editions of newspapers, and even books. Often, it overlaps other genres: memoirs, reports, historical and personal essays.

Often described as “New Journalism,” Creative Non-fiction, “Intimate Journalism,” or “Literary Non-Fiction,” the concept is distinct from traditional

journalism, which is characterized by objectivity and attribution in a historic form of writing known as the inverted pyramid. Cindy Royal vividly makes this distinction between literary journalism and fiction writing: “What the literary journalist tries to do is to convey a deeper truth than the mere presentation of facts can accomplish. Fiction writers can enjoy the license to create, to make things fit, to apply just the appropriate symbol to convey meaning. Literary journalists must work within the boundaries of dialogue and scenarios that they have either witnessed or that have been conveyed to them by witnesses or documentation of such events.”<sup>8</sup>

In the seminal work published in 1973, *New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe offers not only a definition of literary journalism, but an argument about the uniqueness characteristics and the appropriateness of what he calls “narrative journalism.” Wolfe credits talented feature writers like Gay Talese, Jimmy Breslin, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson for the popularity of Literary Journalism. Other journalism historians have credited Matthew Arnold for coining the term new journalism in 1887 to describe brash, advocacy type of journalism practiced by W.T. Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.<sup>9</sup> His writing was brash and reform-minded and much journalism of that time had a tone of advocacy. Others have argued that literary journalism was practiced as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the case of Daniel Defoe.

Mark Bowden’s *Blackhawk Down* unquestionably justifies Wolfe’s assessment that through literary journalism, “it is possible to write journalism that would ... read like a novel.” Using interviews with more than 50 American troops, and dozens of Somalis soldiers and citizens, Bowden vividly describes the battle and includes a multitude of powerful eyewitness accounts to make an interesting and compelling narrative and riveting reading.

Based on the research literature and the contributions of writers from Stead to Bowden, it is evident that literary journalism is not really new but a unique genre of writing. Like most genres, literary journalism offers a distinct strategy for dealing with a specific style of writing. In a 1974 research article, James E. Murphy identified three characteristics of literary journalism: dramatic literary techniques, subjectivity, and immersion.<sup>10</sup>

According to Tom Wolfe, the first characteristic consists of four literary techniques: scene by scene construction, use of extended dialogue, third-person narrative, and the usage of symbols of status to convey meaning.<sup>11</sup> Using dialogue provides realism and lends authenticity to the story. Including in the story what people say and presenting their dialogue as if they were actors in the news event adds credibility to the article. Equally important is the scene-by-scene construction that sequentially advances the chronological narrative. This approach is even more remarkably effective in reconstructing major events such as the conflict in Somalia.

Another technique of literary journalism relates to the use of voice in the narrative. Historically, journalists commonly have used the third person in news articles. The technique is also conducive to literary journalism. While some veteran journalists have no difficulty writing first- and second-person narratives, those two types can convey different meaning and symbolism in literary journalism. Sometimes, the use of both first and second persons in narratives may facilitate editorial bias in the narrative. As a result, Wolfe and others strongly express preference for the third-person narrative.

The fourth technique requires providing symbolic details to the narrative. By doing so, the writer is able to convey greater meaning to the story. This technique requires description that depends on sharp and careful observation.



Success with providing symbolic details lies in the ability of the literary journalist to refrain from injecting his personal opinion in the narrative. Journalists can use this technique to vividly describe conditions in a war-torn nation such as Afghanistan or the Ivory Coast and the interactions of starving people in Ethiopia. It could also be used to report the Martha Stewart stock fraud trial or the Roman Catholic priest sex scandal. While it is almost impossible to be objective, literary journalists need to be cognizant of the fact that overt or blatant subjectivity detracts from the quality of the narrative and undermines credibility.

The effective use of the foregoing techniques has drawn criticisms from some journalists as well as fiction writers about the appropriateness of literary journalism. Some writers argue that literary journalism does not constitute a unique genre, because it reflects various writing styles. In an article published in *Columbia Journalism Review* Jack Newfield argues that the new journalism “is a false idea. There is only good writing and bad writing, smart ideas and dumb ideas, hard work and laziness.”<sup>12</sup> One major criticism has to do with the use of dialogue in literary journalism. Although the technique provides realism to the story, critics suggest that some writers depend on recreations rather than genuine recollection or reflections of an actual dialogue.

Another debate has to do with its attention to details and presentation of facts. A few literary journalists have been accused of fabrication or creating subjects in their stories. In 1976, *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke won the Pulitzer Prize, journalism’s highest award, for a story about non-existent juvenile drug addict. The award was subsequently withdrawn and Ms. Cooke was banished forever from journalism. In legitimate cases, writers may be able to recreate extended dialogue or to recount situations, but outright fabrication cannot be tolerated.

Despite these criticisms, literary journalism has attracted renewed interest among newspapers across the country. A 1993 study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors concluded: “when stacked up against other types of newspaper stories, including the traditional inverted pyramid, the narrative was generally better read and better at communicating information.”<sup>13</sup> For decades, in many newsrooms across America, editors and publishers resisted publishing pieces of literary journalism. The argument was that the writing resembled essay or literature that was too close to fiction. Then came the movement toward advocacy journalism, participatory journalism, and other types of feature or in-depth reporting designed to attract youthful readers. Today, many more daily newspapers have embraced literary journalism although the articles are relegated to Sunday editions or special supplements. Chris Harvey also acknowledges competition among the mass media for readers /viewers may have convinced editors and publishers to consider alternative approaches to newspaper writing.<sup>14</sup>

As a veteran journalist who has had the opportunity to teach English composition, literature, and journalism courses at several universities, I am cognizant of the appropriateness of literary journalism. Most English departments offer not only composition and literature courses, but creative writing which supports non-fiction writing. Literary journalism within the English department, especially one that offers courses in creative writing and journalism, would be a great complement to the major curriculum. Literary journalism should be recognized in academia and offered as a legitimate part of the curriculum. However, there are some questions that are still difficult to address and maybe that’s because further discussion is warranted. The questions are:

- Where should literary journalism be housed: English or Journalism?
- Who should be responsible for teaching literary journalism: journalism practitioners or English professors?

As the field evolves, the debate will continue.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bowden was a Philadelphia Inquirer staffer for 18 years at the time of the publication. He is author of two other books, *Doctor Dealer* (Warner, 1987) and *Bringing the Heat* (Knopf, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>The Philadelphia Inquirer's nonfiction series began on Nov. 16, 1997 and is available at <http://inquirer.philly.com/packages/Somalia/sitemap/asp>

<sup>3</sup>Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, Harper and Row, New York, 1973, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Ronald Weber, *The Literature of Fact*, Ohio UP, Athens, OH, 1980, p. 163.

<sup>5</sup>Kevin Kerrance, "Making Facts Dance," *The Art of Fact*, Touchstone, New York, 1997, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>Chris Harvey, "Tom Wolfe's Revenge: The Renewed Interest in Literary Journalism," *American Journalism Review*, October 1994, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup>Seymour Krim, "The Newspaper as Literature/Literature as Leadership," in *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy*, ed. by Ronald Weber, Hastings House, NY, 1974, p. 183.

<sup>8</sup>Cindy Royal, "The Future of Literary Journalism on the Internet," unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin, April, 2000.

<sup>9</sup>Kerrance, "Making Facts Dance," *The Art of Fact*, Touchstone, New York, 1997, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>James E. Murphy, "The New Journalism: A Critical Perspective," *Association for Educators in Journalism*, 1974, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>12</sup>Jack Newfield, "Journalism: Old, New and Corporate," in *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy*, ed. by Ronald Weber, Hastings House, NY, 1974, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup>Harvey, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup>Harvey, *ibid.*

## **On Becoming a Renaissance Geek: Designing a Senior Seminar in Travel and Exploration Writing as an Arts and Sciences Sendoff for English Majors**

S. Dev Hathaway

For years I've been a devotee of travel and exploration writing, often immersing myself in books like David Quammen's *The Song of the Dodo* or Charles Nicholl's *The Creature in the Map*—even more than in whatever collection of short fiction has my eye at the moment (short story writing is my first passion and longtime specialty). When I ventured into writing a book of non-fiction pieces in '99-2000, I found myself doing on the local level the thing I was often drawn to in those larger travel and exploration accounts—going on and reporting on offbeat excursions. In my case the excursions merely ranged from trekking to the nearby duck pond, where I concluded the crossing sign needed a duck following the stick-figure pedestrian, and so provided one in black enamel, to hunting for the illusive perfect rock in a mountain stream and comparing my lack of luck to the same encountered that week by the Mars Mission Rover. Besides cultivating the oddball slant, I grew more and more enamored of the excursion mode *per se* and of the reading, research, and write-up that gave final form to my little jaunts. When the book was done, I decided to dedicate it to my kids: it was, as I saw it now, basic modeling of the modus operandi of the educated person: go forth, go beyond, seek, connect, and shape.

As an outcome of this process, I proposed teaching the Non-fictional Prose offering of our English Major senior seminar, in Travel and Exploration Writing. My subtitle was "On Becoming a Renaissance Geek." The course description I outlined in my proposal followed through on some of the same elements that had evolved in my reading and in writing: a course that would model and indoctrinate students in the excursion mode as the epitome of self-directed

education. “Indoctrinate...in the excursion mode” sounds like a rather prescriptive regimen, but I meant *indoctrinate* in the sense that I envisioned schooling the students in the demands of independent learning—of venturing beyond the usual assignment paradigm and seeking connections outside the typical categorical confines of a course of study—and *excursion* as metaphorical as much as literal. When I met the class for the first day, I said that the manner in which I would expect them to approach our readings and to take on their course project and paper would require considerable initiative, not unlike the sort taken by the explorers they would be studying. No sterling initiative, I said—to go forth, go beyond, seek, connect, and shape—no sterling grade. I even stated that my aim was to inculcate the habits of that old Liberal Arts nugget, lifelong learning. Such grand goal-making. I meant every bit of it.

*The Demands of Independent Learning.*

In their minds, they likely pictured some choose-your-own-thing approach that would open the way to free reign, touchy-feely topics, and God knows what other easy licenses; and that they’d be smiling to themselves at having lucked out of the theoretical rigors of Professor X’s Contemporary Poetry seminar or the lengthy research requirements of Professor Y’s Restoration Drama.

*Outside Typical Categorical Confines.*

When I explained that in many ways I saw this as a Liberal Arts capstone course that would entail their connecting diverse disciplines, perhaps they thought I meant just a little Gen Ed redux. Maybe “On Becoming a Renaissance Geek” had a too catchy and lightweight ring to it. Maybe the term “Project Log,” which was how I labeled the search and research enterprise that would lead to their seminar paper, sounded mostly like a diary with a little assignment factor on the side.

What *I* had in mind was a course in which the hefty reading would quickly shift from the old prof-provides-directed-study-questions pony to their leading the charge in adventuring into the various conceptual, stylistic, and discipline elements evidenced in the texts, and that they would do ongoing spot research and make associative connections on their own in preparation for seminar discussions. They also each had an outside reading project to report on, in which they would be expected to push well beyond the obvious bio, blurb, and breakdown review of their book—if they desired a report grade better than a C. Follow some provocative tangents, I enjoined them, surprise us with your presentation, show us something. (To date, the presentation grades run 1 C, 5 Bs, and 2 As.)

*The Project, or Project Log, which in good time would lead to...The Paper.* Here's how the course description put it:

PROJECT LOG: Your project log will be an informal record of your own initiative to follow engaging leads of whatever sort that may take you to topics of interest—*your* interest. “Leads” can be of any kind—further reading in an author read or reported on in class; a Google search on a related or spin-off topic; an on-foot or motorized tour of SU/Central PA environs, or one much farther a-field; a History Channel special; an interview you conduct; a stakeout you go on to spy on...spiders weaving their four kinds of webs—or whatever. The important thing is to start your log early in the semester and make a point to find material for entries often—to be on the hunt as a matter of habit (i.e., the excursion mode).... Verbal guidance for this requirement has emphasized my insistence on learning, by steady practice, to root around, to read around. One day I spread out a pile of *New Yorkers* and said take one and tell us next time what you found of interest; if



nothing, take another issue. Another time it was *Smithsonians*; another, *New York Times Magazines*. As we read Ian Frazier's *Great Plains*, our first book, we noted how continually he nosed about, followed leads, picked up hitch-hikers, did research, made associative leaps, created opportunities for serendipity. Serendipity was a theme I emphasized, and we noted how in our next book, *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson was forever stumbling onto interesting bits of lore, odd observations, unusual sources. We discussed how persistent he was in interviewing people, taking thorough and detailed notes, going to school on whatever specialty subject called for him to read up and report back—botany, history, economics, government policy, pop culture, geology, land use. And if he as a college-educated person could, why couldn't we? All this, I said, was good project log fodder.

To model that practice, I read, studied, and researched a recent *New Yorker* article on the Galileo space probe until I could do a ten-minute stand-up presentation on lay person's basic telemetry, software programming, planetary order and characteristics, the relevant moons of Jupiter, Io and Europa (and the derivations of their names from Greek mythology), as well as the pertinent facts, technological challenges, and timeline of the quarter-century history of the probe project (Benson 38-43). And if I could, why couldn't they? That article, I told them, and my study notes, were mine now to toss into my log—and who was to say if or how it might tie into other leads or become a key point in some constellation of interests as yet unrecognized? Maybe, I said, I'd find a new passion in space exploration. I confessed to having a thing for that little Mars Rover and those rocks that NASA had given cartoon character names, and let on that I'd been turning over the relevance of the *Star Trek* "Prime Directive" while re-reading *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (our next book) and contemplating the

dangers of an expansionist culture, re. outer space exploration, in *The Right Stuff* (our final book)—and that I might, indeed, be working on topic groove.

There's been a good deal of modeling of this sort during the first two months of the course, from not just my couple little demos but often in their weekly Project Log updates, outside reading reports, our book discussions, and accidental tangents. We took a September field trip that had the most general of itineraries, and found great relish in those things we stumbled onto—the Amish girl who was fascinated by our travel plan yet visibly abashed that we were journeying over the mountain and outside her ken; the audio cassette of *A Walk in the Woods* that we found on a used book shelf in a coffee house in Gettysburg, and so got to hear Bryson himself, on the van ride back over the mountain and by the Appalachian Trail, reading us most of the final section we were scheduled to discuss next class. No excursion, no surprises, I told them. Someone had also picked up an old paperback copy of Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*. Everyone sounded interested in the thumb-nail summary I gave them, so we got the film version and have watched fifteen-minute clips at the end of several class meetings and put Mowat high on our Geek list. No excursion, no payoff.

Their Project Log updates have been fascinating. Some of the students are into physical excursions, such as the student who hiked the campus stream far, far into the rural countryside, ducking under barb-wire fences, until the last wire she grabbed had no barbs, but plenty of electric kick—Please, please, I said, easy on the risks; and no law suits, no law suits!—and now “the electric fence” is our metaphor for that barrier one inevitably hits (as did Bryson on our local segment of the Trail) in any excursion. Others are into more virtual wanderings. One started with Native American names in *Great Plains*, which led her through a number of permutations, including finding by chance an article on Southwest

tribal cultures left by the printer in a computer lab and being subsequently put onto a student pen pal on a Navajo Reservation School in Arizona; whose grandfather, it turns out, was a Code Talker, a small group of whom still hold monthly meetings, as she's found out, emailing him; and so on and so on. Now she's going to read Frazier's *On the Rez*. A few students I've had to counsel against locking onto a closed topic too quickly, one that they're already directly and exclusively researching. Some I've had to remind that their paper may end up having somewhat disparate parts or taking the form of a crooked trail, and that the act of writing may well finish the connections of some larger picture or gestalt moments; that there may be some scary dead reckoning in the process, and that I'd rather them hazard that prospect, as have Frazier, Bryson, Lewis, Clark, and now Matthiessen (in *The Snow Leopard*). In fact, we've discussed how in each of the books so far the journey's unknowns have been part and parcel of the best encounters and discoveries—a truism, yes, but a necessary reminder about the possible track of their upcoming paper.

The Paper:

PROJECT PAPER:

Following from your hunt for matters of engaging interest, a focused writing project should emerge which allows you to gather and further your inquiry. Yes, this is a senior seminar research paper, with all its attendant requisites for selecting, integrating, and documenting appropriate sources (with MLA style) and demonstrating your now considerable ability as a college-level writer to produce a coherent, well organized, and thoroughly realized piece of writing, one conforming appropriately to the rules of grammar, punctuation, and usage. That said, any material from your log, as well as other pertinent sources you may

dig up while in the writing process, is fair game. Materials that don't fit into the paper proper but are germane to your project may be referenced within the text of your paper (e.g., See video cassette A) and, as suggested earlier, included in some suitable container or companion format, or in an appendix.

Further:

Your paper may be in any agreed-upon (by you and me) appropriate form or mode: a review, an argument, a narrative, a letter, a journal with dated entries, etc. (Creative formats—fiction, poetry, play script, screen play—are not to be used.)

And finally:

A related directive for the paper is that, while it is a full-fledged research project, it should be written in a voice and style that you determine is best suited for your subject and approach. We will be examining these elements in their many applications and variations in the works we read and report on, and will discuss this aspect of your paper individually in conference.

The books we have remaining—the last of The Snow Leopard, with the added element of spiritual searching which has some of the students very stirred; Redmond O'Hanlon's No Mercy: a Journey into the Heart of the Congo (along with a packet of sometimes harrowing emails from a twenty-two year-old U.N. relief worker who is in the Congo now); and Tom Wolfe's The Right Stuff, which will bring along the worrisome baggage of our ongoing discussions of “the wrong stuff”—these further works promise to keep engaging us.

Sometimes I worry, though, about the whole course project, with its somewhat extra-academic underpinning, for a senior seminar, with the premium I'm putting upon serendipity, associative learning, "gestalt moments," and similar sorts of "soft stuff." I'm waiting for the colleague who, for all appearances asks innocently enough, "So what exactly is it you're doing with the Travel Books course?" I think how I'd respond is to ask him or her to sit in. Were it this week's class, she, or he, would have witnessed a lengthy discussion of the last part of *The Snow Leopard* that ran from the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, to the yeti as the sentient animal ancestor of Buddha, to Christianity's doctrine of transubstantiation—plus an extra-credit report on *synesthesia*, as a medical condition. We ended up appropriating that term as a flier for picturing the magic the mind works when beholding incarnate spirituality. We got pretty deep there. Then, with ten minutes left, we watched our pal Farley Mowat show an Inuit Eskimo how to live like a wolf, on his diet of flame-broiled voles. Cogitating a moment, the Inuit declared through his interpreter: "Good idea."

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## A Message in a Bottle

Kit Kelen

'What! You dropped down from the sky?'

'Yes,' I answered, modestly.

'Oh! That is funny!'

– *The Little Prince*, Antoine de St Exupéry

The sky is a volume of infinite mercy. I place my faith in its vast depths and heights, its world spanning breadth. If I were an icon maker then, given the wherewithal, I'd fashion some version of it for my devotions. In my presence circumstances this is quite unnecessary. Of course I could as easily despise the vast void for having brought me to my current state. But that would be peevishness. Without an optimistic view of things I'd have gone under long ago. Devout or iconoclast, the sky hangs over me, it is all of my horizon. It's everywhere I look except for when I look at myself and even then it's there if I see beyond as I can't help but do. So you see it's different for me than it is for a city dweller, which is what I am or was or...

Let me explain. This is a survivor's tale, the story of someone saved. What saved me was – and here you'll understand the nature of my devotions – what saved me was a piece of cloth, a vast quilt's worth, a sky in itself you could say. It would be my icon I suppose but for the fact that the real thing is closer, but for the fact that time in its action of infinite wisdom has shredded the thing past use. This I admit is one of civilized time's few measures here, the rate of rot or something made, something other than me. I suppose I could call my shreds together a relic. I have no icon but nevertheless I have a holy souvenir to show

where I've been, how I came. I lack the mirror to gauge my own rate of rot, though I do get a glimpse, days when the waters are glassy.

What else is there of civilization? A certain amount remains in my head. And that's it for round here. That and what washes us. Detritus from which I mend my fortune. The pencil and paper were in my pocket. I preserved them falling, and later from the elements, when the quilt was still in service.

I could have put that quilt in the hold, but I have no faith in the holds of planes and I hate waiting around carousels for my things to arrive and once, on Continental, I had had all of my luggage soaked in fish water and got some pretty strange looks going home on the jetfoil with it. As to this particular piece of outsize carry-on, I knew I was going to be in a hurry at the other end, in L.A. That's a joke from where I sit now of course. Although I did go on being in a hurry for a surprisingly long time. Look where it got me. The main thing though was the preciousness of the cargo. That's why I wouldn't let it go.

So I made my vast sack carry on. I tried to be inconspicuous with it. The overcoat I was wearing because I'd need it at the other end, that and the jumpers underneath – the gear I'd worn in order to avoid having a second bag – all that incongruous bulk made me far from inconspicuous. I was sweating. I probably looked like a terrorist climbing aboard. The cabin crew gave me some strange looks climbing up the last steps from the tarmac to the plane. The sky marshals sneered but then one and the other dozed off again. They seemed like great ungainly bears. Where could they sit I wondered. Even business class seats would barely contain them.

There's a fortuity in awkward things, I now know. Blessed are those who feel mortification, something might just come in handy. Had I been asked – and I was prepared for this – I had the proud spiel about duty and honor and all that.



And tolerance and the right to life options in the twenty first century. I wonder if bears can follow all that? I didn't get to find out. Fortuity, fate, providence: there must have been a squadron of brave abstractions along with us that night.

Flying is a miracle, one too easily overlooked. It's a risk to depend too much on miracles in life. The religious among us will of course say there's not much choice in the matter, we only get to be here in God's grace, which is the world's most miraculous thing. There's a little too much social control tucked under that particular rug for my liking. I get hay fever every time I take a peak in there. There's the maleness of God for one thing.

The philosophers tell us that miracles are ongoing, the stuff of every instant, the breath of God that is the *sine qua non* of being. It's hard to argue with that stuff unless you're an existentialist or an accidentalist. As for me, I'd say my jury's still out. In fact it's been in continuous session for many moons now. I have time to work things through.

Miracles, unmiracles. Have a look at the map, a privilege I lack and you'll see what I'm up against, or what's around about me. I admit you'll probably need a very good map to have a fair guess at where I am. But I suppose there are maps that should show every mid-ocean rock in the world, every bit of the earth that stands up higher than high tide. Surely?

Mid-ocean, who knows? All I can say for a certainty is that I am one meal and one crossword and one nap of undisclosed duration vaguely east of Taipei... Maybe more than that. I'd had an extra drink and I'd been to the toilet once and it being an American plane there'd been all that guff on the wall about Authorities warning that smoking was a Federal offence and the FBI would be after you and I remember distinctly thinking to myself, prophetically as it seems now, 'we're not in Kansas anymore'. I went back to my seat and, instead of Toto,

within a few minutes I was gripping that pack full of quilt, hanging onto it for dear life. I'd put it on the seat next to me, but that, with everything else, was gone. The bag was in my lap and I wasn't letting go.

Where were we? Where am I? Guam rings a bell. That might be the closest place but I've never been there and I've never really been one to study maps just for the sake of it, memorizing provinces to prove it can be done, so I can say with some confidence that I have absolutely no idea where I am. If you have such a map – one with all the little rocks still poking out at high tide – please take a look around Guam and further afield if necessary. If not I urge you to get one or make one or just come out and look for yourself. The views are stunning. The sky is so big and the stars are so bright you could reach up...

We must have been past Guam though because it was almost day. Look a fair way east of Guam I'd say. But I really don't know. I have sometimes seen lights at night passing over the horizon. Of course I've seen planes but there's been no ship come close enough to wave at.

A little background in case this is helpful. We'd left Macao about eight at night, taken off from Taipei again at eleven or maybe it was midnight, but it was still many hours till dawn. Dawn saw me floating on the cushion from what had been my seat, floating until I saw the only rock you can see from here. Just me and the seat and my ridiculous overcoat and my sodden jumpers and the life vest and the first AIDS quilt to come from China, bound to join its cousins in San Francisco, bound it appears never to make the distance.

When you fall you fall for a long time. You have time to think. Now you might devote that time to having your life flash before your eyes. That could in some cases be quite a show and see you nicely through to the curtain call. Still, I'm told you can do that in a split second. In my case I felt the action had to all be

ahead of me. So I used the time to kill and the vast yards of cloth at my disposal and I put to use the rope which joined its four corners, the life vest to which I had tied all this while still in my seat mid-air. You'll say the seat was mid-air anyway, nothing remarkable in that. But I was still buckled in when I had parted ways with the rest of the aircraft. Just me and the seat and the oxygen mask, the heavy coat I still luckily had on. It was colder than I can explain with words. The few parts of me that were showing were a shade of blue I'd never seen before.

There hadn't been time to worry about removing sharp objects or getting into that big rubber slippery slide or following the fairy lights down the aisle to safety. But the mask had, on cue, fallen down in front of my face, and I had pressed forward into it, secured it behind. That was in another world, in the kind of past you associate with time as it was before a great cataclysm.

It was with the strange blue parts of my anatomy I worked to get the rope connected. It took ages during which I glimpsed in the corner of my eye the fall of other parts of the plane and other passenger anatomies. I seemed to be the only one still seated. Why was this happening?

How had it happened? All I'd heard in the plane's last moments were what I'd call kung fu sounds and a few low groans from the Cro Magnon men just our side of the cockpit. After that I guess it was with their guns the cabin door had been shot away and well, I can't know whether things went as planned or awry because I wasn't in a position to see or hear anything. My guess is that a shot took out the windscreen and pilot or co-pilot or both exited that way. And then, for reasons that remain unknown to me, the plane just fell apart.

The bullets were deafening then the sound of air leaking was deafening and then everything just wasn't there any more. I hadn't had much time to think about the cause of the explosions but I had no doubt that we were descending

rather too rapidly. Maybe planes just fall apart when that happens. If there were internet access on this rock I'd google and find out.

I was experiencing one of those things that couldn't be happening and when I opened my eyes again...it was hard to open them... so incredibly cold and the force of the wind was keeping them shut... have you ever tried driving a car with no windscreen? Multiply the speed and the wind velocity and the cold by ten or a hundred I don't know and then maybe you'll have the idea...

When I opened my eyes I could see it all. The sun was getting ready to rise and with my eyelids pinned back, even through the tears, I can say my view of the world has never been so wide before or since. There's something about freefall, the body poised between life and death, the body in unstoppable motion. Countries and culture don't matter anymore. It doesn't matter how you've got to this point. The funny thing is that in this moment of what you might think of as supreme transcendence, I'd never felt so human, so animal. I was a body falling, all body, just body. The mind was going along with all this.

When the last of my feeble knots was tied, the quilt ballooned up behind me, I was suddenly jerked upward and then it was as if time had ceased altogether. I could have written my memoirs on the way down from then. For a minute I wondered if one or both shoulders had been dislocated but, looking down at the vast dark expanse of ocean below me, that fear quickly gave way to relief at the thought that I wasn't going to die in the next minute, not unless there was a shark with its jaws ready open to catch me down there.

I suppose it was in quilt fall I'd really started pondering on that great beast I'd taken for granted till now. That cool headed thought train commenced up above you can probably place in this phase of existence. Or that's where it started. The pterodactyl? Just frail tin really. Tin plus fossil fuel stirred up with

miracle. You pay your fare and you just expect it all to go. Something like a miniature of the world economy. It's not as if there's anyone who understands how it all works. It all goes by miracles of course.

What happened in the un-miraculous moment? The moment that ended life for many and stood mine still till now? Probably among my many readers (ah, such is fame – it's all or nothing!) are those who know the answer. I'm assuming you see that if these words have fallen into any hands that in the end they will probably reach the appropriate authorities (I don't mean the people in Kansas who make the smoke detector threats) and I assume that the appropriate authorities may have in their possession the black box. You see, I've been thinking, with the bits and pieces at my disposal. They're not much but all the time in the world seems to have washed up with me here.

The black box. It's not me. But I guess there really is such a thing. Ah, had I only had hold of that black box, had I miraculously caught it falling, then I most likely would have been found. I wonder if it's really black.

As it is, it's likely I cast no light on a mystery long since solved, perhaps never a mystery at all, just a tragedy long forgotten save by those inconsolable mourners with whom the media are never concerned.

But where was I? Yes, a long time falling. Somewhere below the threshold of clouds not there. The sun's rim over the world's now. The brilliant dazzle of a windless sea. It was so dreamlike to begin with – the quilt fall – I felt almost certain I would wake in the end, that there would be hands to catch me... I didn't see any black boxes (I don't even know what one looks like) but I saw plenty of other stuff falling. The sky marshals for instance. One seemed to be crouching on a piece of the wing. It took me a while to work out what he was up to and then I

realized that he was surfing or he fancied he was. he was riding that wing all the way down, like the crazed bombardier in *Doctor Strangelove*. At least it was only his own demise he was seeing to. I saw the other marshal too – the one who still had his gun – he was off in the distance firing at someone but I couldn't see whom. The only other funny thing was something I heard, didn't see. A mobile phone ringing. How could there be any coverage here?

I was like Dorothy Gale caught up in that whirlwind between Kansas and the wonderful colorful world of Oz, like Alice falling through that endless rabbit hole. But pretty soon I had to give up on the idea of witches or munchkins. No jaws open at sea level but there was debris to dodge and it's a pretty decent thud when you arrive there with only a blanket having broken your fall. You go a long way under and, having never done this kind of thing before, you might not have as much air in your lungs as you'd like. The sea was pleasantly warm I remember. That could have been it. Once again. You know that's the thing with near death experiences, they tend to come in battalions rather than ones and twos. Ask anyone who's been in a war. You see there was time to think down there too.

I came up gasping, secured myself on a no longer smoking section of the passing slab of the plane's hull. I made for the rock, the only rock I'd sighted in the last seconds of my descent. I paddled with hands first and then with stuff I found on the way. All kinds of stuff. Toilet seats are less than ideal. A section of overhead locker can be a little unwieldy. But a tray table broken off from the seat at just the right angle – now there is a paddle! Once I could maneuver, I began gathering things I thought might be useful. Thinking only of one night's rest ahead, I gathered as many seat cushions as I could on the way. The scavenging has gone on since.

So I got here. I got to the rock. And then I waited. How has it been down here in the other lifetime since I fell? I'm sure you want to know. At first I thought I'd be something like that pilot in *The Little Prince*... a different kind of desert admittedly, but many of the same issues to deal with. After a week I suppose I had as much airplane gathered around me as he'd had. I didn't have much hope of flying with a bit of wing and a few broken meal trays though.

Something mystical had to happen. It didn't. You'd think there'd be some kind of spirit in a place as forlorn, as desolate. Friendly, malevolent, whatever. After just a day or two I'd have been happy to have had someone to argue with. God of the isle, wind spirit, something primeval from under the waves. No takers, there are no ghosts mid-ocean, which is most of the world when you think about it. Most of the world's surface is not human space. When you're stuck on one rock mid-ocean you're rather aware of land's world minority status. Perhaps that's the greatest hope for the world's ongoing survival. But one mustn't moralize, especially not when there's no one to benefit by the precepts imparted... but for you, my reader, my rescuer. I hope you're getting busy with your preparations now. I hope you're about to set off and make human, just for a moment, this desert of sea.

Yes, there were desperate moments but I wouldn't be writing now if I'd succumbed to them. Mind you, lacking the conventional measures, I can't be too sure I'm not mad. Or haven't been at stages. Without company you wonder whether you might not be a ghost yourself. I've learned a lot about myself since I've been here. Am I immodest to claim that's because I'm the most interesting thing here?

Time has been strange. You think you'd remember how many suns, but you don't. Not without a serious effort. That's why in movies they always have the long bearded prisoner scratching the numbers in the wall of his cell. The funny thing is that I only started counting the moons after my periods re-started. I suppose before then I had just assumed that rescue was imminent, that there was nothing to measure. Or that I was having a holiday from all that stuff. Not that gender means much. One is all animal here. But the ticking is deep inside of us humans. Days when the sea is perfectly still, windless days, you hear the heart and know yourself as humanity in this sector. And more: you are the mammal of the place, the permanent above sea more-than-crustacean, crustacean predator. This bodily status counts much more than sentience. You count when enough of the panic wears off for the boredom to get its claws into you. The difference between panic and boredom? How far is it from *angst* to *ennui*? When you start measuring you've already arrived.

But do you want to rescue a philosopher, one paradoxically claiming mere corporeal status? Of course you want to know the mundane details of how this body has slept, how I've weathered storms, what I've eaten, what I've drunk. I'd paid scant attention to *Robinson Crusoe* as a kid, I plan to see *Castaway* if they still have DVDs when I get. Bad luck to say that I guess, I'll say...if I get back to the main land, any will do.

You want to know where I could find food and fresh water on the last rock in the world which lacks a housing estate despite keeping its head above the highest tide. You want to know the survivor's story. Of course you do. Was it salt biscuits from an ancient shipwreck? Are there pyramids just below the surface here, full of some old pharaohs stash of choice honey? Have I simply been subsisting on airline food all this while, meals so tough they can't go off? Or have



I found what the trawlers have missed in all their centuries of looking – a place so thick with fish you just put your hand in and pull them out baked or fried?

Yes, this might be a letter from a paradise lost. You don't know, do you? And I'm not telling. There isn't the lead in my pencil for that. And I suppose anyway that you need an incentive. If you want to find out you'll just have to come and see for yourself. You want to know all about my rock. It's shape, its size, its unknown declivities, potential strategic implications. It's good you want to know these things. Let's see if I can hypnotize you into looking. Without sufficient mystery you might not even come for me... You want to know, so come and find out...

Besides, what would I sell to the magazines, if my story were already told? I don't suppose much attention will be paid to the owner of intellectual property stuck on a rock in the middle of the sea, and therefore lacking means of litigation.

The only further thing I'm prepared to give away at this point is that this bottle you have in your hand is the only one that – at the time of writing – has come my way. Oceans of styrofoam there's been, planks and oars, plenty of plastic. The internal walls of airplanes are very handy in making shelter. You'd be amazed at what find its way here. Barnacled footwear of all shapes and sizes. At any given low tide my rock is ringed with plastic of all description. I've considered options for land reclamation. It's worked for Macao and my need is so much greater. I've got a new collection of CD's; I've got a hi-fi too. I'm just looking for the right power adaptor. Even condoms wash up. Credit cards. I've yet to find that book you'd choose for your desert island experience though. There's been precious little to read here. I guess that – sans corked bottle – the written word eventually sinks. Where have all the bottles gone? My pantry back

in Macao is full of them. Is, was. Doesn't anyone lose bottles overboard anymore? But ocean travel is just romantic fantasy these days. Cork has not been plentiful but there's been sufficient to stop one bottle.

And I'm stopping here now, already you know too much about my rock. My rock!?! If only it were hotly disputed, the subject of a territorial dispute! Perhaps then navies would come here to claim it. But there must be no resources here. This has to be a strategic black hole.

I have a little more paper and what's left of my pencil I'll keep in case another bottle comes my way. Perhaps I've just been unlucky so far?

And look, before you get any bright ideas about replying to me by return bottle I'd have a statistician do the numbers on that one. Remember, I'm writing from nowhere to anywhere, the odds aren't so good the other way round.

I should be serious now. Know you, I have spoken words over this bottle, that it was a long time in preparation for its voyage, that I have hurled it as my strength allowed and when and where I judged the currents best.

And so it is buoyed with scraps of love, it is a talisman against the inevitable. By incantation I have sent it. I wait for the seas to rise or for a next piece of sky to fall, I cast my words and prayers upon the waves.

I am sincerely yours.

**The Poet Disarming Himself:  
Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas" and the Death of the Author**

Elyssa Warkentin

Geoffrey Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas" has confounded readers and critics alike for hundreds of years. Some label the strange, rambling poetry ineffective – an artistic failure, perhaps intended to be so, perhaps not. Others argue that the tale is a successful entry in the parodic mock-romance genre, or that it succeeds as a burlesque.<sup>15</sup> In any case, the controversy that surrounds the tale highlights the importance of the tale itself. It comes close to the end of the Canterbury Tales, when Chaucer's intense meditation on the nature and function of art in society is nearing its apex, and thus it must be read as a contribution to Chaucer's overall artistic and ideological vision. To read it as a simple failure – or even as an uncomplicated genre piece – is to miss the intricacies of the tale itself. A close reading of the tale, in combination with an understanding of the authorship theories of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, among others, and the feminist interpretations of critics like Celia Daileader, suggests that Chaucer's execution of the "Tale of Sir Thopas" is both deliberate and carefully thought out. On a very superficial level, the tale's ridiculously poor poetry makes it a failure. But its very failure allows Chaucer to play with concepts of authorship and eventually debunk his own authority as a writer – in effect, this tale scripts the death of the author. (Chaucer continues his meditation on art and authorship with the remaining tales in the cycle – particularly in "The Manciple's Tale" – and comes to his perhaps unsettling conclusion in the retractions.) As we shall see, Chaucer's surprising rejection of his own authority, achieved by constructing

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<sup>15</sup>See Loomis and Burrows, respectively.

the tale as a “failure” from the outset, allows him to wrestle further with the artistic questions that consume him throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, and to formulate a mode of writing that (while perhaps not overtly feminist), effectively challenges patriarchal power.

“The Tale of Sir Thopas,” along with “The Tale of Melibee,” is the tale most intimately linked to Chaucer. Both tales are told by Chaucer himself – or at least, by a character named Chaucer within the artistic frame. It is important to distinguish from the outset between Chaucer, author of *The Canterbury Tales*, and Chaucer, literary character and teller of “The Tale of Sir Thopas” within the artistic frame. As Ann S. Haskell explains, “In ‘Thopas’ [Chaucer] separates the many creative layers of self and strings them together with the metaphor of puppetry. A literal puppet is manipulated by a surrogate human being, who is in turn operated by a real person, who is ultimately controlled by the fate of the gods” (259). Chaucer’s literary portrayal of himself as a character in the links between the tales, and also as a storyteller in the tales themselves, provides vital insight into his perception of himself as an artist – and into his ideological position on the role of the artist in society.

In “The General Prologue,” Chaucer’s character seems merry and outgoing – drinking and chatting with the other pilgrims. In the “Prologue to Sir Thopas,” however, he is newly characterized as introspective:

...our Hooste jopen tho bigan  
And thanne at erst he looked upon me,  
And seyde thus: “What man artow?” quod he;  
“Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,  
For evere upon the ground I se thee stare. (PST 693-697)

Lee Patterson has remarked on the “utter lack of specificity” (117) of the Host’s question. He argues, “the opening question implies unrecognizability ... By contrast, for example, Harry asks the Monk and the Parson not to identify themselves but simply to explain their specific ecclesiastical offices” (117). Chaucer is an enigma; the narrator seems to have no means by which to categorize him. In fact, Harry comments only that “He in the waast is shape as wel as I; / This were a popet in an arm t’enbrace / For any womman, smal and fair of face. / He semeth elvyssh by his contenance” (PST 700-703). Chaucer is fat like Harry, small like a puppet, and “elvyssh” – a slippery term with several possible meanings, as we shall see. Patterson again contends, “This identification in terms of manner and body shape is a substitute for the identification in terms of vocation applied to the other pilgrims” (118). If Chaucer, a prolific and well-received writer, is not described by vocation, what are the implications for that vocation? In Patterson’s words, “What work does the narrator perform? What is his social function?” (118).<sup>16</sup> How important is writing if it is not even mentioned as Chaucer’s vocation in the text? Obviously, the debunking of the writer’s authority has already begun.

“The Tale of Sir Thopas,” then, can be read as an attempt by Chaucer to define himself and his role and authority as a writer. Patterson argues, “[Chaucer] is the originator of a national literature in a culture that lacks both the concept of literature and a social identity for those who produce it. Lacking a recognizable role within the social whole, Chaucer is obliged to locate himself outside it” (135). Thus he becomes the strange, “elvyssh” creature that confounds

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<sup>16</sup>Patterson notes, “The question of authorial identity that Chaucer has Harry Bailly here raise explicitly preoccupied him throughout his career” (118). In *The Canterbury Tales* and in Chaucer’s other major works, authorship and the nature of art are major areas of fascination.

Harry Bailly – identifiable as a physical being, but not as a social or, for lack of a better word, vocational being. He deliberately positions himself outside of any recognizable social identity, which in turn offers him the freedom to examine his literary project from the outside. What is his role, as author? And what are we to make of his text?

“The Tale of Sir Thopas” begins, “Listeth, lordes, in good entent, / And I wol telle verrayment / Of myrthe and of solas<sup>17</sup>” (ST 712-714). Chaucer’s initial appeal for attention is rife with stock phrases – hardly the opening one would expect from an accomplished and celebrated author. It is set out in a “crude and thumping meter” (L. Benson 16). The rhyme scheme, as well, while unique in Chaucer’s canon, is common to many Middle English romances – which would seem to support the idea that Chaucer wrote the tale as a simple mock romance. However, as J.A. Burrows has shown, the tale is in fact carefully structured into three fits, comprising of eighteen stanzas, nine stanzas, and four and a half stanzas respectively. The apparently haphazard tale actually conforms to the ratio of the diapason (4:2:1), indicating that Chaucer wove the principle of universal harmony thought to govern the universe into the text of his ostensibly faltering tale. This is another indication that the failure of the tale is very deliberate; that Chaucer knowingly unmask his authorial power. The apparent failure of form is deliberate; Chaucer thereby illustrates the authorial potential for inadequacy.

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<sup>17</sup>The “solace” of “The Tale of Sir Thopas” paired with the indubitable “sentence” of Chaucer’s other tale, “The Tale of Melibee,” suggests that on some level, Chaucer himself wins the contest of *The Canterbury Tales*, as set out in the “General Prologue” (GP 796-801) – though this is never recognized by any character within the artistic frame.

Not only are the rhyme scheme and meter of “The Tale of Sir Thopas” different than any other tale in *The Canterbury Tales*, but the physical layout of the tale in many manuscripts sets it apart from the others. All rhyming lines are joined together with brackets, and each tail-rhyme line is written to the right of its two preceding lines, so that the tail-rhyme line appears in a separate, second column of verse on the page – and as Judith Tschann argues, this layout is not necessarily typical of the tail-rhyme romance genre. Tschann contends, “In more than half of the manuscripts which preserve ‘Sir Thopas,’ allowing for those manuscripts which carry out the scheme of either bracketing or juxtaposing lines only partially, the method of indicating the verse form for this tale differs from that used for any of the other tales” (2). Thus “The Tale of Sir Thopas” is set apart from the other tales – and this “special graphic distinction is an important aspect of the manuscript tradition of ‘Sir Thopas’” (Tschann 2).

“The Tale of Sir Thopas” follows the strange adventures of the very strange knight, Sir Thopas, in his search for an elf queen. But even as a simple quest plot, the tale breaks down under the weight of its own poetic rhetoric. Chaucer’s choice of words is often unusual and distracting; for example, Sir Thopas “worth upon his steede gray” (ST 751) – why “worth,” instead of the more knightly “vault?” In the following stanzas, the word “priketh” is used suspiciously often. Sir Thopas “priketh thurgh a fair forest” (ST 754), he “priketh north and est” (ST 757). After several similar usages of the word, Chaucer writes:

Sire Thopas eek so wery was  
For prikyng on the softe gras,  
So fiers was his corage,  
That doun he leyde him in that plas  
To make his steede som solas,

And yaf hym good forage. (ST 778-783)

Though there is never any direct statement sexualizing Thopas's relationship with his horse, Chaucer's word choice here raises questions about the nature of that relationship. Further, Thopas is repeatedly described as child-like. He eats "gyngbreed that was ful fyn, / And lycorys, and eek comyn, / With sugre that is trye" (ST 854-856). At one point, in fact, he is explicitly described as a "child" (ST 817). In addition, his sagacity as a knight is questionable at best. He has a sheath, but no sword is mentioned. His helm is made of "latoun bright" (ST 877) – a soft metal, virtually useless as a defence. Clearly, Thopas is not a standard romantic hero – in fact, his questionable relationship with his horse means that he's not even a standard mock-romantic hero. Chaucer's deliberately peculiar portrayal of Thopas suggests further that the tale is intended to fail.

There are even internal textual references to the ongoing failure of the tale. Chaucer, it seems, is unable to hold the attention of his audience of pilgrims. His initial modesty – "ne beth nat yvele apayd, / For oother tale certes kan I noon, / But of a rym I lerned longe agoon" (PST 707-709) – is apparently well-founded. At the beginning of the second fit, he pauses the action of the tale to request, "Yet listeth, lordes, to my tale, / Murier than the nightyngale" (ST 833-834). Obviously, the attention of his audience is beginning to wander. Just nine and a half stanzas later, Chaucer is forced to repeat his plea for attention, this time with more strength. The shortened time-span between interruptions suggests that the audience is quickly losing patience with the tale:

Now holde youre mouth, *par charitee*,  
Both knyght and lady free,  
And herkneth to my spelle;  
Of bataille and of chivalry,



And of ladyes love-drury

Anon I wol yow telle. (ST 891-897)

One can only assume that Chaucer was forced to pause in the telling of his tale because he was unable to make himself heard over the chattering of the other pilgrims. The failure of the tale is written into the text itself – almost as if Chaucer (the author outside the artistic frame) wanted to emphasize that very failure.

Just over four stanzas into the third fit, and just when “The Tale of Sir Thopas” seems to be gaining some kind of momentum, it ends with an interruption by Harry Bailly:

“Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee,”

Quod oure Hooste, “for thou makest me

So wery of thy verray lewedness

That, also wisly God my soule blesse,

Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.

Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!” (ST 919-924)

Although Chaucer protests, “Why wiltow lette me / Moore of my tale than another man, / Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?” (ST 926-928), the Host concludes, “Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!” (ST 930). While this is obviously not the best rhyme Chaucer is capable of, his claim to that effect demonstrates, perhaps, a deep ambivalence about the quality and importance of his own work. His authority is demonstrably shaken by his audience’s reaction to his work – whatever authority he holds is not self-sufficient. Instead, it is based on the audience’s willingness to grant him that authority. And in “The Tale of Sir Thopas,” Chaucer scripts an audience response that effectively strips him of authority. He is an author, but an author who encodes himself in the text

as a literary failure. By his own volition, his authority “is not worth a toord” (ST 930).

Of course, if the tale is intended to fail, it has obvious implications for Chaucer’s literary authority, for the author is deeply implicated in the text – not least of all because the tale is one of the only two attributed to Chaucer himself. After all, “Chaucer does not present himself in the *Canterbury Tales* as a fully-developed and definable persona but as a teller of tales” (D. Benson 65) – and that is why his literary authority, more than anything else, is at stake. Seth Lerer argues that “The Tale of Sir Thopas” is “above all a poem about its teller’s presence” (185). Lerer draws a parallel between Sir Thopas’ rambling knight errancy and Chaucer as “narrator errant” (186) in the telling of the tale. He notes, “The telling is a kind of quest, the teller beset by the giants of mistaking critics and aberrant audiences” (184). Chaucer, then, can be associated with Sir Thopas himself. In this framework, the giant Olifaunt corresponds to Harry Bailly – the only character in the frame narrative to pose an overt threat to Chaucer-as-teller. Further, Thopas’s quest for the elf queen can be read as a metaphor for Chaucer’s own quest for a muse – almost always personified as female.<sup>18</sup> However, it is also important to remember that Chaucer himself is described by Harry Bailly as “elvyssh by his contenance” (PST 703), implying that perhaps that muse, or inspiration, is self-generating and exists within the author. Of course, Thopas never finds his elf queen – by extension, can we assume that Chaucer lacks a muse or inspiration in this tale, which is written as an intentional failure? This parallel encodes Chaucer’s failure yet again in the text.

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<sup>18</sup>In the original Greek myth, the muses are the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. They habitually retain their feminine form in much of Western literature.

Bailly interrupts the tale on the grounds that Chaucer's poor rhyming is a waste of time. But in fact, Chaucer's intentional failure with this tale opens up different possibilities for theories of authorship, philosophies of art, and frameworks for textual authority – the tale is far from a waste of time. Bailly fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the tale (as he also does for “The Tale of Melibee”). It is useful, instead, to look to relatively contemporary literary theorists such as Foucault and Barthes to illuminate the message of “The Tale of Sir Thopas” – with his intentional failure, Chaucer proves to be surprisingly prescient in his understanding of the resounding social implications of textual authority.

Chris Weedon argues that with all written texts, “the reader is subject to the textual strategies of the writing in question and its attempts to position her as subject and extend to her its values and view of the world” (164). Writing is indeed a powerful and potentially dangerous medium. In *The Canterbury Tales*, many of the tales preceding “The Tale of Sir Thopas” are rife with rhetorical violence – violence that is often, but not always, directed against women. “The Man of Law's Tale,” to take one example among many, is essentially the story of a virtuous and consenting woman (the aptly-named Custance), being buffeted by male power. Her life is one of constant violence, broadly defined, both explicit (her treatment at the hands of her mothers-in-law) and implicit (the submerged-yet-present incest plot of the tale's sources). Angela Jane Weisl argues that the tale “valorizes violence by giving it a transcendent result, while reveling in its detail, rather like a contemporary horror film” (117). But if we take a step back from the tale, and move into the frame narrative, we see that it is the Man of Law who holds all the rhetorical power in this tale – he, essentially, is the force that commits rhetorical violence on Custance. And Chaucer, of course, is the force

behind the Man of Law. Weisl connects the violence of the Man of Law's rhetoric with the Christian tradition: "Man's need to control women through violence, doubly revealed in literature and in life, becomes a kind of quiting (vengeance) on them for the sins of Eve, a continuous justified abuse that goes primarily unquestioned through a long and varied tradition" (117). The Man of Law's narrative manipulation of Custance is parallel to the violent, implicitly sexual manipulation that Custance endures throughout the tale at the hands of various men – her father, her false-accuser, her would-be rapist.<sup>19</sup> And "The Man of Law's Tale," like all texts, "attempts to position [the reader] as subject and extend to her its values and view of the world" (Weedon 164). The textual violence committed against Custance has much larger implications – and this is exactly why Chaucer destabilizes his own textual authority by encoding his own failure in "The Tale of Sir Thopas." By debunking that authority, Chaucer begins to counteract the rhetorical violence found in "The Man of Law's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale," among others.

Foucault, in his essay "What Is an Author?" questions the authority and privilege of the author in a way that sheds much light on Chaucer's work. He refers to writers as "founders of discursivity" (985). He argues that instead of accepting transcendental theories of authorship that lead to questions such as, "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?" (988), we must allow the author to disappear into the discursive field he or she creates. This allows, instead, questions such as:

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<sup>19</sup>Admittedly, the markedly declining narrative presence of the Man of Law in his tale could be an indication that he realizes the disturbing significance of the violence of the tale. Discomfort, perhaps, leads to disassociation.

What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions? ... What difference does it make who is speaking? (988).

The transition from a transcendental theory of authorship to a Foucauldian discursive theory of authorship is exactly the project of "The Tale of Sir Thopas." Chaucer inserts himself into the text, but tells a floundering tale that destabilizes his own position as a textual authority. As Foucault would have it, the question of the tale becomes not what part of Chaucer's deepest self is expressed in the text, but rather how does the tale function, discursively, and more importantly, who can appropriate that discourse?

Similarly, Roland Barthes describes a Western literary tradition (of which Chaucer was inevitably a part), in which "the uncontested owners of the language, and they alone, were authors" (143). Authorship, in this framework, is a position of power and control. He continues, "no one else spoke, and this 'monopoly' of the language produced, paradoxically, a rigid order, an order less of producers than of production: it was not the literary profession which was structured ... but the very substance of this literary discourse" (143). In "The Tale of Sir Thopas," Chaucer-the-author himself debunks his so-called "monopoly" of language. First, as Jill Mann observes, "[Chaucer] does not remain external to his creation, the hidden puppet-master pulling its strings. Instead, he enters it, placing himself on the same fictional level as the other pilgrims, and his authority on a level with theirs" (qtd. in Daileader 27). And of course, his self-portrayal within the artistic frame tells a tale so unconvincing that his character is forced to speak over the chattering of his audience. "Now holde youre mouth,

*par charitee, / Both knyght and lady free, / And herkneth to my spelle*" (ST 891-893), he begs. His is a single voice among many, and his authority is completely overridden by the interruption of the Host. As a literary authority, Chaucer ceases to exist.

Foucault argues, "we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (981). In other words, we must ask why Chaucer would write himself out of the text in such a manner. What openings do his absence make possible? To answer this question, it is important to keep the context of the tale in mind. In the Ellesmere manuscript, "The Tale of Sir Thopas" follows the brutally violent "Prioress's Tale," and precedes "The Tale of Melibee" – a prosaic treatise that touches on the subject of the role of women in marriage, with Melibee eventually agreeing to be guided by his wife Prudence's advice. In terms of self-determination, Prudence is arguably the most successful female character in The Canterbury Tales – rivaled only, perhaps, by the Wife of Bath. "Sir Thopas" also follows a long line of tales, as detailed above, concerned with violence against women – violence that, on a rhetorical level at least, is attributable to Chaucer as textual authority. His abandonment of that authority must be read alongside the anti-feminist violence of the text. By rejecting his textual authority, does Chaucer open up a space in which patriarchal power (in whatever form) can be challenged?

Celia Daileader details Chaucer's "dissection of the gendered hermeneutic arising from the woman-as-flesh / man-as-spirit binarism – an ideology which posits the text as female, the engendering stylus as male, an ideology which allows texts to be raped and rapes to become texts, an ideology which denies woman a stylus and thus denies her a voice" (26). This framework forms the

basis for the antifeminist violence that pervades much of The Canterbury Tales. Custance's continuous run-ins with violence; Griselda's torment at the hands of her husband; even "The Knight's Tale," in which Theseus "conquered al the regne of Femenye" (KT 866) – all are examples of (often relatively voiceless) women's torment being turned into text. Daileader argues that Chaucer begins to debunk this ideology by creating characters like the Wife of Bath and Prudence. Both of these characters are outspoken in their belief in women's power, and each uses a similar strategy to make her point. The Wife of Bath and Prudence both cite authorities to state their respective cases, thereby subverting the very tradition that oppresses them, and appropriating it in their own feminist arguments. In "The Tale of Sir Thopas," Chaucer goes even further. Instead of subverting that tradition of patriarchal authority, he positions himself outside of it altogether.

Daileader continues:

It is not enough for Chaucer to give these women a voice: as if uncomfortable with the paradox of his own paternity over his feminist creations, in "Sir Thopas" he uses his persona within the text to undermine his own "auctoritee," thus clearing a path for Dame Prudence's rhetorical tour de force. In this way the "Thopas-Melibee" sequence, operating on the echoes of the "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," allows Chaucer not merely to challenge the antifeminist patristic tradition, with its hermeneutic of sexual violence, but actually to uproot the very concept of a unified patriarchal authority. (27)

This is an extraordinary possibility. It is as if Chaucer, by scripting his own failure in "The Tale of Sir Thopas" – and thus essentially scripting the death of

the author – opens up a space in which patriarchal authority ceases to exist. Prudence, therefore, is able to evade the antifeminist patristic tradition and speak with a voice entirely her own. “The Tale of Melibee” begins with male ignorance and sexual violence, but it ends, as Daileader notes, “with forgiveness, enlightenment, and truce” (38) – a neat follow-up to the Wife of Bath’s explosive tale. The transformation from violence to forgiveness occurs through Prudence, and thus sidesteps patriarchal authority.

Finally, Daileader argues, “Utilizing his persona to make a seemingly harmless joke at his own expense, Chaucer in fact introduces and makes palatable a revolutionary message” (38) – that message is the defeat of the tradition of patriarchal authority. The Host, not surprisingly, fundamentally misunderstands the import of “The Tale of Melibee”:

Oure Hooste seyde, “As I am feithful man,  
And by that precious corpus Madrian,  
I hadde levere than a barel ale  
That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!  
For she nys no thyng of swich pacience  
As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence.” (PMT 1891-1896)

It is the Host’s interruption that halts Chaucer’s authorial experimentation in “The Tale of Sir Thopas,” and the Host’s final word on the revolutionary message of “The Tale of Melibee” is to an attempt to reposition it back within the patriarchal tradition. Chaucer illustrates clearly the play of discourses and the power struggles at work in all texts. As Foucault would have it, the Host’s misinterpretation of “The Tale of Melibee” shows exactly how vital it is to ask the questions, “What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself?” (988). As



Chaucer removes himself as an authority in "The Tale of Sir Thopas," Prudence assumes a form of rhetorical authority in "The Tale of Melibee." And the Host attempts to appropriate her authority immediately after her tale is completed – an unsuccessful attempt, considering the twenty-five pages afforded to Prudence's tale, and the twenty-five lines given over to his complaint.

Chaucer uses "The Tale of Sir Thopas" to debunk his own textual authority, but he also makes repeated internal, intertextual references within the tale to several of his other tales and poems – an indication, perhaps, that the subversion of patriarchal power found in the Thopas-Melibee sequence should be applied to his entire body of writing, or should at least be kept in mind when reading Chaucer's other works. Mary Hamel identifies numerous links between "The Tale of Sir Thopas" and "The Prioress's Tale." These include the fact that "Sir Thopas's name<sup>20</sup> associates him with the gemlike hero of the preceding tale" (254), and the fact that both tales make references to lilies, the Prioress in her prologue, and Thopas twice in his tale. Laura Loomis observes, "Echoes from his own poems are heard, for Chaucer could imitate himself as humorously as he imitated others" (493). She identifies echoes of "The Clerk's Tale," "The Merchant's Tale," "The Pardoner's Tale," and The House of Fame (493). Chaucer has encoded strands of other texts within "The Tale of Sir Thopas" – an indication that the lessons learned in this tale must be remembered throughout his entire body of work.

Finally, then, the Host's original question to Chaucer – "What man artow?" (PST 695) – becomes insignificant compared to the question of what Chaucer is doing with his text. As Alan Gaylord notes, "classifying 'Thopas' as a

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<sup>20</sup>As Hamel notes, the gemstone topaz was associated in the Middle Ages with chastity (254) – a characteristic also attributed to the Prioress's little clergeon.

parody has kept us from seeing what kind of invention it really is" (314). And what it really is, is a text that strips away the authority of its author until he disappears entirely. The death of the author encoded in "The Tale of Sir Thopas," and the rejection of patriarchal authority that that metaphoric death entails, allow a new discourse to begin. Chaucer takes this discourse to a new level with his eventual retraction. Roland Barthes observes, "few authors renounce writing, for that is literally to kill themselves, to die to the being they have chosen; and if there are such authors, their silence echoes like an inexplicable conversation" (147). But Chaucer's "death" in "Sir Thopas" – and even his retraction – is far from inexplicable. It allows for the formulation and expression of an anti-patriarchal discourse of writing and authorial power. "The Tale of Sir Thopas" might be considered an artistic failure – but it must also be considered a political and ideological triumph.

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## Poetry by Danielle Jones

Reading Mandelstam's  
"In St. Petersburg We'll Meet Again"

When you don't feel the rhyme slanting  
between "rest" and "blessed" or startle  
at the slip of an "officer like a clockwork doll"  
or learn how the curve of Russian  
teaches me to lean into my tongue more,  
you don't miss meeting the jagged-edged point  
of the poem as much as the nuanced text of me.

### Last Will

To my sisters,  
the wooden boxes  
in various sizes. The drawers  
gilt or plain—all empty  
that they might fill. The unrocking  
chair to the neighbor with the pale  
baby. Perhaps, to Father,  
my negatives and undeveloped film.

All the rest, to you, my lover  
to remember though it's not

enough. The locket of hair hiding  
in corners, the squished spiders  
of ink never fully formed  
into words. The curves of my belly  
bending into smile.

All of these I leave to you. Except  
the wrinkles on my nails—

the lines of bar codes sliding down  
my fingers into the grave space  
as if someone squeezed my hand too hard

in a final embrace. These, I leave  
to our unborn children. Pleats  
of stress in place of stretch marks.

To them, then, these wrinkles  
and the testament, if death were different  
they would be.

## Contemporary Epic Novels:

### Walcott, Merwin, Carson and the Birth of a “New” Genre

Antony Adolf

1

#### **Predications: Bakhtinianism vs. Modernism**

My argument for this paper is predicated upon two concepts that, taken in their Bakhtinian significations, have become influential in both literary studies and discourse analysis: *epic* and *novel*. First, it is important to note that, for Bakhtin and his uncritical followers, the two concepts are not only different but also diametrically opposed both politically and sociologically. For our purposes, the concise but accurate characterizations of the two speech genres given by Janet Giltrow in a forthcoming article will suffice:

Epic instates the dominating word of the fathers, imposing a sealed past on a living present. Foreclosing the future, the deed of the ancestor forfeits possibility to praise of antique glories, *faits accomplis*. Poetry (of the kind Bakhtin has in mind) isolates and indemnifies the individual voice as if self-sufficient and unimplicated in the unfolding voice of the other. Both epic and poetry refuse the *historicity* of the word – its service to the epoch, “the day, even ... the hour” (263)—and its *sociality* – its rendering of groups, schools, generations, professions, and their positions and interests. For Bakhtin, the stylistic profiles of epic and poetry also project a

philosophy of language and in turn a politics: centralised conceptions, unitary and unshakeable ideas, and uniform speech respectability.

Novelistic style, on the other hand, incites “dialogic” heteroglossia, and the infinite calibrations of positions vis-à-vis the other’s word. For Bakhtin, this is the zone of democratic possibility.

Taking Bakhtin’s quasi-ontological commitment to social reform in the perhaps obsolete vein of literary Marxism he adhered to, it comes as no surprise that Bakhtin and his idealistic cohorts favor novels over epic poetry, a political move that has echoed—I believe too loudly—in the academies of countries that consider themselves democratic, most notably here in the United States and in my home country, Canada. It is within this socio-political climate that Adorno made his famous comment that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34) a proposition I have heard reiterated a thousand times by my colleagues at various universities in such guises as “You mean you’re applying for a grant to study *poetry*?” and “Poetry just doesn’t tell us what we need right now—for that we need to turn to prose—or movies.”

Paradoxically, however, at the very same time Bakhtin was proposing these “genreotypes,” modernists such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky, building on the work of epic and long poem writers as diverse as Dante, Whitman and Browning, took it upon themselves to take epic poetry seriously; or rather, perhaps having realized the Bakhtinian position before it was put forth, and thus the shortcomings of their epic forerunners, they took it upon themselves to put the modern world in relation to epic poetry and epic poetry in relation to the modern world. In Pound’s famous words, though in styles and with politics that are as distinct as night and day, these writers and



others like them tried their best to “make it new.” Thus, modernist monuments like *The Cantos*, *Patterson* and “A” have been handed down to us, and have received considerable attention under the perhaps misleading title of “long poems.” Margaret Dickie and Brian G. McHale have, for instance, referred to these works by this term. While I do not have time to go into these texts in any detail, I hope that my audience has enough familiarity with these texts to agree with me when I propose that, with the texts, the epic as Bakhtin understood it was forever changed. How? As I understand the works of these modernist masters, their achievements lie in the fact that they incorporated and embodied discourses distinctively *other* than those Bakhtin saw at work in classical epics: Pound infamously incorporates discourses of fascist economics and politics, Williams claims he was building a poetics of the speech of “Polish housewives” and Zukofsky draws upon the works of Spinoza, Marx and Henry Adams to complete “A.” Finally, it is important to note that, unlike the works I will soon be discussing, these works share the trait of being by and large narrative-free.

I could continue this genealogy into the so-called post-modern age, with major works such as Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems* and Robert Duncan’s long serial poem, *Passages*; however, my chief concern here is what I believe should be characterized as the birth of a new genre that gets *beyond* the genreotypes of epic and novel put forth by Bakhtin, much like Nietzsche goes *Beyond Good and Evil*. This *going beyond* is at the same time a “trans-valuation of values,” as it was for Nietzsche, but as I hope to make clear, it is so only insofar as it is a “trans-discourse of discourses.” What I mean by this will, I hope, become clear by an examination of three works that came out in the past decade: Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, W.S. Merwin’s *The Folding Cliffs* and Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*.

*Walcott's Techno-Glocalism*

Probably the most famous of the three works I will be discussing is the Nobel laureate Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. This 325-page poem interweaves the stories of a Black fisherman named Philoctete, the struggle for a Helen by a Saint Lucian Achilles and Hector, as well as a host of "native immigrants" in the Caribbean—including the poet himself. It is written in long lines sculpted in loose terza rima stanzas that harken back to Dante, with allusions to Homer and Joyce, among others; but it is not so much the formal and/or allusive qualities of the poem that interest us now, but rather the way in which Walcott, in interweaving these stories, also interweaves an incredible quantity and quality of discourses, from that of imperialism and colonialism, to local dialects, to 'foreign' languages and various languages of labor.

According to Jahan Ramazani, in his groundbreaking *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, *Omeros* is an "epic divided to the vein, a poem split by a glottal scream" about how "the postcolonial poet can both grieve the agonizing harm of colonialism and celebrate the empire's literary bequest" (50). While Ramazani fruitfully focuses on Philoctete's wound in order to explore the dynamics of the postcolonial in the poem, what will concern us here are the extended moments during which Walcott's speech-acts enact the dynamism of where the global meets the local, in a word, the *glocal*. More particularly, what will interest us here is how Walcott uses the conceptual space of mediating technology to explore this glocal dynamic, or his brand of techno-glocalism. As I hope to show, by interweaving the localized discourse of the Caribbean with a globalized English—through a common techno-jargon—Walcott achieve the first characteristic of the genre type that we are concerned with here, that of epic

novels: their inherent and ever present *super-dialogism*, a term we may take to mean the hyper-inclusivity of discourses within a given text that goes beyond Bakhtin's characterizations of epic and novel.

While instances of this super-dialogic techno-glocal discourse abound throughout the text, we must for brevity's sake take as our focal point one and only one passage, which I believe best exemplifies the genreotypic characteristic we are exploring:

Cut to a leopard galloping on a dry plain  
across Serengeti. Cut to the spraying fans  
drummed by a riderless stallion, its wild mane

scaring the Scamander. Cut to a woman's hands  
clenched towards her mouth with no sound. Cut to the  
wheel  
of a chariot's spiked hubcap. Cut to the face

of his muscling jaw, then flashback to Achille  
hurling a red tin and a cutlass. Next, a vase  
with a girl's hoarse whisper echoing "Omeros,"

as in a conch-shell. Cut to a shield of silver  
rolling like a hubcap. Rewind, in slow motion,  
myrmidons gathering by a village river

with lances for oars. Cut to the surpliced ocean  
droning its missal. Cut. A crane hoisting a wreck.  
A horse nosing the surf, then shuddering its neck. (230)

As I read this passage, what I see taking place is a fission/fusion of various discourses, rotating around the "wheel" of the technologies of the screen (notice that the word "wheel" is distinctively end of one of the longest lines in the book, and incorporates the word 'heel', which resounds when we come "Achille" two lines later). The words "cut," "flashback," "rewind" and "slow motion" are all

familiar to the discourse of the screen; the words “plain,” “stallion” and “mane” all pertain to the agrarian; the words “chariot,” “cutlass” and “myrmidons” evoke the discourse of a mythological battle; the words “conch-shell,” “village” and “ocean” invoke the Caribbean setting of this scene; finally, the perhaps hidden discourse in this passage is the English language itself, with its concomitant politics, of which Walcott elsewhere tells that he learned “to hate England as I worshipped her language (“Leaving School,” 32). Thus, within the space of just a few lines, we have the intersection of at least four different discourses: the agrarian, the mythological and the Caribbean, which all rotate around the pivot of film discourse. It is the tension between these various discourses—and many more that can be found in the text—that leads me to suspect that we have here neither the discourse patterns of epic or novel but, due to its super-dialogism, we can safely affirm that we are here getting a first feel of a new discourse, or rather discourses, in literature, a literary newness that is as precious to the degree that it is rare.

As we will see, however, super-dialogism is not the only characteristic that distinguishes epic novels from either of its constituents; rather, it is only when and where the three traits I will highlight here are coexistent that we can confidently affirm that we are in the presence of this “new” genre.

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### *Merwin's Foreign Nativism*

A lesser-known exemplar of this emerging genre is W.S. Merwin's 1998 book, *The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hawaii*. It is curious to me that the word “epic” is used to describe the work on the back cover; curious, because the text does not make use of any of the epic convention with which we are

familiar: it does not begin in *media res*, it does not have a call to the muses and it does not have a trip to the underworld etc. Here we come to the realization that the word “epic” is used—as it often is, e.g. the film of *The Lord of the Rings* as “epic”—not in the strict sense of “epic poetry,” but in the loose, adjectival sense of “heroic or impressive proportions.” The bastardization of this important literary term completely overlooks the philological significance in the word, as does Bakhtin, wherein lies the Latin *epicus*, from the Greek *epikos* or *epos*, meaning speech, word or song, a “living language,” if you will, *not* that of an absolute past that makes the present obsolete.

Yet, strangely enough, we never hear a film described as “novel” in the literary sense (we will discuss this in the next section). Indeed, if we look into the history of the epic/novel dilemma, we find that with the emergence of the Old French *novelle* grew out of the *romance*, or prose works written not in the hegemonic, if not outright “foreign,” Latin of their time, but in the “native” language of ordinary folk of, say, what was to become Spain or France. The languages Bakhtinian epics are always already dis-located, “foreign,” while novels are always already organically at home, “native.” This is why Bakhtin sees novels as a radical and subversive genre, and epics as conservative and imperial. But were not Greek and Latin, the “epic languages” *par excellence*, not “native” to the ordinary folks of their respective times and places?

If we agree that they were, then the problem of the native/foreign distinction becomes central to any discussion of the two genres, or of a synthesis of the two, as I see happening in *The Folding Cliffs* and other epic novels. So, while I cannot, unfortunately go into the “narrative” part of the subtitle here (which tantalizingly includes murder, leprosy and love) in this text, as in *Omeros*, we find that the language of the master is used to support the cause of the slave;

English is used not as a means of oppression, but rather as a means of liberation; in other words, the hierarchical structure of Bakhtin's literary epistemology is reversed, if not completely overturned. This overturning suggests to me that epic novels, as we are coming to understand them, are paradoxically both subversive and imperial, radical and conservative, a political position Henry Adams would call "conservative anarchy." Drawing on two or more languages, two or more cultures and two or more discourses, epic novels are, it seems to me, simultaneously producers and destroyers of the foreign/native distinction. This is the dynamic we will now try to unfold out of brief passages of Merwin's text, though its political and sociological implications remain beyond the scope of this presentation.

They read:

- A.     and they talked the way people talk but what they said  
          was like pebbles going around in a gourd when they  
babbled  
noises *blither blather jabble jumble rumble*  
*berry love Tahiti love baby love woman* (60)
- B.             they recalled building the church and the oxen the mules  
mule stories and the way Nakaula talked all the time  
          to animals—Oh yes—he said—you have to keep them  
listening to you and they listen in different ways  
          so you speak to them differently as you speak to  
foreigners differently... (93)

C. it was like being back at school at Reverend Rowell's  
but was easier in a way because they all spoke  
Hawaiian in the house and prayed in Hawaiian  
and read from the Hawaiian Bible though Mr Sheldon  
spoke of the government's plan to get rid of the language  
and of Thurston boasting every year about how many  
schools there were now in which not a word of Hawaiian  
was ever heard... (309)

Importantly, a distinction should be made between a) the *language* of the passages, and b) the *discourses* in their language. In the preceding section, we were concerned with the latter, in this section and the next we are concerned with the former, a field Bakhtin deals with only insofar as it concerns medieval macaronic poetry. In passage A, a parodic phonetic sketch of the Other, foreign, imperialist language is presented from the perspective of the native; in passage B an analogy is made between a native speaker speaking to animals and to foreigners; finally, passage C can be read as a criticism of the fate of the native language in the face of the foreign.

A Bakhtinian would be at a loss in explaining how such events could happen in such a text: what we have here is the dynamic content of the novel within the static context of an epic, the subversive within the hegemonic and the radical within the conservative and vice versa. Above all, however, what we have here is the foreign within the native and the native within the foreign, a linguistic dynamic that goes beyond the scope of *heteroglossic discourse* as Bakhtin expressed it, and into the realm of what I have called the *multilingual*, in my

previous work. Although I did not focus upon it in *Omeros*, the multilingual is also present; thus, the multilingual is, after super-dialogism, the second trait of epic novels as we are coming to understand them, and the politics of which mark Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*.

4

### **Carson's Heteronomy**

Again, what is written on the back cover of Carson's 1998 book is extremely telling, despite or even because of its attempted marketing edge:

The award-winning poet Anne Carson reinvents a genre in *Autobiography of Red*, a stunning work that is both a novel and a poem, both an unconventional re-creation of an ancient Greek myth and a wholly original coming-of-age story set in the present.

Would not this description drive a Bakhtinian mad? To what do the word "genre," which Carson is said to reinvent, refer to if not the epic? To be sure, fantastic characters in the novel (including a red-winged monster, homosexuals and bohemians) are not to be found in an epic as Bakhtin conceived them; yet they abound in this "novel in verse." How can this be?

Like Walcott's use of film discourse as the pivotal discourse around which rotates the discourses of globalism and localism, Carson uses the discourse of photography throughout the novel. Like Merwin, Carson fuses and fissions the native and the foreign, as a large part of the story takes place in South America, while the protagonists are from a place that resembles North America all too well. However, the trait that we will focus on here is the multilingual, exemplified in the following passage, ushered in by one of the first prose



sentences that introduce the book: "A refugee population is hungry for language and aware that anything can happen" (3). "*English is a bitch*," (137, original italics) Carson writes, which is perhaps why she often writes in German, Greek and Quechua, as in:

Cupi checa cupi checa  
vermi in yana yacu  
cupi checa cupi checa  
apacheta runa sapan  
cupi checa  
in ancash puru  
cupi chec  
in sillutambo... (113)

All Carson tells us is that "cupi checa" means "right left;" unfortunately, I have found no way to translate the rest of the passage. But what this passages *means* is not as important as *the impossibility of a monolingual English reader to readily understand what it means*. Thus, the eyes of the Other are staring us in the face here, but we cannot make out their expressions; the intents of the Other are put forth but betrayed. In the eyes of the Other, however, what we can make out is that a heteronomous (taken in the literal sense of "different laws") are being set in place: different laws of grammar, different laws of language, yes, but also different laws of sexual orientation and even different the laws of human biology, both of which play omnipresent roles in the work.

It is this presence of an Other body of laws within the body of a text in the language of the Same that forms the third and final trait of epic genres as I will qualify them here: heteronomy. Along with duper-dialogism and multilingualism, heteronomy is what marks epic novels as distinct from both

epic and novels, which might be considered genres of the past. The epic novel, however, remains for the moment at least, the genre of the present. It remains to be seen if it will continue and/or evolve into the genre of the future.

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**A Tangle of Snakes: Confronting White Racism in Douglas's *Can't Quit You,***

***Baby***

Lynn Pifer

Author Ellen Douglas, noted for her adept handling of folk and fairy tales in her fiction, uses multiple references to such tales in her 1988 novel, *Can't Quit You, Baby*. Characters are compared to Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel, and Jack of beanstalk fame. Douglas also employs a folk legend about a doomed water skier blissfully skiing over a nest of snakes to emphasize her protagonist's oblivion to unseemly aspects of life, such as the racism she, as a white southern lady, witnesses and participates in. The narrator tells us:

There is an apocryphal tale of a water-skier that rolled like ball lightning through the Mississippi Delta during the late sixties [. . . .] A beautiful young girl is flying along the surface of one of the unnumerable oxbow lakes that mark changes in the course of the Mississippi River. She swings back and forth over the cresting wake of the boat [. . . .] Then something happens -- the rope breaks [. . . .] The lover spins the wheel, brings the boat about in less time than it takes to write this sentence [. . . .] It's a writhing, tangled mass of water moccasins [. . . .] She's dead before he can drag her into the boat [. . . .] This tragedy, they say, occurred on Lake Bolivar, Lake Washington, Lake Jackson, Lake St. John [. . . .]

But *you* -- you're the one, I hear you say. You're the driver of this boat. You're pulling the skier. Is the story true?

It's always true. Always true that a tangle of water  
moccasins lies in wait for the skier. Always, always true. (130-131)

Throughout the novel, Douglas references the image of the graceful skier destroyed by the snakes that lie just under the surface she skis over. The story's warning is clear: this tangle of snakes always lies in wait. The snakes represent evil and misfortune to Douglas's white protagonist, who wishes to live a perfect life, never acknowledging grief. More specifically, the story, which—like the Civil Rights Movement—spread throughout Mississippi in the Sixties, comes to remind us of an unacknowledged conflict due to racial prejudice. The snakes serve as a metaphor of misfortune, but also, in terms of the protagonist, as a metaphor of racial issues that have long been ignored.

As a writer Douglas grapples with aspects of white racism that most of the white majority would never consider. In an interview with Shirley M. Jordan, she openly declares herself "a sixty-eight-year-old Southern white woman who has loved in this world and seen injustice and been party to injustice, party to blindness, party to deafness all my life" (58) and she acknowledges this perspective in her fiction. One of her earliest stories, "I Just Love Carrie Lee," exposes the blatant racism of a conceited white narrator who can't see her own bigotry. In her most recent work, *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell*, she confronts her own family's racist past, and her novel, *Can't Quit You, Baby*, examines unwitting white racism, even as her narrator insists that the reader should not consider race or class.

*Can't Quit You, Baby* examines the lives of two women: one middle-class white and one working class black, and Douglas deftly portrays the effects of class and race on these two characters. For fifteen years Julia Carrier, a.k.a. Tweet, works for and talks to Cornelia O'Kelley, a white woman living a life of

privileged isolation. Tweet seems to be the only one who takes the trouble to speak up loudly enough for the hearing impaired Cornelia to hear her. Each day when she comes to work, Tweet brings Cornelia a present: roadside flowers, a recipe, a story, anything to connect Cornelia to the outside world. She often tells stories that her employer would rather not hear, such as how her former white employer, Wayne Jones, tried to rape her, or how her own father tried to kill her and her grandfather in order to get their land. Cornelia claims not to believe these stories, showing only the most superficial interest in them: "She accepts the tales like the flowers that she sticks in a jelly glass and sets in the window by the kitchen sink and forgets" (14). Cornelia thinks of herself as a good person, someone who would find herself above the ill effects of common bigotry. She cannot, for instance, bring herself to call Tweet's husband by his nickname, "Nig," and only refers to him as "Mr. Carrier." She also insists on using the more formal name, Julia, even though everyone else, Tweet included, prefers "Tweet." She doesn't understand that disregarding Tweet's stories, or ignoring the name she prefers, betrays her own sense of racial and class privilege.

The narrator repeatedly describes Cornelia as someone skating, or skiing, through life. She relishes her deafness, sometimes turning down her hearing aid to shut out others. She carefully "wears a kindly smile, a gracious smile, the blind smile of a deaf woman" (39). Her deafness allows her to shield herself from unpleasant realities. She prefers, for instance, to think of her family as perfect and herself as lucky and untouched by tragedy, poverty, racism, or any unbecoming side of human behavior:

in her passion for [her husband] and her commitment to her household and work--children with straight teeth and straight backs and straight A's; gleaming silver, polished mahogany [. . .]

towels and sheets in ribbon-tied stacks on the shelves [. . .]--she has not asked one question, has only said occasionally, reading in the morning paper of some new catastrophe: My God, we're fortunate. (11)

Her own family hides their secrets rather than disappoint her, but this only delays the tangle of snakes.

William Dalessio notes that Douglas herself has suggested "writing requires 'an artist [. . .] to look at the world (including himself) with a clear and ruthless eye,' and this is often difficult because" in Douglas's words, "'we like to believe comfortable lies about ourselves'" (99). When Douglas approaches social problems as a writer, she must overcome the "blindness and deafness" she was trained to develop as a member of an aristocratic Southern family. Dalessio writes, "The notion that the individual, by living a life of 'comfortable lies,' acts as an agent in his or her psychological subordination is especially evident in white, upper middle-class, contemporary southern ladies, a group prominently featured in Douglas's fiction" (99). Dalessio discusses the lies southern white women have had to live with since slavery, and uses Antonio Gramsci's term "consent" to describe how southern ladies participated in their own subjugation:

According to Gramsci, oppressed social groups, 'consent' to their domination when they internalize, validate, and actively propagate the ideological outlook of the dominant social group [. . .] Gramsci suggests that to challenge their subjugations effectively, oppressed groups [. . .] must first and foremost challenge their own attitudes which produce 'consent.' (100).

Cornelia has consented to her position as Southern wife and mother. She eloped with an unsuitable match, John O'Kelly, which she considered at the time to be a

daring, rebellious act, like Rapunzel escaping her tower and the evil witch's clutches. However, what she accomplished was to run from her mother's house and her mother's control into John's arms, his house, and his control — all the while considering her condition "lucky." Karen Jacobsen describes this transition as an exchange of pedestals: "after her marriage to John, Cornelia simply steps from her southern belle pedestal to that of the southern lady. Significantly," Jacobsen adds, "her encroaching deafness during her twenties and thirties mirrors her increasing silence as she settles comfortably into her southern lady role."

Although Cornelia is the most developed and dynamic character in the novel, hers is not the only point of view presented. Douglas alternates between narrating sections of the novel in Tweet's voice as she tells her own life's stories to Cornelia, and sections from Cornelia's point of view. In addition to a traditional third-person narrator, an obtrusive narrator, whom Douglas has referred to as "the writer,"<sup>21</sup> occasionally addresses the reader directly, often criticizing omissions in the plot line or the way the latest section was told. Repeatedly, this second narrative voice complains that the narrator hasn't covered key details and events honestly enough: "I am honor bound, I think, to call your attention to [this tale-teller]. I want you to believe her, but there are pitfalls in the path of her narrative" (38). Later the writer warns that "she has the power to distort" (38). Despite the fact that the novel takes place in Mississippi in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the writer insists that she would rather not

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas has noted in a interview that her "sense of the form is that there's a four-way tension in the book, and that the fourth corner of it is the writer [the first three being Tweet, Cornelia, and the narrator], who really is a fictional writer. The writer is not Ellen Douglas or Josephine Haxton. I think of that writer as being an element in the novel" (Tardieu 123). I thank my students, Tana Jennings and Cara Jones, for directing me to this interview.



deal with the racial issues that the Civil Rights Movement would bring to the surface in this setting. "And try for now," the writer tells us, "to be absentminded about race and class, place and time, even about poverty and wealth, security and deprivation" (5). Obviously this task is difficult when one of her two main characters is white, wealthy and secure, and the other is black, poor, and has known deprivation. "Ah, well, I didn't say it was possible," the writer chides, "I said, *Try*" (5 original emphasis).

The main event not covered well enough, according to the writer, is a brief scene, just after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, when Cornelia rushes to Julia's home to express her condolences. This is the scene Hollywood would milk for an easy sentimental denouement, but this novel does not play itself out as the maid's version of *Driving Miss Daisy*. Cornelia's good intentions are met with a gaze of hatred from her "faithful servant," and the usually talkative Tweet doesn't utter a word to her employer. The scene itself is only mentioned in passing, a two-page scene described "just because it popped into my mind at this moment" (98). The novel cannot, however, resolve itself until the two characters acknowledge and begin to overcome the differences that are highlighted by this awkward scene.

Douglas's writer acknowledges that this scene reveals an unexplored conflict: "I wrote nothing [. . .] of Martin Luther King's death, except that Tweet turned away from Cornelia's gesture of sympathy. What tangle of snakes have I been skiing over?" (240). Here Douglas draws attention not only to the writer's voice, but to the many white Americans who choose not to examine difficult racial issues. It can be easy to view the Civil Rights Movement as a historical event that occurred safely in the past, and to assume that injustices that lead to the movement have been resolved. This attitude allows many white Americans

to ignore the current racial situation, turning a deaf ear to new cries of injustice, just as Cornelia is tempted to turn down her hearing aide when Tweet tells her shocking stories, such as the time Wayne Jones tried to rape her.

Ann M. Bomberger points out that Douglas's condolence visit scene demonstrates how deaf and blind Cornelia has been to Tweet's situation: "King's assassination spurs a white woman to try to reach out to an African American woman she spends hours with daily, and yet the ignorance she has kept herself in doesn't allow her to see the impropriety of the gesture at that moment" (24). Only when Cornelia begins to see how Tweet must feel after King's assassination, can she understand how to approach a friendship with her.

Douglas notes, in her interview with Jordan, that she based her character, Tweet, on an African-American woman that she knew, Matilda Griffin: "I had known a woman [. . .] who had Tweet's voice. That's Matilda Griffin talking and she told hair-raising stories--very often to embarrass the white person who was listening" (55). Some of the stories Tweet tells are based on Griffin's stories, and the scene between Cornelia and Tweet after King's assassination is based on an encounter between Douglas and Griffin: "I actually went over to that woman's house [. . .] the day Martin Luther King died and we stood there and looked at each other just the way it is in the book" (56).<sup>22</sup> Douglas acknowledges that her initial intent was to write a collection of stories narrated by Tweet, but once she settled on the storytelling context, Tweet talking to a white woman embarrassed to listen, she realized that she was writing a novel: "I got more and more interested in the development of a white character and the play between the

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<sup>22</sup> For an examination of the autobiographical aspects of this novel, see Leslie Petty's article, "'She has some buried connection with these lives': Autobiographical Acts in *Can't Quit You, Baby*."

black woman and the white woman" (56). What she was interested in, of course, was race.

Douglas has examined the unequal relationship between black servant and white employer in earlier works, particularly in her short story, "I Just Love Carrie Lee," published in her 1963 collection, *Black Cloud, White Cloud*. All the stories and novellas in this collection examine upper class southern white families and their relationships with the black people who work for them. "I Just Love Carrie Lee" is an older white woman's monologue about her friendship with the black servant who has been in her family for decades. The narrator, "Miss Emma," wears her devotion to Carrie Lee as a badge of honor. The more the narrator discusses her good deeds, however, the more strained her "friendship" with Carrie Lee appears.

Much of Emma's narration revolves around the obligation she feels towards Carrie Lee: "I feel the same responsibility toward her that Mama did. You understand that, don't you? She was our responsibility. So few people think that way nowadays. Nobody has the feeling for Negroes they used to have" (119). Through Emma's monologue, Douglas examines the effects of *noblesse oblige* on those who practice it. Emma conflates a demonstration of privilege with a display of emotion, having "feeling" for an African-American woman. She confuses the master/slave dynamic with friendship, and, as a result, her feelings towards her servant/friend are mixed with both love and hatred. Carrie Lee, the servant who has been in the family for years, becomes the white woman's burden:

When Mama died, I felt as if she had more or less left Carrie Lee to me, and I've been taking care of her ever since. Oh, she's no burden. There's no telling *how* much money she has in the bank. There she

is, drawing wages from Billy and from me, owns her own house [. . . .] Between us, Sarah and I give her everything she wears; and [. . .] every stick she has come out of our old house. (124-125)

Emma's protest that Carrie Lee is "no burden," only emphasizes that Emma does feel burdened. Carrie Lee works for Miss Emma six days a week, taking care of Emma's children as well as her house, but Emma has kept track of every dollar she has paid and every scrap of hand-me-down clothes she has given, so she feels that *she* has been taking care of Carrie Lee. Emma proudly points out that she is one of a dying breed of responsible Southern whites: "no one feels any responsibility any more. No one cares, white or black. That's the reason Carrie Lee is so precious to us. She knows from experience what kind of people we are. It's a boon in this day and age just to be recognized" (121). Emma needs Carrie Lee to establish her own nobility just as much as she needs her to clean her house.

The final lines of the story reveal the narrator's conflicted feelings about Carrie Lee, her only true friend/maid: "I'm often alone on Sunday afternoon when Carrie Lee comes to see me [. . .] with Bill and Mama dead and the children grown and gone [. . .] Carrie Lee is all I have left of my own" (141). Emma insists that she considers Carrie Lee to be part of her family, but her words betray her perception of Carrie Lee as property. Douglas emphasizes the latter interpretation in a 1993 interview. When asked if the white woman understands Carrie Lee or feels the need to, Douglas responds, "I don't think she ever could. What she says at the end is 'Carrie Lee is the only thing I got left of my own' as if she owns her--not loves her, but owns her" (Jordan 61). Emma has, after all, inherited Carrie Lee from her mother, and thus manages to "keep her in the family."

Where "I Just Love Carrie Lee" examines the privileged white woman's blindness to the conditions her black friend/employee faces every day, *I Can't Quit You, Baby* examines the relationship between a black servant and the white woman she works for in a way that emphasizes not only their differences, but the potential for friendship between the characters. This possibility arises when Cornelia is finally shaken out of her comfortable perception of herself.

Bomberger writes:

Because Cornelia excels in denial of her own or anyone else's wrongdoing, the two women have little potential for developing a genuine friendship unless Cornelia undergoes some kind of conversion. This conversion requires not just changing her racial attitudes (which are more paternalistically racist than virulently racist), but changing her approach to the world. (19)

Douglas, of course, provides the conversion. She can't let her water skier glide along for long. Cornelia's tangle of snakes hits when her son reveals that he is marrying an unwed mother with whom he's lived for the last two years, and the rest of the family has kept his secret, and others, from her. She is filled with anger and distrust, directed mostly at her husband. When he starts acting strangely while they're on a trip, she berates him for getting drunk in public. She begins with a ladylike, "What possessed you, John? [. . .] You're just as drunk as you can be" (153) but ends by calling him a "fucking bastard" (153) and declaring that she hates him and the rest of the family. She realizes, too late, that he has actually had a stroke; he dies before she can take back her words. Like Miss Emma, who brings Carrie Lee along to sit with her at her husband's funeral, Cornelia, when asked who should drive her home, can only remember Julia Carrier's name and phone number. Emma thinks that her gesture, and her

inadvertent desegregation of her all-white church, demonstrates her friendship with Carrie Lee, but it merely shows the audience how dependent she is on her servant. At this point in the novel Cornelia needs Tweet, but she does not heed her advice about actively mourning John or giving him a proper wake.

At first John's death causes Cornelia to retreat further into herself. She finally escapes her family, which now includes a new daughter-in-law and two step-grandchildren, by traveling to New York by herself. Once alone, and often lost, in the city, Cornelia finally starts hearing Tweet's voice, which tells her stories, reminds her to watch her step, and forces Cornelia to examine her former "perfect" behavior:

Listen to *me*, she says. I notice you don't hardly ever ax a question, and sometimes *seems* like you're listening – you put on listening – but you ain't. Seems like you think you don't need to ax, don't need to listen, you already got answers, or else you don't want to hear none. (194)

Tweet had never spoken so directly to Cornelia, but now Cornelia finally hears Tweet's voice criticizing her openly. She realizes that Tweet can see through her gracious white lady persona and, furthermore, never been impressed with the ladylike self Cornelia has so carefully constructed. Once Cornelia hears Tweet's voice, and begins to listen to it, her conversion begins.

When she learns that Tweet has fallen and hurt herself, Cornelia returns south, to her family, including the step-grandchildren, and to Tweet. The narrator notes, "She has set the volume of her hearing aid higher than she used to. The sounds of the house and street are tinny, she hears an occasional echoing wowww. But she *hears*" (231). The simple act of turning her hearing aid up

symbolizes her willingness to listen to and participate all aspects of the world, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Because of an aneurysm, Tweet is locked inside herself, unable to communicate. Their roles seem reversed.<sup>23</sup> Now Cornelia visits Tweet's house, bringing her presents, talking to her, finally calling her Tweet. But Tweet, except for a look of rage directed at Cornelia, which "ran through the air like fire through a wick, joined their eyes together, pierced her like a fork of lightning" (238), is not immediately responsive. Instead of ignoring Tweet's angry look, Cornelia acknowledges it: "I saw how you looked at me. I saw it" (238).

The climax of the underlying conflict between Tweet and Cornelia occurs only after Tweet regains her speech. Purvis, the ten year-old step-grandson who is brave and clever like Jack, realizes that Tweet can and has been singing to them. Once she begins to communicate through singing, Tweet also regains her powers of speech, and she and Cornelia can finally discuss the issues they have been avoiding for years. On one of her visits, Cornelia sees a gold barrette that she recognizes — one of her own. She has seen this stolen barrette before, after King's assassination. When Cornelia paid her bereavement call she saw it "gleaming like a round target," (99) but she could not acknowledge it as hers. Instead she felt ill and left. This time Cornelia picks up the barrette and looks at Tweet, who admits taking it. Finally, Cornelia asks a direct question, "Why did you steal my barrette?" (254). Tweet explains that she stole it because, "I hate you all my life, before I ever know you" and she had to "steal that gold barrette to remind me of it, in case I forget [ . . . ] Sometimes I forget" (254). Like Carrie Lee's Miss Emma, the old Cornelia would not have been able to fathom that her servant might actually hate her, but the new Cornelia has more sense. Tweet

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of voice and silence in this novel, see Karen Jacobsen's "Disrupting the Legacy of Silence: Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*."

explains further by singing a bit of an old blues song, "Can't Quit You, Baby,": "I love you baby, but I sure do hate your ways." The narrator notes, "she's laughing and singing at the same time" (256). The novel ends not with a friends-for-happily-ever-after ending, but the promise of the transformation of this relationship to a friendship that might be able to see beyond racial and class restrictions because the friends have begun to understand and think outside these restrictions. Douglas's early stories, such as "I Just Love Carrie Lee," show her readers the need for change; this novel shows that change just may be possible.

In *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Douglas shatters illusions for Cornelia that her narrator in "I Just Love Carrie Lee" could never see beyond. Miss Emma was metaphorically blind to Carrie Lee's situation and Carrie Lee seems happy — and smart enough — to leave her in the dark. Cornelia is literally deaf, yet Tweet tries to get through as she reminds her to turn up her hearing aid or to check the batteries. Cornelia doesn't flaunt her friendship with Tweet to others, but the friendship does become important to her. And where Miss Emma remains a static character, smug in her feelings of racial superiority, Cornelia changes and realizes, like the narrator, that race does matter. Just as the writer reminds us with the water skiing story, the tangle of snakes — racism — is always, always there, and it's not possible to glide over it.



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