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About

The Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies (*JAAAS*) is a peer-reviewed gold open-access journal which provides an interdisciplinary space for discussions about all aspects of American studies. The journal functions as a forum for Americanists in Austria and the global academic community. Published twice a year, the journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics, aiming to broaden the multi- and interdisciplinary study of American cultures.

Aims

Interrogating the notion of "America" and looking at the U.S. within its transnational and (trans-)hemispheric interconnections, *JAAAS* seeks to challenge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together original and innovative work by scholars who focus on topics as diverse as literature, cultural studies, film and new media, visual arts, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, performance studies, queer studies, border studies, mobility studies, age studies, game studies, and animal studies. Apart from offering insights into trans- and international American literary and cultural studies and offering European perspectives on America, the journal also solicits scholarship that deals with history, music, politics, geography, ecocriticism, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, law, and any other aspect of American culture and society.

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AYA Special Issue
Early Career Americanists

Edited by **Elisabeth Krieber**, **Christian Stenico**, **Christoph Straub**, and **Roberta Hofer**

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Guest Editors' Editorial

This third issue of *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* is a special issue in more ways than one. The idea at its core was to highlight contributions by emerging scholars in American studies at Austrian universities, compiled and arranged by a team of guest editors who are members of Austria's Young Americanists (AYA)—the graduate student network that is affiliated with the Austrian Association for American Studies. Beyond that, the journal itself is young—at the time we began our work, it had just been founded and was still in its conceptual stages. As such, the editing process presented a number of unique challenges in the ambitious process of putting together a special issue. While most jobs in academia are tenuous, as 78 percent of all academic jobs at universities are limited-term employments,[1] coordinating long-term projects presents an exciting but sometimes unpredictable endeavor, especially at the early career level. This is reflected in both the composition of the issue's editorial team and the remarkable flexibility demonstrated by all contributors throughout the process.

While the work on the issue was initiated by Roberta Hofer and Christian Stenico at the University of Innsbruck, Elisabeth Krieber and Christoph Straub (University of Salzburg) joined the editorial team to ensure continuity when Roberta left academia to work at the Austrian broadcasting service ORF. Soon afterwards, Christian received a scholarship at the University of New Orleans, turning the editorial process into a transatlantic venture. Likewise, the final list of contributions looks a lot different now compared to when we started our work on the issue—in some cases due to the unique situation of early career researchers, in part linked to the demanding and dynamic process of establishing a new journal. On top of all these existing challenges, the final stages of the issue's publication overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, which added its own difficulties. Despite all these obstacles and challenges, the issue you have before you now brings together a number of exceptional contributions by early career researchers.

This AYA special issue opens with a contribution that could not address a timelier subject. In "'The World Called Him a Thug': Police Brutality and the Perception of the Black Body in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*," Barbara Gföllner (University of Vienna) illustrates how literary works can become instrumental in making room for neglected perspectives. *The Hate U Give* (2017), as she shows, seeks to reveal the United States' long history of dehumanizing black bodies, and it points to the relevance for alternative visions: "Counternarratives to dominant discourses oppose the derealization of marginalized people by, for instance, challenging prevalent images of black people as criminals or thugs." Gföllner embeds her discussion of Angie Thomas's young adult novel in the long history of policing black bodies, the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the hypervisibility of the brutal murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. Informed by Judith Butler's notion of grievability, she illustrates how the adolescent Khalil—the best friend of the novel's protagonist who gets killed at the hands of the police—stands for a public discourse on life that has "derealized" black bodies and thus rendered them external to Western notions of "humanity." In doing so, Gföllner shows why *The Hate U Give* "exemplifies [an] emerging type of black YA fiction, in which fiction often mirrors reality": the book not only reveals the dehumanization of black bodies, but subversively manages to demonstrate "that the derealization of a certain group of people makes it easier to justify violence inflicted upon them, as their deaths seemingly leave no marks."

The impact of racial discourses is also at the center of the second contribution. In her article "The Dissolution of Racial Boundaries," Juliann Knaus (University of Graz) provides a close reading of former two-term U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey's 2012 poetry collection *Thrall*—Trethewey's most explicit attempt at examining race as a category through poetry by focusing on discourses about mixed-race identities. In her analysis, Knaus skillfully explores the ways in which Trethewey draws upon colonial diction and etymology to reveal the hegemonic power of language, paying particular attention to the transnational and transtemporal qualities of racial classification. Engaging with colonial Mexican and U.S.-American discourses on mixed-race identity, their foundations in Enlightenment thought, and their permutations over time, Knaus shows how *Thrall* "creates a layered form, where intersections between racial ideologies become visible, while the shortcomings of such ideologies are emphasized." Trethewey, a mixed-race U.S.-American and Southern poet, uses her work to investigate and deconstruct the entanglements of racial ideologies. In her conclusion, Knaus points to the significance of Trethewey's work: "through embracing the fluidity of mixed-race identities and by shedding light on the language that has been used to bind mixed-race individuals throughout history, the confines that this language imposes can begin to dissolve."

Johannes Vith (University of Innsbruck) then focuses on the medium of film to investigate the representation of cultural trauma. His article "Remaking Columbine" examines Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and the movie's unique portrayal of the Columbine high school shooting. He provides insight into Van Sant's artistic background and oeuvre, exploring the director's creative inspirations and cinematic techniques. In his detailed review of *Elephant*'s representation of a taboo topic, Vith outlines how the film's fragmented and non-linear plot structure, its flat characters, and its mundane and distanced portrayal of high school life confront the viewers with the horrifying randomness of school shootings. Stylistically and thematically inspired by Alan

Clarke's *Elephant* (1989), the movie focuses on acts of gun violence without offering its viewers much narrative guidance. Moreover, Vith highlights Van Sant's remediation techniques to engage with the public discourse which blames video games for inciting mass shootings. His analysis thus convincingly outlines how *Elephant*'s narrative and aesthetic choices and the film's casual attitude towards violence refuse to propagate a specific ideological position. As Vith concludes, instead of leading the audience toward an explanation for the shooting, Van Sant's movie encourages reflection on public violence and personal biases and thus provokes a unique confrontation with cultural trauma.

Finally, Alekszandra Rokvity (University of Graz) delves even deeper into signification processes and their cultural impact as she examines punk fashion and its journey from subversive, anti-establishment statement to its reintegration into "the mainstream popular culture that punk once sought to undermine." Her contribution "The Sign as Battlefield: Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel" illustrates how punk subculture has claimed mainstream fashion items as "signifiers of rebellion" and deconstructed "the restrictive prescription of gender roles" in the process. Moreover, Rokvity's insightful analysis exposes the fashion industry's underlying gender bias, as markers of femininity and masculinity for clothing items and their subversive appropriation are connoted differently depending on the wearer's gender. She argues that the category of femininity exhibits a greater degree of flexibility, since the entire fashion industry predominantly caters to women and "profits most from constantly re-defining femininity." During the reintegration of punk aesthetic into the mainstream, this accepted flexibility regarding performances of femininity has led to the transformation of punk women's initially subversive appropriation of masculine fashion items into a profitable fashion trend. This "mainstreamification" effectively removed women's power "to rebel through fashion," whereas male cross-dressing still retains its subversive quality. While Rokvity also lists contemporary examples of performances by Lady Gaga and Ruby Rose which "promote a punk legacy" through their gender-bending aesthetics, she concludes that punk fashion has "come full circle" at the expense of female agency.

The variety of topics and approaches presented in this AYA special issue highlights the diversity and significance of ongoing research projects by early career Americanists in Austria. By focusing on subversive young adult literature that contextualizes the need for movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, by showing how poetry can help to deconstruct the legacies of racial boundaries, by emphasizing the socio-critical potential of film, and by dis-entangling the social semiotics of punk fashion, they all address relevant cultural and political issues. As editors, we are proud to present their outstanding work, which allows us to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of American culture and society.

Moreover, as no publication emerges from thin air, the editing process of this journal issue, too, depended on the support of a number of colleagues and friends. Accordingly, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to several people. First and foremost, we need to say "Thank you!" to the *JAAAS* board for trusting and supporting us throughout the entire editing process. We are especially grateful to the managing editor, Michael Fuchs, who helped us navigate the intricacies of the journal's online system, and to Christian Quendler, who guided us through the editorial process. Furthermore, we would like to thank all of our reviewers, not only for lending us their expertise and helping the contributors improve their manuscripts, but also for their patience in working with first-time editors. Our special thanks go to Joshua Parker for taking another close look at all the submissions in a final round of proofreading. Finally, and most importantly, our biggest "Thank you!" goes out to the four contributors to this issue: Alekszandra, Barbara, Johannes, and Juliann! We are grateful for your patience in this truly extraordinary publishing process—and we are sure that our readers will appreciate your work as much as we do.

Elisabeth Krieber, Christian Stenico, Christoph Straub, and Roberta Hofer

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Note

[1] Selina Thaler, "Kettenverträge an Unis: Halten oder sprengen?" *Der Standard*, March 29, 2019, https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000100381493/kettenvertraege-an-unis-halten-oder-sprengen.

“The World Called Him a Thug”

Police Brutality and the Production of the Black Body in Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*

Barbara Gföllner

Abstract

Widespread police violence, often targeted at black people, has increasingly entered public debates in recent years. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, various African American young adult novelists have addressed the topic of police brutality and offer counternarratives to the stories about black victims disseminated in the media. This article illustrates how prevalent debates of Black Lives Matter are reflected in contemporary young adult fiction. To this end, the first part elucidates substantial issues that have led to the precarious position of African Americans today and to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Drawing on theoretical concepts such as Judith Butler’s notion of “precarious lives” and Frantz Fanon’s description of the black experience in a white-dominated world, I will analyze Angie Thomas’s novel *The Hate U Give* in view of ongoing debates about racial inequality. As I will show, the novel features striking similarities to real-world incidents of police brutality while simultaneously drawing attention to the manifold ways in which society disregards black lives and continues to subject African Americans to racial injustice.

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“The World Called Him a Thug”

Police Brutality and the Production of the Black Body in Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*

Barbara Gföllner

Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice. Sandra Bland. Eric Garner. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. These names are immediately associated with a movement. Unlike earlier African American movements, these are not the names of leaders, but names of victims of police brutality, repeatedly chanted at protests and spread online in order not to be forgotten. While these names have circulated around the world and have sparked widespread outcry, many more people are constantly added to the long list of victims of police violence, yet they largely go unnoticed. Relentless killings of unarmed black people are often justified on the grounds of their allegedly suspicious behavior; they are prejudged a threat because of their blackness. Each killing of an unarmed black person marks a moment of a larger structural problem that is rampant and has consequences on black people’s daily lives.

The killings of Ahmaud Arbery in February 2020, Breonna Taylor in March 2020, and George Floyd and Tony McDade in May 2020 marked a tipping point that led not only to national but global protests. While people have taken to the streets to protest unabated police brutality for years, the scale of support the movement gained was different: nationwide protests went on for months, millions of people gathered worldwide in solidarity with Black Lives Matter (BLM), and the movement attracted broader public attention from various groups of people that a “radical” movement suddenly went “mainstream.”[1] BLM became the voice on topics of racial injustice as issues of structural racism and police brutality entered public and private discourse in the United States and in many other countries around the world as protests flared up. Framed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems, injustices became even more palpable, as the virus disproportionately affects people of color and thus emblematizes systemic racial violence.[2]

While BLM grew to unprecedented prominence following the 2020 protests, the movement has been standing up to racial violence for several years. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013, after the name of another unarmed black person killed by a law enforcement officer circulated online: Trayvon Martin. The seventeen-year-old African American was shot by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmermann due to Martin's allegedly suspicious behavior. Zimmerman was eventually acquitted of all charges.[3] When Zimmermann's verdict was announced on July 13, 2013, Alicia Garza's outrage on her Facebook page sparked multiple responses: "I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people, I will NEVER give up on us. NEVER."[4] Patrisse Khan-Cullors's answer marked the beginning of a new movement: "#BlackLivesMatter." In the wake of Zimmermann's acquittal, Garza, Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi actively turned the hashtag into a movement as they helped organize marches and protests and compiled a list of demands to bring attention to the cascading effects of institutional racism on the black community. As they explain on their website, "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."[5]

This call for black humanity drives the movement. BLM emphasizes that black lives matter to foreground the many instances in which African Americans are treated as less than human, such as in police shootings, cases within the criminal justice system, and rhetorical dehumanization in the media. However, as is the case in most emancipation movements, the call for equality of a marginalized group often provokes the outrage of a supremacist group that fears for its privileged status. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" has evoked the question of why the movement does not call for the appreciation of all lives. Moreover, one particular instance of retaliation, supported by President Trump, contends that "Blue Lives Matter," in reference to the killings of police officers while on duty.[6] Positing that "All Lives Matter," however, dismisses the fact that black lives are not included in this generalization as long as racial injustice and racial bias prevail. "All Lives Matter" can only be achieved by foregrounding the lives that are currently being neglected. As Garza puts it, "*When Black people get free, everybody gets free*."[7] This idea resonates with Judith Butler's notion of freedom, which is influenced by Hannah Arendt's thinking: "Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us. . . . No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality."[8] However, there are possibilities to create relations that facilitate a more expansive understanding of what it means to be human.

In this context, literature is a powerful tool that allows marginalized communities to provide alternative perspectives. Counternarratives to dominant discourses oppose the derealization of marginalized people by, for instance, challenging prevalent images of black people as criminals or thugs. Indeed, as the cry for black humanity has become more pronounced, authors have felt an increasing urgency to address the issue of police violence in young adult (YA) literature. Topics surrounding racial injustice have been explored in various genres, from graphic novels such as Tony Medina and John Jennings's *I am Alfonso Jones* (2017) to poetry collections such as *Say Her Name* (2020), which was launched by the African American Police Forum, and novels such as Jay Coles's *Johnson Was Here* (2018).

Significantly, since many individuals who are fatally shot by police officers are black teenagers, this topic is widely covered in literature for young readers. The attendant emphasis on black lives counteracts the traditional underrepresentation of black characters in YA fiction.[9] Although YA novels that explore police brutality are very popular today, this has not always been the case. Even Angie Thomas's novel *The Hate U Give* (*THUG*), a critically acclaimed bestseller that has also been adapted to the big screen, was rejected more than 150 times.[10] *THUG* exemplifies this emerging type of black YA fiction, in which fiction often mirrors reality. Although Thomas's protagonist Starr and her story are products of the author's imagination, the reader is repeatedly reminded of black people's imminent reality, as the novel evokes the names of real victims of police violence and echoes their last words.

Written from the perspective of the sixteen-year-old black girl Starr, *THUG* revolves around Starr's witnessing of a police officer killing her childhood friend Khalil. The novel explores both the public's reaction to the teenager's death and Starr's personal conflict with her role as the sole witness to her friend's shooting. As she is exposed to conflicting reactions from both her prestigious white school in Williamson and her black neighborhood Garden Heights, Starr initially decides to remain an anonymous witness to the crime and observes the dehumanizing discourse surrounding Khalil's killing. In so doing, the novel demonstrates how black individuals who lost their lives at the hands of police officers are often denied their status as victims; instead, they become responsible for their deaths because their blackness is viewed as dangerous.

This article will illustrate how the novel describes the public's perception of the black victim in the aftermath of his death. By drawing on bell hooks, I will trace Starr's transformation from passive witness "defined and interpreted by others" to an empowered subject—for "only as subjects can we speak"[11]—who takes responsibility for shaping Khalil's narrative and thus seeks to provide Khalil the humanity that he has repeatedly been denied. In addition to hooks, I will deploy George Yancy's theory of the white gaze, which examines the experience of black individuals in a white-dominated society, and Judith Butler's thoughts on dehumanization and grievability to challenge prevalent assumptions about black individuals as "thugs." In combination, these tools and ideas will allow me to highlight the importance of counternarratives and -movements that resist pejorative classifications of individuals and Starr's rite of passage from silenced witness to outspoken agent of a social movement in *THUG*.

Monitoring the Black Body

From the days of slavery to the present, the movements and images of black bodies have been controlled and defined by a racial regime that preserves white supremacy. Modern surveillance practices in the United States, which largely target non-white communities, emanate from the system of slavery and are grounded in backlashes against black people's freedom. While, historically, these practices enforced racial segregation in the Jim Crow laws, black people are still monitored today in the form of mass incarceration, which, according to the legal scholar Michelle Alexander, constitutes a new form of Jim Crow segregation. To explain the systematic over-imprisonment of African Americans, she refers to the criminal justice system as a "racial caste system" in the sense that it "denote[s] a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom." In her description, mass incarceration "refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison."[12] This systemic oppression is key to what Alexander labels "The New Jim Crow," a term which allows her to establish a lineage to the racist laws that defined the lives of black people in the Southern states after the abolition of slavery. She thus emphasizes that discrimination, racism, and institutionalization still shape black realities.

The beginning of the phenomenon referred to as mass incarceration is commonly linked to President Nixon's "law and order" strategy in the 1970s and President Reagan's implementation of the so-called "War on Drugs" in 1982. The new "tough on crime" policies, which allowed police officers to stop and search civilians without a warrant and introduced harsher sentences, dramatically increased prison admissions.[13] While fewer than 200,000 prisoners were held behind bars in 1970, American prisons had more than 2.2 million inmates in 2018—a more than tenfold increase while the U.S. population only grew by about sixty percent.[14] Despite composing a mere thirteen percent of the United States' population, black people represent about 35 percent of the prison population. Regardless of the nature of the crime, African American men are nearly six times more likely to be imprisoned than white men.[15]

The soaring incarceration rates can be linked to the enactment of policies that exert control over bodily movement in public spaces, disproportionately aimed at racialized minorities. "Manner of walking" charges, police shootings, and the stop-and-frisk policy are all disproportionately used against people of color. Between 2004 and 2012, 83 percent of those stopped in New York City were African Americans or Hispanics.[16] Such practices and policies, referred to as "racialization of mobility" by Cotten Seiler,[17] show that racial bias significantly influences the police's assessment of possible threats. From slavery via Jim Crow to today's mass incarceration and police shootings, black and brown movement has always been monitored and confined by a white-dominated society. Disproportional and unwarranted stops and searches of people of color are not only demeaning but also frequently end in an arrest or even death.

However, the numerous deaths of innocent people of color at the hands of police officers have long remained invisible. Due to a lack of official data, accounts of those killings are sparse or incomplete.[18] In an effort to provide more comprehensive data on police brutality, the research collaborative Mapping Police Violence and the project The Counted, launched by *The Guardian* in 2015, chronicle the killings by police based on reports, news outlets, and crowdsourced information.[19] According to The Counted, 1,146 people were killed by police officers in 2015. These findings also shed light on the racial dimension of police violence. Black people, and especially young black men between the ages of 15 and 34, are the group most affected by excessive police force. A study conducted by Rutgers University shows that police killings account for 1.6 percent of all deaths of black men aged 20 to 24.[20]

The Thuggification of Blackness

In response to the high number of black teenagers fatally shot by police officers, writers of YA literature have started to cover topics related to police brutality in their novels. Nic Stone, for example, writes about racial profiling and police violence in *Dear Martin* (2017) and explores flawed practices in the juvenile justice system in her follow-up book *Dear Justyce* (2020), while Kekla Magoon provides an account of an urban neighborhood that witnesses the police killing of a young boy in *How It Went Down* (2014) and the killing of a young girl in the sequel *Light it Up* (2019). These and other examples of African American YA fiction provide counternarratives to stories of black victims, whose humanity has often been denied posthumously through media coverage which highlights their alleged criminality. In this way, authors resist the monitoring of black people's bodies and stories, and instead expose the realities of police brutality to show young readers that their lives do matter, as the writer Jesmyn Ward affirms: "I believe there is power in words, power in asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words. That sharing our stories confirms our humanity."[21]

Although *THUG* foregrounds the fatal shooting of Starr's childhood friend Khalil as an example of police brutality, the novel's central conflict occurs in the aftermath of Khalil's death. As the only witness to her friend's death, Starr, the novel's protagonist, processes both the trauma and grief of Khalil's loss. In addition, she is constantly exposed to the media's and her schoolmates' derogatory comments on his life as a "thug." Indeed, when his name first appears in the news, he is labeled "a Suspected Drug Dealer," but the fact that he was unarmed is omitted. Khalil's name is replaced with negative descriptors such as "threat," "thug," and "drug dealer." News reports about the shooting always include pictures of Starr's black neighborhood, "a neighborhood notorious for gangs and drug dealers," and speculations about Khalil's gang affiliations.[22] Since Starr is confronted with different reactions to Khalil's shooting from her white and black environments, the one labeling him a criminal and the other mourning his death, she initially decides to hide her identity as the sole witness to Khalil's death.

The word "thug," as used by the media, plays a significant role in the posthumous creation of the black victim's narrative. As CalvinJohn Smiley and David Fakunle explain, the media exploit the negative connotations of the word "thug." In media coverage, "thug" refers to male African Americans "who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America."[23] The media's use of "thug" thus cements the image of the criminal black person, as it connotes criminalization and thereby shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the victim. In discourses surrounding BLM demonstrations, both victims and protesters are often referred to as "thugs." For example, in response to protests in Minneapolis, President Donald Trump called the protesters "THUGS" on his personal Twitter account.[24] Trump's rhetoric showcases how hegemonic groups try to control discourses on violence to fit their narrative. Using language in a way that turns groups opposing violence into agents of violence, then, helps to justify the use of excessive force by the state.[25] Tellingly, *THUG* shows how the representation of Khalil as a "thug" shifts attention from the criminal act of the police officer to the victim's alleged criminality; as Starr observes, "the news basically makes it sound like it's Khalil's fault he died."[26]

The fact that the word "thug" is often employed to emphasize a black individual's criminal background highlights the media's power to determine language and shape connotations. As the linguist John McWhorter argues, "thug" conveys different meanings depending on its usage; voiced by white people today, it "is a nominally polite way of using the N-word."[27] In the novel, Starr becomes aware of the power of the media to shape public opinion as she sees a photo of Khalil on the news that shows him "gripping a handful of money." She comes to understand how one picture can generate very different interpretations in people: "For some people, the thug-shot makes him look just like that—a thug. But I see somebody who was happy to finally have some money in his hand, damn where it came from."[28] As a photo ostensibly depicts the objective truth, Khalil is visually branded a thug. He is denied a personal narrative, which allows the media discourse to alter the facts. Knowing his background, Starr can see beyond the money in his hand as alleged proof of his criminality. The different connotations triggered by one picture reveal the implicit bias that affects people's understanding and quick judgment of black individuals.

The image of black people as thugs can also be connected to the concept of the "white gaze." In *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008), George Yancy explores this idea from various perspectives and defines the white gaze as a hegemonic way of seeing that "function[s] to objectify the Black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined, and relegated to those marginalized, imprisoned, and segregated spaces that restrict Black bodies from 'disturbing' the tranquility of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being."[29] In order to illustrate the link between blackness and whiteness, he refers to Frantz Fanon, who asserts that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man."[30] Thus, the meaning of blackness is constructed with reference to whiteness, which constitutes "the transcendental norm," Yancy notes. In this sense, history has shown that the black body has long been regarded as the "diametrical opposite" of the white body by having been framed as "criminality itself." Prior to any gestures they might make, the black person is seen as dangerous. As Yancy explains, the white gaze automatically condemns the black body before it commits a crime: "The reality is that I find myself within a normative space, a historically structured and *structuring* space, through which I am 'seen' and judged guilty a priori." Starr's interrogation by the police offers an example of this indiscriminate characterization of the black body as dangerous and guilty. As the last person who saw Khalil alive, she plays a crucial role in seeking justice for her friend. However, she is also aware that her credibility will be compromised by her black body, "by nature criminal," which is more easily adjudged guilty than the white one, "by nature innocent, pure, and good," to draw on Yancy.[31] The police, instead of talking about Officer Cruise, the perpetrator, inquire whether Khalil "compl[ied]," seemed "irate" or "hesitant," and ask about his affiliation with gangs and drug dealers.[32] They have already identified Khalil as the source of danger before interrogating the witness.

As Judith Butler's analysis of the Rodney King beating illustrates, there are different ways of "seeing." Instead of being recognized as the object of violence, Khalil is made into what Butler calls the "*agency* of violence." This image of the threatening black body is produced within the white imaginary, "through the saturation and schematization of that field with the inverted projections of white paranoia."[33] Within their racist imaginary schema, the police officers fail to grasp the immanent reality of their own brutality and transfer Khalil's vulnerability to themselves by creating a narrative that confirms their image of the black individual as a permanent threat. The questions directed at Starr support their preliminary conclusion, which refuses to see Khalil as the victim. Nevertheless, Starr challenges the interrogator's questions and tries to reaffirm Khalil's position as the target of violence by stating that "he didn't pull the trigger on himself." She refuses to let the police construe his vulnerability as their own and "make them feel better about killing [her] friend."[34] In so doing, she challenges the power of the white gaze to condition the public to believe in the guilt of the black individual.

Similarly, the report of the encounter that the father of Officer Cruise delivers in an interview on TV also exposes his biased mindset, as it correlates blackness with criminality. He perfects the image of his son as a diligent citizen, as he highlights his love for "working in the neighborhood" and dedication to "mak[ing] a difference in the lives there." At the same time, he reveals his distorted perspective of the incident by talking about Starr and Khalil's cursing and threatening actions, claiming that "they were up to something" and "could've taken him down if they teamed up." Starr is shocked by his inaccurate remarks: "I couldn't have taken anyone down. I was too afraid. He makes us sound like we're superhumans. We're kids."[35] Officer Cruise's father argues within the racist schema that perceives the black body as a threat and thereby "splits the violent intention off from the body who wields it and attributes it to the body who receives it," as Butler puts it.[36] He views Starr and Khalil through a lens that conflates blackness and violence before even considering them as unarmed teenagers.

The public discourse around Khalil construes his image as a criminal by calling him a "thug," which renders his body hypervisible and even more vulnerable. While invisibility endangers black individuals by denying their experience or even existence, hypervisibility subjects them to constant surveillance. The public's white gaze fixes and defines black individuals according to the white imaginary, which led Fanon to conclude that the black person is "overdetermined from the outside."[37] Racist language, as the author Claudia Rankine points out, makes those addressed hypervisible: "Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present."[38]

The discourse surrounding Khalil's death reminds Starr of her own vulnerability and thus prevents her from disclosing her identity as the witness. Starr worries about her two worlds (i.e., Williamson and Garden Heights), which she always carefully keeps separate, possibly colliding and potentially being labeled a thug herself. As bell hooks states, "speaking out is not a simple gesture of freedom in a culture of domination"; instead, speaking against dominant beliefs as someone in a disadvantaged position within a dominant hierarchy that repeatedly denies black humanity means that black people "are often shocked to find [themselves] assaulted, [their] words devalued."[39] The fear of revealing her identity is thus part of Starr's coming to terms with her precarious position, recalling Audre Lorde's argument that "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger."[40] Self-revelation, then, can implicate hypervisibility. Appalled by the distorted image of Khalil and herself that the police officer and his father propagate, Starr nonetheless makes use of her voice as an anonymous witness in an interview with the press. As she clarifies, the proliferation of negative images of black people through the media led to Khalil's death and provokes false assumptions about their community: "This all happened because he . . . assumed that we were up to no good. Because we're black and because of where we live. We were just two kids, minding our business, you know? His assumption killed Khalil."[41] The officer's internalized assumptions about blackness have caused him to perceive an unarmed black teenager as a threat, which in his eyes justified a brutal murder. Thus, the public's thuggification of blackness, fueled and amplified by people's racist perceptions, confines the black body to a constant state of precariousness.

A Hierarchy of Grief: The Dehumanization of Black Life

Given the easy dismissal of black lives and society's frivolous willingness to accept any justification of their killing by police officers, it seems that not all lives are considered equally valuable or worth to be mourned. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler addresses questions of grief, vulnerability, and bodies as well as violence in the United States' post-9/11 climate. Her "hierarchy of grief," which she uses to investigate whose lives count as "grievable," may also be applied to racial discrimination. She argues that grievability is linked to a dominant socio-cultural frame which classifies people as human and determines which life is valued and accepted to be mourned. This question of who is and is not considered human—and, accordingly, who may be mourned—is shaped by the media. Those who are represented in the media and granted a narrative may be humanized. However, narratives can also be twisted and used to dehumanize individuals. Referring to killed unarmed black people as "thugs" and spreading distorted narratives about their lives in the media, as is the case in the media coverage of Khalil's death, implies that their lives are, in fact, not grievable.[42] The media's narrative of the victim as a criminal suggests that their life is less valuable. Thus, to draw on Butler, Khalil has "fallen outside the 'human' as it has been naturalized in its 'Western' mold by the contemporary workings of humanism."[43]

The juxtaposition of the image of Officer Cruise as a dutiful citizen and Khalil as a drug dealer establishes a hierarchy of grief to the detriment of the dead black individual. To a certain extent, this hierarchy is influenced by common associations with (skin)color, such as correlating whiteness with innocence and blackness with immorality. As such, the dominant socio-cultural frame that classifies specific people as human beings grants white people greater grievability than black people. Since the negative bias attached to his skin color overshadows Khalil's innocence, it also denies his grievability. While Khalil's killing is justified through his portrayal as a thug, the police officer's actions are rationalized through his portrayal as a victim. Although Starr, as the only witness to the crime, testifies to her friend's innocence, the officer is not arrested for shooting the unarmed young man. Instead, people empathize with him and emphasize his reputation as a benevolent person. Despite having killed an unarmed adolescent, Starr's uncle Carlos, a police officer himself, refers to Officer Cruise as "a good guy" and the media offers space for him to be pitied as his father talks about his son's well-meant intentions in tears: "Brian's a good boy . . .. He only wanted to get home to his family, and people are making him out to be a monster."[44] The refusal to acknowledge the actual perpetrator as a threat shows that his white privilege grants him humanity, sympathy, and even innocence. Khalil's youth and innocence, but most profoundly his humanity, are dismissed by police and public alike. People's inability to comprehend the bias that shapes their interpretation and reconstruction of events is symptomatic of a blind spot in the white imaginary that has determined the black body as inherently threatening.

Khalil's death is rationalized to prove that his life did not count as valuable. The prevalent media narrative reduces his entire existence to one negative aspect that also prompts Starr's friend Hailey to devalue his life with racist remarks: "He was a drug dealer and a gangbanger . . .. Somebody was gonna kill him eventually." As she even considers it "kinda messed up that we're protesting a *drug dealer's* death," she blatantly denies him his grievability.[45] In an interview, Starr calls attention to the absurdity of the discussion surrounding Khalil's death:

> I don't understand how everyone can make it seem like it's okay he got killed if he was a drug dealer and a gangbanger. . . . It seems like they always talk about what he may have said, what he may have done, what he may not have done. I didn't know a dead person could be charged in his own murder, you know?[46]

Starr reminds the public that instead of mourning an innocent person that has been killed, people posthumously put the victim on trial for his own death. Khalil not only has to answer for all the mistakes he has made in his short life but is also blamed for his murderer's mistakes.

Having internalized this hierarchy of grief, Hailey resorts to a response common among white people when discussing the fate of the police officer, who "lost everything because he was trying to do his job and protect himself. His life matters too, you know? . . . What's wrong with saying his life matters too?" Her remark initiates a discussion reminiscent of BLM debates and backlashes such as All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter. Hailey fails to see Khalil's death as a result of racial injustices and deeply ingrained prejudices. As Starr explains: "His [the policeman's] life always matters more!"[47] Due to prevalent assumptions about black individuals as thugs, Hailey demonstrates how people negate the innocent black teenager's right to live and instead bond with the white police officer over their shared white privilege.

The media does not only choose which lives to glorify and which lives to vilify posthumously, but it also chooses which lives to ignore. These lives thus become unreal to the media and those influenced by the media. As Butler explains, dehumanization can lead to the derealization of lives: "The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral."[48] While the discourse about Khalil as a criminal constructs a pronounced negative image, the derealization of Khalil's life also becomes apparent through aspects of his life that the media discourse consciously omits. Initial media coverage of the incident is brief and does not mention Khalil's name, dismissing his humanity through the obliteration of his name, his image, and his narrative. His life is considered unreal; thus, his death becomes unreal, as well. Similarly, later on, the media tend to use the label "drug dealer" rather than "Khalil." This erasure of his name, which is a specific marker of his uniqueness and humanity, casts Khalil as less-than-human. In this way, the novel highlights that the derealization of a certain group of people makes it easier to justify violence inflicted upon them, as their deaths seemingly leave no marks.[49]

As a means of resistance, Starr gradually resorts to individual strategies that allow her to counteract the injustices done to Khalil without revealing her identity as the witness. She refuses to call Officer Cruise by his name and instead refers to him by his badge number: "One-Fifteen."[50] Since he is responsible for her friend's death and her trauma of witnessing this murder, Starr does not want to grant him more authority. As she is aware of the power imbalance between the law enforcement officer and herself, she tries to assume control by questioning his humanity. Moreover, referring to the police officer by his badge number emphasizes that this instance of police brutality is not merely an individual wrongdoing; instead, it exemplifies the larger structural problem of the criminal justice system that fails to provide sufficient security for racialized minorities.

The fact that Khalil's body remains in the streets for hours after his murder is yet another blatant sign of his dehumanization. His body does not matter enough to be taken care of immediately. As Starr observes, he is treated like an object rather than an innocent dead person: "They leave Khalil's body in the street like it's an exhibit." This points to his invisibility, as well as the derealization of his life, and furthermore evokes Michael Brown's murder, whose body was similarly left in the streets for hours and sparked the riots in Ferguson and then ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. Here, Thomas connects the fictional realm to real life, as she accentuates the appalling reaction to black people's deaths. To make the grim reality of the killing of black people even more palpable, Thomas calls to mind Eric Garner's last words when the narrator describes the moment after Khalil's death: "They finally put a sheet over

Khalil. He can't breathe under it. *I can't breathe*."[51] Treating black bodies as objects that can be left at the scene of their deaths for all to see and stifling their last words illustrates the derealization of black lives within a system that tries to make the black suffering it is built on invisible and inaudible.

Rewriting the Narrative: "Thug Life"

While victims' voices have been suffocated and their bodies criminalized in a system operating through the white gaze, African Americans have created opportunities to counter the dehumanization of black lives. In the novel, Starr uses social media to remind the public of Khalil's humanity, which has been disregarded by media discourses promoting his thuggification. She starts a blog titled *The Khalil I Know*, where she posts pictures of her friend that represent him the way she remembers him. On Tumblr, she adds captions to the pictures to offer a more personal account of Khalil's life, such as: "The Khalil I know was afraid of animals."[52] By providing a counternarrative to Khalil's representation in the news, Starr questions white America's way of seeing blackness; she challenges Khalil's stereotyped image as a thug and portrays him as a human being whose life mattered. Starr unsettles what Butler refers to as "the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field," as her posts reveal "a reality that disrupt[s] the hegemonic field of representation itself."[53] She does not only provide a single story about her friend but rather shows multiple facets of his life and being. By giving him a face, she demonstrates his humanity and grants him the grievability that he had been denied.

Social media allow Starr to speak out for Khalil and challenge existing discourses that have framed her friend's image as a thug. Starr thus expresses her first form of activism online. Similarly, social media was an important tool in igniting the BLM movement as #blacklivesmatter helped to connect people for a common cause. It remains a crucial part of its activism and significantly contributed to the swift expansion of the 2020 protests that gained worldwide solidarity. Social media may be seen as a "space of appearance" as conceptualized by Hannah Arendt; they help political action gain visibility.[54] Social networks, thus, provide a forum to animate conversations surrounding police violence and serve as a testimonial space to spread evidence of the dehumanization faced by black people; evidence that does not always suffice to indict the perpetrator but draws global attention to the rampant police brutality that disproportionately targets people of color.[55] Most importantly, social networks amplify black voices and connect people.

Similarly, social media becomes Starr's first platform to remind people of Khalil's humanity. Instead of directly exposing her own body, she uses her voice in the online space. Starr animates people to like and reblog her postings and to upload more art-works and pictures of Khalil. Digital platforms thus provide spaces for people to connect, which is a key component for action to move from virtual space to the streets. Starr gradually realizes that she is implicated in Khalil's invisibility and/or hypervisibility if she remains silent: either his true personality is denied and his name remains unvoiced or his criminal actions are foregrounded to overshadow his humanity and his name becomes replaced by "thug." Starr finally sees her responsibility to capitalize on this visibility to create change, as Lorde so powerfully argues: "And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength."[56]

As Starr becomes more conscious of her voice, she also begins to comprehend the power of language. The language exercised by the dominant group labels Khalil a thug and takes control over the individual by positioning him within a certain social context. As Butler notes in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of Performativity* (1997): "We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory." To name someone is to recognize their existence but also a means to take away power and call their subjectivity into question. Language not only "sustain[s] the body" but "can also threaten its existence." Hence, depending on the circumstances, words can have a "wounding power."[57] However, speech that wounds can also be deployed as a means of resistance: "Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance," as hooks has pointed out.[58] In the course of the novel, Starr comes to understand that dominant discourses can be resisted, rewritten, or reinterpreted. As she develops her awareness of these hegemonic discourses, she engages in what hooks refers to as "self-recovery," which means to see oneself "as if for the first time, for our field of vision is no longer shaped and determined solely by the condition of domination."[59]

The meaning of the word thug expresses exactly this struggle "to read [oneself] anew."[60] Accordingly, both Khalil and Maverick, Starr's father, challenge the word "thug" as they refer to Tupac Shakur, who reinterpreted the phrase "thug life." According to the rapper, thug life is an acronym and translates to "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody."[61] Tupac divests the word of its original power and reinvests it with a new meaning, which transcends its intended pejorative use by white people. He reclaims the word commonly employed by a dominant group to derogatorily refer to the black community, removes its negative associations and gives it new meaning that draws attention to racism.

Reclaiming a word also means reclaiming power. As a stigmatized group takes control over the usage of a term that has been used to their detriment, their feeling of agency increases.[62] This process of recovering agency also shapes Starr's transformation from a girl intimidated and silenced by the public's derogatory comments about her friend Khalil to someone empowered by the very anger she has bottled up while remaining anonymous. The phrase "thug life" and its reappropriated meaning play a significant role in the assertion of black humanity, as does Starr's process of emancipation as she learns "to express anger for [her] growth," as Lorde put it.[63]

While Starr first learns about Tupac's understanding of thug life in a car ride with Khalil shortly before his death, the concept functions as an important motif throughout the novel. Starr also discusses thug life with her father, which is when she comes to understand its deeper meaning: "It's about what society feeds us as youth and how it comes back and bites them later." She realizes that Tupac's message is not just directed at adolescents but at "everybody at the bottom in society" and symbolizes the struggles of black people in the United States. As Starr's father explains, it reflects the situation of many drug dealers in Garden Heights. To prove his point, Maverick alludes to existing racial injustices in America. He talks about unequal education opportunities, as schools in black neighborhoods "don't get the resources to equip you like Williamson does," and unequal career opportunities, as "corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities." Finally, he addresses the issue of drugs dispersed in black neighborhoods and points out that before judging a community or individual for their drug problems, one has to understand the wider web of implications: "How did the drugs even get in our neighborhood? This is a multibillion-dollar industry we talkin' about, baby. That shit is flown into our communities, but I don't know anybody with a private jet." Thus, thug life stands for the cycle of poverty and crime in which many black individuals find themselves as a result of an oppressive system: "That's the hate they're giving us, baby, a system designed against us. That's Thug Life."[64]

The novel dismantles negative stereotypes about black people as inherently criminal by portraying drugs, gangs, and violence as consequences of a systemic lack of opportunities. Khalil was trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime, while Starr, who has benefitted from better circumstances, at first does not comprehend her friend's "choice" to resort to an illegal way of earning money: "I swear to God whenever I think about Khalil falling into that life, it's like watching him die all over again. Yeah, Khalil matters and not the stuff he did, but I can't lie and say it doesn't bother me or it's not disappointing. He knew better." She fails to grasp that criminality is often not a matter of choice, as her friend DeVante points out: "He didn't wanna sell drugs, Starr . . .. Nobody really wanna do that shit. Khalil ain't have much of a choice though." Only when DeVante explains the reasons for her friend's decision to sell drugs, Starr begins to understand. Khalil sold drugs to support his terminally ill grandmother and pay his drug-addicted mother's debts. Khalil refused to be a member of a gang, but the media nevertheless turned him into a "gangbanger." Thus, Starr partly succumbed to the one-sided assumptions about Khalil that were propagated after his death: "This is worse than denying him. I thought the worst of him." She comes to understand that Khalil's image is controlled by derogatory names that position him as a criminal: "I just hate how he's being called a thug and shit when people don't know the whole story." Hence, Starr concludes that the cyclical nature of poverty and crime traps people and leaves them without a choice: "Neither one of them thought they had much of a choice. If I were them, I'm not sure I'd make a much better one. Guess that makes me a thug too."[65]

Tupac's art plays a crucial part in Starr's transformation from silent witness to advocate for social justice. It furthers her understanding of Khalil's background. In addition, it inspires her pride in her community and encourages her to speak up for her friend. His reappropriation of thug life not only raises awareness of social injustices but also serves as a form of empowerment. It attempts to instill hope in people and motivates them to question and challenge racial biases that determine their lives. As the protagonist realizes, in the context of the ongoing protests and riots, thug life means that "the system's still giving the hate."[66] Khalil's death at the hands of police brutality is no exception and riots will not stop as long as the victims do not get justice. An insightful conversation with her father helps her find her voice:

> "That's why people are speaking out, huh? Because it won't change if we don't say something."
> "Exactly. We can't be silent."
> "So I can't be silent."[67]

Starr sees the wider implications of Khalil's death for society as a whole and comes to understand the power of her voice: "This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us despite not knowing me or Khalil. My silence isn't helping Us."[68] Grasping Tupac's meaning of thug life intensifies Starr's sense of community as she prioritizes her contribution to the black community over her fear of speaking out by capitalizing Us. Moreover, it helps her to connect with the people in Garden Heights. She not only overcomes her fear of speaking out but also the shame she internalized about her black neighborhood. As Starr reveals her identity as the witness and publicly stands up for her black community as the voice of protests fighting against police brutality, she, together with other protesters, affirms "the right to place and belonging."[69] These protests expand the space of appearance from online platforms to the heavily policed streets and thus now directly target the problem at its roots. These performative and collective actions provide an opportunity for those who have been excluded, considered "unreal," or silenced, to speak themselves into existence. In the words of bell hooks: "When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence."[70]

Starr's motivation to raise awareness of the systemic oppression that affects her community is essentially what spurred the BLM movement. Garden Heights is the epitome of what Patrisse Khan-Cullors has described as "a forgotten generation" that has been "written off": "We've been written off by the drug war. We've been written off by the war on gangs. We've been written off by mass incarceration and criminalization."[71] Protesting and speaking out for her is a way to bring this generation into existence and heighten people's awareness of its circumstances. For Starr, her voice represents a way to grant Khalil humanity through the narratives she provides. Khalil represents more than just a victim of police brutality; his case is an example that illustrates society's contempt for communities such as Garden Heights and the unjust treatment of their residents through the police and media. The novel challenges the normative discourse that decides who is considered human and instead foregrounds the lives of unjustly killed black people. At the end, the book leaves the fictional realm as it provides the names of real victims of police brutality:

> It would be easy to quit if it was just about me, Khalil, that night, and that cop. It's about way more than that though. It's about Seven. Sekani. Kenya. DeVante.
> It's about Oscar.
> Aiyana.
> Trayvon.
> Rekia.
> Michael.
> Eric.
> Tamir.
> John.
> Ezell.
> Sandra.
> Freddie.
> Alton.
> Philando.
> It's even about that little boy in 1955 who nobody recognized at first—Emmett. . . .
> They're not forgetting. I think that's the most important part.[72]

This transgression from fiction to reality reminds the reader of the prevailing racial discrimination in today's society and suggests that Khalil's story is representative of countless forgotten lives. As Starr notes that "there will always be someone ready to fight," the novel's message transcends the diegetic level to inspire and empower its (black) readership. Starr speaks up for black humanity by giving her friend a narrative and by insisting on saying out loud his name: "I called him Khalil. The world called him a thug."[73] In that sense, *THUG* embraces black humanity and tries to ensure that black lives and names are not forgotten.

Notes

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30 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008), 90.

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40 Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Audre Lorde (New York: Crossing Press, 2007), 42.

41 Thomas, *THUG*, 290.

42 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2006), 30–34, 146–48.

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45 Thomas, *THUG*, 341, 183.

46 Thomas, *THUG*, 288.

47 Thomas, *THUG*, 248.

48 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146–48.

49 See Judith Butler, "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?" interview by George Yancy, *The New York Times*, January 12, 2015, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/; Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146, 35.

50 Thomas, *THUG*, 71.

51 Thomas, *THUG*, 25, 26; emphasis added. See Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 14, 169. In July 2014, Eric Garner was choked to death by the police officer Daniel Pantaleo while exclaiming "I can't breathe" eleven times. Sadly, this cry for help has been repeated by other victims of police brutality and gained renewed urgency in 2020 when George Floyd uttered the same words as he was choked to death by a police officer kneeling on his neck for more than eight minutes. The ensuing protests counteracted this systematic silencing of

black voices as George Floyd's dying words "I can't breathe" became the rallying cry of worldwide BLM movements.

52 Thomas, *THUG*, 205.

53 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 150.

54 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198. Considering that the very plight—police brutality—that BLM aims to address mostly occurs in public spaces, which are also surveilled by the police, it is not surprising that the BLM movement gained global attention through, and continues to operate in, virtual spaces. This foregrounds the importance of social media as safe platforms for vocalizing resistance.

55 Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 75, 170. Videos, often captured by smartphones, which show law enforcement officers beating or shooting people of color have now widely spread through social media. While such footage serves as uncontestable evidence of police violence and clearly shows who is the perpetrator, visual proof did not always suffice to hold police officers accountable in front of the law, as in the case of Freddy Gray and Eric Garner. See Sarah Almukhtar et al., "Black Lives Upended by Policing: The Raw Videos Sparking Outrage," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html. The *New York Times* compiled video footage depicting police violence targeted at black people. George Floyd's killing stands as one of the most recent examples of police brutality filmed and posted online, which turned people around the world into witnesses. The uncontrolled spread of videos of people dying at the hands of police officers, however, also raises important ethical questions: Does it really serve a demand for justice or do these widely shared videos turn black death into a spectacle? For more information on this topic, see Allissa V. Richardson, "The Problem with Police-Shooting Videos," *The Atlantic*, August 30, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/08/the-problem-with-police-shooting-videos-jacob-blake/.

56 Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence," 42.

57 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1, 5, 13, 14.

58 hooks, *Talking Back*, 28.

59 hooks, *Talking Back*, 31.

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64 Thomas, *THUG*, 168–70.

65 Thomas, *THUG*, 236–39, 288.

66 Thomas, *THUG*, 171.

67 Thomas, *THUG*, 171.

68 Thomas, *THUG*, 171.

69 Butler, "Bodies in Alliance," 13.
70 hooks, *Talking Back*, 18.
71 Khan-Cullors and Bandele, *BLM Memoir*, 248.
72 Thomas, *THUG*, 442–43.
73 Thomas, *THUG*, 43, 442.

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The Dissolution of Racial Boundaries

Colonial Diction and Mixed-Race Representations in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall*

Juliann Knaus

Abstract

As the field of mixed-race studies continues to expand, my article adds to this growth by analyzing the representation of mixed-race children in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall* in relation to the corresponding Mexican *casta* paintings she refers to. I explore how Trethewey uses diction and etymology in *Thrall* by performing close readings of her Mexican *casta* painting poems. Throughout my analysis, I pay special attention to how aspects of knowledge and colonialism affect the portrayal of these mixed-race offspring. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Trethewey skillfully uses diction and etymology to emphasize the relationship between knowledge and power, particularly with regard to the representation of mixed-race people in society. Trethewey intertwines mixed-race representation and experiences that seem disparate—her poems cross geographical, temporal, and spatial boundaries—in order to illustrate how mixed-race peoples' positioning and representation in society often transcends such boundaries while additionally critically assessing power dynamics controlling said representation. Accordingly, by closely examining the representation of mixed-race people and miscegenation in art and poetry, this article sheds a new light on how meaning can be developed between races and cultures and stresses how colonialism and knowledge can be connected to contextualizing difference across time and space.

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The Dissolution of Racial Boundaries

Colonial Diction and Mixed-Race Representations in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall*

Juliann Knaus

Former two-term U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey's poetry is abound with racial commentary from a marginalized perspective. According to Malin Pereira, Trethewey "sees herself as an advocate for blacks and maintains a strong identification with black culture and black people" and "assumes an activist role in relation to the erasure of blacks in Southern history."[1] This advocacy for (Southern) black culture becomes especially apparent in Trethewey's poetry collections, in which she claims an active role in telling the stories of people who have not always been listened to. History has typically been written through a hegemonic white male perspective; therefore, by writing about otherwise marginalized populations, Trethewey provides an outlet for a history left untold. This untold history, however, does not only belong to the black population, but includes the mixed-race populace, as well.[2]

Of her numerous volumes of poetry, Trethewey has stated that her 2012 collection *Thrall* "is the book that is actually most about race that I've ever written. Race always appears in my work because I have a racialized experience of America. But in this new book I'm fully examining race as such, as a category itself, and its relation to that vexed issue of blood."[3] Trethewey was born in Mississippi in 1966 to a white Canadian father and an African American mother. Trethewey's mixed heritage and her position as a mixed-race U.S. author (from the South) place her in a prime position to address race in U.S.-American society from a critical standpoint.

Thrall contains multiple poems that deal with the Enlightenment era's obsession with racial classifications. About a quarter of the poems in the collection more specifically address race in colonial Mexico and the systems of classification set in place there. Throughout the collection, these musings surrounding race in colonial Mexico are intermixed with transnational, historical, and autobiographical poems, which broaden discussions of the U.S. within transnational mixed-race discourses.[4]

Trethewey has often referred to herself as being mixed-race or mixed-blood.[5] In her work and in her public persona as a poet, Trethewey embraces the labels that she self-identifies with, namely, labels associated with her multiracial heritage. Racial ideologies have, many would argue, moved beyond their connection to (pseudo-)scientific or biological concepts; however, social views have not progressed in the same way and retain convictions about inherent racial differences. Trethewey argues that the language used to label mixed-race individuals should be analyzed and she constantly underlines why race is still an essential topic of discussion. As a result, many questions arise when one considers how language—both language as employed by Trethewey and language as employed by ruling populations—has been instrumentalized to classify multiracialism. These questions include: How is language connected to mixed-race classification? How are racialized terms related to colonialism and othering? And what connections does Natasha Trethewey establish between language, knowledge, and power particularly with regard to colonialism and imperialism?

Because Trethewey's poetry is an intervention into the long-standing transnational debate about defining and thus socially restricting mixed-race people, this article will seek to answer these questions. Accordingly, my aim is to demonstrate that Trethewey skillfully avails herself of diction and etymology to critically address the way that those in power have claimed to have classified and attempted to bind mixed-race individuals through language. Trethewey's strategic use of language serves as a tool to approach the fluid identities of mixed-race people in order to expose the relationship between knowledge, power, and representation.

Blurring the Borders of Racial Classification in the United States and Mexico

Although the United States and Mexico are located on the same continent and have intertwining geographies and histories, their colonial legacies and cultures have developed in different directions. In particular, the formation of race—although culturally and politically influenced in both countries—took different paths from colonial times onwards, especially in terms of the classification and recognition of mixed-race people and the binaries (or lack thereof) of racial categories.

In the United States, the so-called one-drop-rule was central to racial classification, particularly in the early twentieth century. The one-drop-rule, which socially and legally classifies a multiracial individual as exclusively black if they have any black heritage, has formed the basis of the United States' approach to classifying mixed-race people.[6] This rule, although not part of current legal specifications, is still visible in the mixed-race politics of today and continues to reduce mixed-race identity to the perceived lower hierarchal race(s), which again affirms the racial binary that prevails in discussions of mixed-race identity in the United States.[7] This "rule" signifies that not only social restraints, but also political, ethical, and legal restraints were fundamental to the United States' control over the growth of the mixed-race population.

By contrast, the classification systems that were created in Mexico during colonialism and the period of the Enlightenment move beyond simple black–white binaries so as to include other races and racial mixtures that are not solely based on (perceived) skin color. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in New Spain—vastly stretching from Panama to parts of the southern and western United States—a *sistema de castas* was put into place to organize society in the New World. *El Sistema de Castas*, also known as the caste system or system of castes, was a complex societal arrangement used by the Spaniards in their colonies in the New World. More specifically, the word "castas" (with an "s") was initially used to designate groups of the population who were mixed-race, of "illegitimate descent," and who did not possess "*limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood)," which gave the term "a pejorative connotation."[8]

The *casta* system eventually became more or less obsolete or, rather, was no longer the main determiner of one's place in Mexican society as emphasis began to be placed more on socio-economic factors rather than racial ones.[9] Nevertheless, there was a one-of-a-kind trait that made the *casta* system distinctive from other racial structures in colonial territories. This rare characteristic was that aspects of the *casta* system were not only verbalized in legal, political, and social terms, but further existed as visual art in the form of *casta* paintings.

Casta paintings were a colonial art form that depicted the variety of racial mixtures found in Mexican society and became quite popular in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As Christina Sue notes, these *casta* paintings represented "taxonomy and exotic portrayals of the New World" and also "powerfully displayed the role of phenotype in socio-racial classification."[10] Hence, the paintings reaffirmed the racial stereotypes and phenotypes that had been established through Enlightenment thinking. Trethewey's *casta* painting poems in *Thrall* stand out because they combine colonial diction with mixed-race themes and cross geographical as well as temporal boundaries. Notably, her interaction with Mexican *casta* paintings and the resulting casta painting poems create parallels between U.S.-American and Mexican racial ideologies, as well as imperialist ideologies more generally.

Although the main differences between U.S.-American and Mexican categories of race are integral to understanding Trethewey's usage of the colonial Mexican system, the lines between these aspects of racial classifications and racial formations become blurry when considering that the U.S. southwest was part of Mexico until the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. That part of the United States historically belonged to Mexico and would have thus been influenced by *casta* system classifications. U.S.-American and Mexican conceptions of race should therefore not be distinguished as two completely separate systems.[11] For example, the poem "Calling," with the subtitle "Mexico, 1969," points toward the poet's focus on Mexico not solely being limited to the temporal constraints of the colonial period, but rather extending to the latter half of the twentieth century. In "Calling," the speaker describes a familial (and most likely autobiographical) experience, which has become "palimpsest—one memory / bleeding into another."[12] This bleeding together of memory, experience, geography, and time acknowledges the transnational "vexed issue of blood,"[13] which Trethewey focuses on in *Thrall*.

The blurred boundaries between the United States and Mexico are not only visible through geographical land boundaries, but also through maritime boundaries. The shared Gulf of Mexico and the use of the Mississippi River as a crucial travelling and trading point further represent grounds for exchange of people, goods, and ideologies. In the poem "Geography," Trethewey mentions the "I-10 from Mississippi to New Orleans," "Wolf River," and "the Gulf and Ship Island Line," all of which signal land-based and nautical travel (predominantly across state boundaries).[14] However, in the early nineteenth century, the interstate highway I-10 would have been located in Mexican territory. Additionally, as a native of Gulfport, Mississippi, along the Gulf of Mexico, Trethewey's home state has a French, Spanish, and English colonial history, as well as Native American roots, which would have likewise been intertwined with Mexican racial classifications. Adding to that, aspects of racialization in the U.S.-American South have their own complicated history of colonialism, slavery, and segregation. As a result, Daniel Turner states that Trethewey's poems "recall the South's cross-hatching of ethnic traditions, a stunning admixture of ethnic blood types (Native peoples, European 'settlers,' African and Caribbean exiles/transplants …) threaded among the area's remarkable ecodiversity."[15]

The poem "Enlightenment," which largely portrays a father–daughter visit to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, illustrates the blurred connection between European colonial powers, Mexico, and the United States. Analyses of this poem tend to concentrate on the speaker's (possibly Trethewey's) experiences as a mixed-race individual with their white father visiting Jefferson's Monticello, Jefferson's white hegemonic power, or Jefferson's Enlightenment thinking and racist ideologies.[16] However, I would argue that this poem and its references to Jefferson evoke the blurred geographical boundaries of the United States and its conceptions of race, which Trethewey explores throughout her collection. For example, Jefferson's role in the Louisiana Purchase and Louisiana being a state located on the Gulf of Mexico, with complex linguistic, cultural, racial, and most importantly colonial histories epitomizes Trethewey's focus on what Turner calls "the South's cross-hatching of ethnic traditions."[17]

Examining differentiated, yet overlapping, perspectives toward the histories of racial definitions in the U.S. and Mexico/Latin America provides the tools to investigate how Trethewey utilizes these historiographies in her writing with the aim of critically addressing race in both nations. The shifting and blurry geographical boundaries between the U.S. and Mexico thus become metaphors of the indistinct boundaries of racial divisions in both countries. The *casta* system and *casta* paintings, however, supply Trethewey with a tradition that did not explicitly exist in all parts of the U.S. South. This allows her to use this system and art form in order to play with aspects of estrangement and familiarity with regard to mixed-race representation. The portrayal of (un-) differentiated Mexican and U.S. perspectives, in turn, prevent a U.S.-focused, U.S.-based perspective, which is noteworthy because Trethewey does not use race in Mexico to avoid talking about the United States directly. On the contrary, she uses the comparison to highlight details about the U.S. system that are usually ignored or misconstrued because of the perceived hierarchy between U.S. and Mexican culture.

A Diachronic Approach to Colonial Diction in *Thrall*

Trethewey's use of diction as well as her diachronic approach to words are crucial aspects of her poetry's aesthetics and argumentative trajectory. In multiple interviews, Trethewey affirms her use of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[18] She reflects on this method by stating that "every word is a poem in itself because there's the history of the word, all its uses across time, all of the secondary and tertiary definitions that can help deepen the figurative level of the poem."[19] Hence, words should be considered with their historical contexts and the development of their meanings over time in mind. A word cannot, and should not, be watered down to a single modern definition, as Trethewey uses etymology and archaic forms to affix a historical dimension to her poetry. Her historical consciousness then not only extends from her themes of mixed-race people and their representations from colonial times onwards, but is also an essential element of her writing style. Therefore, neither are her themes restricted to the twenty-first century, nor is her language oblivious to the extensive history of English language semantics and pragmatics.

Already the single-word title of the poetry volume, *Thrall*, directs attention to the historical dimensions of a noun unknown even to the majority of poetry readers. The word "thrall" is not a common one; even Trethewey herself admits that she had never heard the word as a term for slave; she had only encountered it in the phrase "in thrall to,"[20] as in "to be captivated by something." The definition of thrall provided by the *OED* is: "One who is in bondage to a lord or master; a villein, serf, bondman, slave; also, in vaguer use, a servant, subject."[21] Consequently, the selection of "thrall" as the title of this collection links the word to the content, which includes topics regarding colonization and hierarchical racial classification.

The development of the title began when Trethewey, who was in the process of finishing her third collection of poetry, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Native Guard* (2006), decided to look up the word "native." The definition she found was "someone born into the condition of servitude; a thrall."[22] Once Trethewey began to contemplate the definition of native, she wondered: "Why do we have the word 'native?'"[23] The answer was rooted in colonialism. She argues that "when we claim land, the people who are there are the 'natives'; it is about colonialism, it is about empire, and the word 'thrall' is right there."[24] "Native," she continues, "carries with it a history of imperialism, of colonialism, the idea that when we go there to colonize someplace, those people are the 'natives'."[25] It is then only through colonialism that there are natives; and it is the language of colonialism that is used in othering.

The word "native," which was so crucial to the creation of *Thrall*, appears once in the collection. Trethewey uses the word "native" in the poem "De Español y de India Produce Mestiso." Interestingly, "native" is italicized in the poem.[26] While Trethewey primarily reserves italics for Spanish words in the collection or for English translations of Spanish *casta* labels, in this poem she uses italics to add emphasis, among other words to the term "native." Importantly, this specific poem ekphrastically describes the painting that was chosen for the cover of *Thrall*. This suggests that the inclusion of "native" in said poem is a nod toward acknowledging the role the word "native" played in the title and creation of the collection.

Additionally, the word "native" can be applied to the mother of the child represented in the painting used for the cover, because she is "indian," or a "native" of Mexico. It is furthermore possible to associate "native" with the child servant in the painting, who was born into a position of servitude, thus embodying the definition of the word. As a further point of connection, the inclusion of the word "native" also relates to the mixed-race child in the painting and the fact that she was born into a position in which she is a slave to the racial mixture that defines and confines her.

The word "native" in this poem is contained in the run-on line "He is dark / as history, origin of the word / native."[27] Here, Trethewey points to the "origin of the word" that was so integral to the creation of the collection. The "dark / as history" indicates a negative, overshadowing history, such as one connected to slavery, or to the violent treatment of indigenous communities by colonizers—both concepts that are not limited to Mexican history, but instead emphasize the link Trethewey wants to establish between colonial Mexico and the United States.

In Trethewey's discussions of the word "thrall," she links the word to knowledge, power, and colonialism, and calls attention to the role language plays in creating hegemonic societies. She argues that "we're in thrall to: language, knowledge, ideas, power."[28] Thus, we are all slaves to these concepts that control our society. As Trethewey notes, if we look back at "travel narratives and captivity narratives, it was language that they [colonizers] were using to shape the understanding of a place and its inhabitants. When you look at those colonial maps that have drawings of the people there, it is the iconography, as carefully as the taxonomies of who they were that they were enthralled to."[29] Therefore, as Europeans explored new regions of the world, producing writings about both the places they "found" and the people there, they always included a "native" element and an element of hierarchy in their representations.

Language is not just based on etymology or historical associations, but is also closely linked to how power is used to gain control over people, societies, and ways of thinking. In particular through the eighteenth century and the Age of Enlightenment, ways of thinking became rooted in the language of classification. This era concretized the employment of language in classification systems which, according to Trethewey, produced the "emergence of codified racial difference" and "taxonomies" that "were a form of knowledge production that subjected some peoples" and which "we still hold on to today in many ways."[30] Therefore, although the Enlightenment era provided useful ways of looking at the world around us, the language developed during that time led to knowledge, or rather presumed knowledge, which in turn encouraged the disempowerment of othered subjects.

Race is systemically integrated into our society and culture. Michael Omi and Howard Winant claim that "we utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is" and, therefore, when we come across someone who is mixed-race, "such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning" because we are unable to classify or label this person unambiguously.[31] This may, in turn, become a crisis of identity for both the individual and the Other. The individual not only questions the other individual's identity, but also begins to question the parameters of their own racial identity. Additionally, the connection between the phenotypes that we see and the racial assumptions we hold about them does not always match these two components. It is this unplaceable aspect of mixed-race people that encouraged the labeling and classifying of mixed-race individuals.

This attempt to join phenotypes and language should be connected to Trethewey's use of the word "taxonomy." Four of her ekphrastic *casta* poems are included in a section titled "Taxonomy," which presents examples of mixed-race unions in Mexico including the taxonomies used to label mixed-race people. Taxonomy is a scientific field that focuses on classifying and naming organisms; accordingly, Trethewey's use of "taxonomy" infers a scientific basis for the classification of mixed-race people. By exerting control over the naming and classification of mixed-race people in society, the Spanish recognized these populations, but naming them gave the Spanish the ability to control them based on said categories. Trethewey's ekphrastic approach to the casta paintings is to first examine the "language" that is applied along with "the imagery that accompanies that language."[32] The Mexican *casta* paintings that she writes about have both "the imagery—the painting of the parents, the mixed-race union, and then the offspring they would have produced—in addition to the names: the taxonomies made to name those mixed-blood people."[33] These taxonomies are present in the titles of various poems, as well as in the labeling language used in the *casta* painting poems.

Trethewey's arguments about mixed-race people being "in thrall" to taxonomies and language is concretized in her poem "The Book of Castas" featured in the section titled "Taxonomy." At the beginning of the poem, Trethewey employs various mixed-race labels that were used in colonial Mexico. As Malin Pereira explains, "Trethewey traces an Enlightenment-associated discourse of race in which . . . mixed race persons' value is calculated through proportion of white blood, expressed in a taxonomy of terms."[34] In Trethewey's words, this shows "the ways in which the people had been labeled as a form of social control: to name them and thus to know them in the naming."[35] Since we are enthralled by such labels, the poem ends by saying that a mixed-race female and "all her kind" are "in thrall to a word."[36] The "her" in the line refers to the mixed-race child and the final line encourages a reading that the multiracial child is a slave to the terminology that binds her. She is held captive by the labels attached to who she supposedly is, as determined by those in power. Furthermore, as Joseph Millichap makes clear, "the cast, or color, of these bi-racial progeny, as well as the caste, or class, assigned to them within their culture therefore are determined by their white fathers to whom the children then are forever in thrall."[37]

Trethewey refers to the names and equations of mixture associated with each mixed-race child. She demonstrates her knowledge of the outcomes of these equations in "The Book of Castas," in which she describes the eponymous book that was used to provide the legal and social record of a person's racial classification.[38] Trethewey describes this book as being both the "catalog / of mixed bloods" and "the book of naught."[39] The catalog of mixed bloods would include every aspect of a person's ethnicity and/or heritage. However, the word "naught" suggests that the book is, in fact, a book of nothing. The book accordingly reveals everything the person is not. They are not Spanish and not white, meaning that they hold a liminal position of neither being one thing nor the other. On the other hand, in phrases which use "naught," such as "to bring to naught," the nothingness of naught takes on a vastly different meaning. It begins to represent the destruction of purity, of pure lineage, and whiteness, thus othering the subject based on everything that they are (of mixed bloods) and everything they are not (of nothing).

The poem "The Book of Castas" includes the highest number of labels of mixed-race classification out of all of Trethewey's *casta* painting poems: "*mulatto-returning-backwards*," "*hold-yourself-in-midair*," "*the morsica, the lobo, the chino, / sambo, albino*," and "*no-te-entiendo*."[40] Hence, the poem foregrounds labeling and classification so as to emphasize the extent of racialized language. The sheer number of terms used to classify mixed-race people in *casta* paintings is extensive; with Maria Herrera-Sobek estimating that at least "fifty-three different names," if not more, composed "the casta nomenclature" of various "racial mixtures."[41] Christa Olson, however, points out that "far fewer caste names [were] in common use."[42] This expansive racial terminology, regardless of the extent to which the terms were used, point toward the colonial fixation on race. Trethewey exposes this obsession with the use of labels and language and implies a link between these racial ideologies and control/power particularly in the last line—"in thrall to a word."[43] Consequently, by exposing these terminologies as historically linked to the assertion of power, the ways in which racial codification across history affects current ideologies toward race and attitudes regarding mixed-race people becomes visible.

Trethewey's use of words for the classification of mixed-race people in colonial Mexico in her *casta* painting poems corresponds with the taxonomies, racial mixtures, and key racial ideologies detailed in the casta system. In "De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza," Trethewey lists "three easy steps / to purity," explaining three different intermixtures: "*from a Spaniard and an Indian, / a mestizo; / from a mestizo and a Spaniard, / a castizo; / from a castizo and a Spaniard, / a Spaniard*."[44] Generation after generation, these intermixtures become whiter, eventually returning to a category of someone with full Spanish blood. The parents' races are always placed on one line, and the resulting label of their mixed-race offspring is placed on the line directly below. By placing the mixed-race child on the line below, Trethewey separates the child from their parents and the parents' races, highlighting the child as the creation of something new. Here, each of the racial labels is written in italics, which visually sets these "steps of purity" apart from the rest of the text. The only other word that is italicized is "*Mexico*," in the line "(call it *Mexico*)."[45] Italicizing "Mexico" creates a visual link between the racial mixtures and the country. This visual link emphasizes the underlying connections between Mexico and its racial ideologies of the *casta* system. The three mixes are conjoined with the use of semi-colons and the completion of the purity process ends with a period. This period signals the completion of the steps to purity, with the mixed-race individual attaining the label of "Spaniard," the ultimate goal.

Naming, labeling, and classifying were of great importance, not only in the Mexican *casta* system and in the process of colonization, but also to U.S.-American society. As Trethewey emphasizes, "We are enthralled to the language that seeks to name us; thus 'mulatto,' 'quadroon,' 'octoroon,' 'sambo,' 'albino'" and we are enthralled by language that "make[s] us occupy certain positions in society, in history."[46] Mixed-race people are defined and confined by the labels imposed upon them. Although the system of mixed-race classification in the United States is not as in-depth as that of the Mexican *casta* system, as Trethewey makes clear, "there is legal language meant to define me, and also render me illegal or illegitimate," "to name me as other, and in that way to shape my identity and place in the world."[47] The lack of recognition of mixed-race people in U.S.-American society and the legal language that places someone like Trethewey into the category of being "black" rather than mixed-race are all ways in which language keeps Trethewey in thrall. This is also the case, for example, with the word miscegenation, which—at the time of her birth—was meant to "render" Trethewey "illegal" and "illegitimate."[48]

Legal terms such as miscegenation are furthermore interconnected with questions of agency. Who has the power to regulate language? Who has power over the naming of individuals? This power is visible in the introduction of miscegenation into legal systems, in order to codify racial differences and hold power over others because of those racial differences. The legal system, however, is an abstraction—there are always people behind the system who are not always named, but who nonetheless have the power to name others. As Trethewey argues, "someone had a word for what they thought they saw in me. That's a memory that doesn't just belong to me. It belongs to our national memory in terms of how we divided and parsed human beings."[49]

Robert B. Moore notes that "language not only develops in conjunction with a society's historical, economic and political evolution; it also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts but actually shapes thought."[50] Trethewey reaffirms this statement by arguing that "we are in thrall to language, to ideology … Language comes first, in some ways, before you even begin to think."[51] The individual is consequently always exposed to socially determined and socially determining language. The labels that are attached to mixed-race people draw on the collective ideologies of race and the labeling of race that is engrained into U.S.-American history and culture. Thus, the language and supposed knowledge used by those in power to produce the othering of the colonized or marginalized constitutes a noteworthy aspect of this work; a fact that is already apparent from the title of Trethewey's collection and its development.

The Semantics of Mixed Blood

In *Thrall*, Trethewey moreover explores the Mexican *casta* system's focus on *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) by utilizing various levels of blood imagery in her poems. In fact, all of her *casta* painting poems apart from one (as well as seven of her other poems in the collection) include references to blood. Trethewey is then "looking at ideas of otherness, racial difference, blood purity and impurity across time and space" in order to see "how these ideas assert themselves, these notions of blood and purity, through varied histories, [and] how these concepts are still affecting how we think about and treat other human beings around the world."[52]

"The Book of Castas" notably features an abundance of blood imagery. Expressions such as "mixed bloods," "typology of taint," "stain," "blemish," "sullying spot," "purified," and "blood" all elicit the image of blood. Connections between mixed-blood and purity, especially "that which can be purified, / that which cannot" are the focal point.[53] In particular the word "taint," employed twice in this poem, stands out.[54] The use of the word creates an image of tainted blood, blood that is not pure. This reference to tainted blood links back to the so-called scientific taxonomic trajectory in the labels of classification for mixed-race individuals, which was not objective, but rather ideologically inflected, because it included evaluative and often pejorative implications.

According to Olson, *casta* paintings typically portrayed that "sufficient dilution of indigenous heritage returns a child to the status of Español,"[55] which is visible in Trethewey's poem "De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza." This meant that mixed-blood could be returned to pure blood. However, "there is no such cleansing for African heritage"; therefore, "African blood is depicted as most degraded and most contaminating."[56] This is mirrored in ideologies of the one-drop rule in U.S.-American society. Correspondingly, mixed-blood that was tainted with black blood could not revert back to pure Spanish blood. Unlike "The Book of Castas," "De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza" has only two mentions of blood: "mixed blood" and "the promise of blood."[57] In this poem, blood is no longer emphasized because the mixed-race child has the opportunity to return to being fully Spanish, and thus, they are not as haunted by their blood mixture as other mixed-race individuals, especially those with African blood, who are referenced in "The Book of Castas."

"De Español y Negra Produce Mulato" mentions blood only once, and the reference is not directed toward mixed blood or the mixed-race child, as in the previous examples, but instead links blood with the black mother. In the lines "red beads / yoked at her throat like a necklace of blood," the red beads of the black mother's necklace evoke the image of drops of blood.[58] Using a word like "yoke" ties the placement of the necklace on the mother to a harness employed to exploit animals for farm labor. This encourages readings of how African blood enslaves the black mother to her social position; she is, consequently, "in thrall" to her African blood.

The poem "Blood" located in the "The Americans" section of the collection refers to a painting by George Fuller titled *The Quadroon* (1880).[59] Quadroon was a racial classification used in the United States to describe someone with one fourth black or African blood. This mixed-race classification dates back to ideologies of the one-drop rule. Apart from the title, blood is mentioned once in the poem in the lines, "the pathos of her condition: / black blood." The "condition" in this case is the tainting of black blood on the "melancholic beauty" of the subject figure in the painting. Notably, "*black blood*" is the only italicized expression in the poem apart from the word "*Mezzo*." Trethewey, once again, uses italics to add emphasis to the role that blood plays in her collection and in her critical approach to mixed-race representation, as well as to signify a foreign word, this time in Italian. The half- or in-between-ness implied by the Italian word links with the liminal mixed-race position of the girl in the painting, due to her half (or in this case quarter) "black blood." In addition, it evokes the girl's position in the painting between the viewer (most likely the white gaze) and the "dark kin working the fields behind her." Her role then becomes "to bridge the distance between."[60]

Combating Racial Codifications through Fluid Mixed-Race Identities

Trethewey's writing traverses many borders; her writing crosses the North American border of the United States and Mexico, as well as transatlantic boundaries between Europe and North America. The temporal boundaries she addresses cover a span of hundreds of years, from colonial times to the modern day. Katherine Henninger argues that the speakers and contexts within Trethewey's poems "move repeatedly between personal and international material, fluidly drawing cross-cultural comparisons between the two and creating a mixed race community based on the experience."[61] The limitless nature of Trethewey's poetry and diction in *Thrall* interconnects issues of mixed-race identities across the visual and the textual modes and encourages links between Mexican and U.S.-American concepts of race while also emphasizing communal imperial experiences of mixed-race people.

Trethewey's focus on diction encourages delving into etymology to uncover the socio-historical power of words. She takes a linguistic parallel track to looking at mixed-race ideologies with a historical mindset. Additionally, her usage of Spanish words alongside English ones signifies her acknowledgement of the power of language in a transnational history of colonization, racism, and discrimination.

Although Trethewey is a U.S.-American—and, more importantly, a mixed-race U.S.-American and Southern—author, she implements a transnational strategy in her poems by including a double perspective of race from both a U.S. and Mexican viewpoint. She acknowledges the transnational phenomenon of mixed-race ideologies by writing poems that oscillate between the United States and Mexico in order to underline the intertwined, yet differing histories of race ideologies in both countries. The overlapping nature of the subject matter in her poems creates a layered form, where intersections between racial ideologies become visible, while the shortcomings of such ideologies are emphasized. Trethewey does not limit or confine herself to the Mexican *casta* system; instead, as Malina Pereira notes, she sheds light on "the history of colonization, and who the colonialist is, and who the colonial bodies are" to critically assess the representation of mixed-race people throughout history, across boundaries of time and space.[62] Trethewey refuses to accept the limitations imposed by the colonizing words of power; instead, she writes poetry that "needles us to think deeply about something and perhaps have to rethink ourselves and our position in the world and everything we thought up until that moment."[63] Trethewey's force pushes us all beyond the boundaries of our ways of thinking and liberates mixed-race people from the binds of colonial language.

If mixed-race individuals accept and celebrate all aspects of their multiracial identity, they blur the boundaries between racial groups and actively combat "the denial of their existence," as Cynthia Nakashima puts it. As Nakashima explains, this establishes a space that enables the dismantling of racial categories and encourages discussions of how "biological, sociocultural, and sociopolitical arguments" relating to mixed-race individuals can be seen as myths.[64] G. Reginald Daniel proposes that mixed-race people should therefore affirm a "nondichotomous and nonhierarchical identity," rather than trying to assimilate into the discriminatory system set in place to define them.[65] As Michele Elam suggests, there is a "call for a refocusing of ways of seeing that can afford not merely a defensive but also a productive opportunity for social insight into the intersubjective processes of racial formation."[66] By recognizing the power of cultural, social, economic, legal, and political systems, as well as their effects on multiracial formation, Trethewey exposes how verbal representations of mixed-race identities both harmonize and oppose one another. Thus, through embracing the fluidity of mixed-race identities and by shedding light on the language that has been used to bind mixed-race individuals throughout history, the confines that this language imposes can begin to dissolve.

Notes

1 Malin Pereira, "Re-reading Trethewey through Mixed Race Studies," *Southern Quarterly*

50, no. 4 (2013): 147.

2 Because Trethewey has used her voice for activism in both the black and mixed-race communities, Pereira suggests approaching Trethewey as having a "mulattoesque blackness," a term she credits to Michele Elam. Elam connects this concept to the term "blaxploration," which "honors a hybriditity that is 'in service to' and 'on behalf of' black needs and ends." Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 21. I am, however, hesitant to endorse the term "mulattoesque" due to the both negative and tragic connotations attached to the term "mulatto."

3 Natasha Trethewey, "Southern Crossings: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey," interviewed by Daniel Cross Turner, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 166–67.

4 Natasha Trethewey, *Thrall* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

5 See, for example, Natasha Trethewey, "Outside the Frame: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey," interviewed by Regina Bennett, Harbour Winn, and Zoe Miles, 2010, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 152.

6 G. Reginald Daniel, "Black No More or More Than Black?," in *Racial Thinking in the United States: Uncompleted Independence*, ed. Paul R. Spickard and G. Reginald Daniel (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 282.

7 For discussions of the one-drop-rule, see, for example, David Hollinger, "Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (2003): 1363-90, https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/108.5.1363; Winthrop D. Jordan, "Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States," *The Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91g761b3.

8 Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodriguez O., "Society," in *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (1980; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 200.

9 For more information regarding race and social mobility in Mexico/Latin America, see Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 68; G. Reginald Daniel, *More Than Black? Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 14; MacLachlan and Rodriguez O., *Forging of the Cosmic Race*, 200–201, 216–17, 223; Christa Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009): 327, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940902991429; Maria Herrera-Sobek, "Casta Paintings and the Black Legend: Ideology and Representation of Black Africans in New Spain (1700–1790)," in *Slavery as a Global and Regional Phenomenon*, ed. Eric Hilgendorf, Jan-Christoph Marschelke, and Karin Sekora (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 85; Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

10 Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 11.

11 I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for indicating this noteworthy point.

12 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 66. I will use page numbers as a point of reference rather than line

numbers.

13 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 167.

14 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 45–47.

15 Daniel Cross Turner, "Lyric Dissections: Rendering Blood Memory in Natasha Trethewey's and Yusef Komunyakaa's Poetry of the Black Diaspora," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 100.

16 See, for example, Katherine R. Henninger, "What Remains: Race, Nation, and the Adult Child in the Poetry of Natasha Trethewey," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 66, 70; Pearl Amelia McHaney, "Natasha Trethewey's Triptych: The Bodies of History in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, *Native Guard*, and *Thrall*," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 170; Joseph Millichap, "'Love and Knowledge': Daughters and Fathers in Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall*," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013): 196, 202–203. The way Trethewey frames "Enlightenment" at her inaugural reading as U.S. Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress indicates that the inspiration for the poem is strongly autobiographical. See: "Inaugural Reading of Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey," *Library of Congress*, September 13, 2012, video, 51:57, https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-5645/.

17 Turner, "Lyric Dissections," 100.

18 See, for example, interviews with Fink, DeVries, Teresi, and Turner in Joan Wylie Hall, ed., *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), as well as the introduction to that collection; and Natasha Trethewey, "'The Larger Stage of These United States': Creativity Conversation with Natasha Trethewey and Rosemary Magee," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013).

19 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.

20 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.

21 "Thrall," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2019, accessed October 10, 2018, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/201091.

22 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.

23 Natasha Trethewey, "Because of Blood: Natasha Trethewey's Historical Memory," interviewed by Lisa DeVries, 2008, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 108.

24 Tretheway, "Because of Blood," 108.

25 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166.

26 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 18.

27 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 18.

28 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 23.

29 Trethewey, "Because of Blood," 108. For further information on how travel narratives were used as tools of empire and colonialism, see Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, "Introduction: Reading Postcolonial Travel Writing," in *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, ed. Justin D. Edwards, and Rune Graulund (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–16; Claire Lindsay, "Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Carl Thompson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), Routledge Handbooks Online, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203366127, ch. 3.

30 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166–67; Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 27.

31 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s," in *The Inequality Reader: Contemporary and Foundational Readings in Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. David B. Grusky and Szonja Szelényi (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 201.

32 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.

33 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.

34 Malin Pereira, "An Angry, Mixed Race Cosmopolitanism: Race, Privilege, Poetic Identity, and Community in Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina* and *Thrall*," in *New Cosmopolitanisms, Race, and Ethnicity: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ewa Barbara Luczak, Anna Pochmara, and Samir Dayal (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 267, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110626209-015.

35 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166–67.

36 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 26.

37 Millichap, "Love and Knowledge," 195.

38 For more information on the "book of *castas*," see Magali M. Carrera, "Identity by Appearance, Judgment, and Circumstances: Race as Lineage and Calidad," in *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1–21.

39 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 24.

40 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 24–25.

41 Herrera-Sobek, "Casta Paintings," 94.

42 Olson, "Casta Painting," 310.

43 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 26.

44 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 23.

45 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 22.

46 Trethewey, "Because of Blood," 108; Natasha Trethewey, "An Interview with Natasha Trethewey," interviewed by Christian Teresi, 2009, in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 125.

47 Trethewey, "An Interview," 125; Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166.

48 Trethewey, "An Interview," 125.

49 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.

50 Robert B. Moore, "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 4th ed., ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 365.

51 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 24.

52 Trethewey, "Southern Crossings," 166–67.

53 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 25.

54 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 24–25.

55 Olson, "Casta Painting," 311.

56 Olson, "Casta Painting," 311.

57 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 22, 23.

58 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 20.

59 See George Fuller, *The Quadroon*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1880, oil on canvas, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10925.

60 Trethewey, *Thrall*, 34.

61 Henninger, "What Remains," 71.

62 Pereira, "An Angry Mixed-Race Cosmopolitanism," 269.

63 Trethewey, "The Larger Stage," 26.

64 Cynthia Nakashima, "An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-Race People in America," in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P. P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 177–78.

65 Daniel, "Black No More," 289.

66 Elam, *Souls of Mixed Folk*, 26.

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Remaking Columbine

Johannes Vith

Abstract

High school shootings in the United States generally receive enormous amounts of journalistic coverage and thus spark a lot of public interest. However, the topic appears to be taboo for mainstream cinema, and there are barely any films about real-life school shootings. This article seeks to show that Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) is both an enlightening exception to this seeming contradiction and an interesting response to the popular narratives surrounding the Columbine High School shooting of 1999. The film is not only unique in its portrayal of a real-life school shooting but also in the way that it approaches the topic. There are three important processes that make this depiction of the Columbine High School shooting so powerful: remaking, remediating, and reflecting. First, Van Sant's film is a remake of Alan Clarke's 1989 film of the same name. Clarke's film depicts several incidents of gun violence in Northern Ireland without any commentary, and Van Sant employs the same techniques in his film about gun violence at a school. Second, the film critiques the discourse around the shooting, as it remediates video games for its filmic rhetoric. Lastly, Gus Van Sant de-narrativizes the shooting and creates a reflective space for the audience. These three aspects all influence the film's storytelling and cinematography, which aim at promoting reflection rather than providing a straightforward narrative.

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Remaking Columbine

Johannes Vith

American exceptionalism usually emphasizes the ways in which the United States is superior to other nations; however, as Seymour Martin Lipset has demonstrated, American exceptionalism is a "double-edged sword": the U.S. has an incredibly low electoral turnout rate, an absurdly unequal distribution of wealth, and (by far) the most prison inmates.[1] The United States is also the only country truly haunted by the specter of school shootings.[2] Despite the continuously high number of school shootings, the Columbine High School shooting of 1999 plays a particular role in their history and commemoration. Fifteen people died, including the two shooters.[3] Although such tragedies are impossible to quantify, the Columbine High School shooting had the highest number of casualties for a school shooting at the time,[4] and it also received extensive media coverage.[5] It became the largest news story of the year in 1999, which 68 percent of Americans followed very closely.[6] According to Glenn Muschert, it was the seventh-highest-rated media event of the 1990s.[7] Interest was especially high among young people, as 73 percent of those under thirty years of age closely followed the events in Littleton. This is particularly striking because this age group tends to show less interest in the news in comparison with older Americans.[8] The shooting has since become an iconic event and has had a great impact on public discourse about social problems, juvenile delinquency, and gun control in the United States.[9]

Interestingly, although both school shootings and mass shootings receive enormous amounts of media coverage,[10] real-life gun violence is a taboo in mainstream cinema culture.[11] In general, mainstream cinema does not shy away from depicting violence in films. In fact, the portrayal of violence in PG-13 films has tripled since 1985. Today, 94 percent of all PG-13 films include segments containing violence, about half of which involve guns.[12] Nevertheless, there are barely any feature films about real-life school shootings. The scarcity of this particular subject matter, both in popular and in independent cinema, makes it even more important to examine films that, in fact, approach these shootings. Notably, the two Columbine shooters even discussed the issue of who would direct a future movie about their shooting. In a series of videotapes (the "Basement Tapes"), Eric Harris, one of the two shooters, stated that "directors will be fighting over this story" and expressed his desire for certain narrative features of a possible film.[13] However, few feature films have broached the Columbine High School shooting, even more than twenty years after it happened. There are some notable exceptions, though. Guy Ferland's *Bang, Bang, You're Dead* (2002) was inspired by the events in Columbine but ultimately resolves the conflict differently than the real shooting. Ben Coccio's *Zero Day* (2003) sets out to recreate the Basement Tapes, a kind of video diary of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. While not a narrative feature film, Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) interconnects the events of Columbine with a call for stricter gun laws. Gus Van Sant's 2003 film *Elephant* is one of the few critically acclaimed feature films that address the topic of school shootings generally and Columbine in particular. In this article, I will show that Van Sant's film offers enlightening and unconventional insights into the seeming contradiction that school shootings receive enormous amounts of journalistic coverage but appear to be a taboo topic for mainstream cinema. Thus, Gus Van Sant's approach to depicting the violence of the school shooting provides a particularly productive focus for investigation.

By analyzing how *Elephant* mediates the topic of school shootings, I will explore how a film can address issues that are possibly traumatic for its audience. This analysis will also shed light on how a filmmaker can dismantle a traumatic experience in a film and "promote non-judgmental observation in the film's audience."[14] While *Elephant* is a response to the Columbine High School shooting, it is probably not the film Harris envisioned in the Basement Tapes. As I will demonstrate, there are three important dimensions that make Van Sant's rendering of this taboo topic unique. First, *Elephant* draws on Alan Clarke's eponymous 1989 film, which shows several incidents of gun violence in Northern Ireland without providing any narrative context or commentary. Second, Van Sant's *Elephant* critiques the public discourse that surrounded the Columbine High School shooting, in particular concerning its focus on video games as a source of, or inspiration for, the shooting. Van Sant includes aspects of video games in his film, but they are used as an aesthetic influence and filmic rhetoric rather than a narrative focus. Finally, while other films, such as *Bowling for Columbine*, have tried to provide a clear explanation for the shooting, Gus Van Sant de-narrativizes the event, thereby creating a space for reflection for the audience. These three aspects all shape the film to a point where, rather than providing a straightforward narrative, it encourages reflection. This is crucial for adapting an event as grave and traumatic as a school shooting for the screen. As Jennifer Rich has put it, *Elephant* does not provide any "ideological or interpretative clarity."[15] Instead, it asks viewers to reflect on what they have seen.

Review

Like most of Van Sant's movies, *Elephant* merges art and experimentation and blends aspects of popular and independent cinema, combining his interest in subcultures with his desire to appeal to mainstream audiences.[16] In 2003, *Elephant* received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival,[17] which shows that *Elephant* was well-received by both independent and mainstream cinema audiences. Nevertheless, *Elephant* is generally considered an art film. Having attended art school, Van Sant's background invites such a classification.[18] Because *Elephant* blurs the boundaries between mainstream cinema and independent film, it is difficult to link the film to a specific school of filmmaking or a particular theoretical approach. The film rather draws on various styles and techniques related to different traditions.

Van Sant's movies are often associated with arthouse cinema, a term that generally refers to non-mainstream films that are perceived to have particular artistic value. These films are often produced independently on a low budget and/or are not of North American origin. More importantly, Van Sant's films draw on *cinéma vérité*, which combines improvisation with distinct camera work to create a unique sense of reality in a film. Van Sant's *vérité* style owes much to Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr, the American filmmakers Frederick Wiseman and John Cassevetes, and Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kianostami. For example, the long, pensive traveling shots in *Elephant* are a direct homage to Tarr's work.[19] This obsession with the beauty of walking and moving through space in real time is exemplified by Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994). In an essay on Tarr, Van Sant writes,

> I have been influenced by Béla Tarr's films and after reviewing the last three works *Damnation*, *Satantango*, and *Werckmeister Harmonies*, I find myself attempting to rethink film grammar and the effect industry has had on it . . .They get so much closer to the real rhythms of life that it is like seeing the birth of a new cinema. He is one of the few genuinely visionary filmmakers.[20]

Tarr became famous for art films with philosophical themes and cinematography defined by long takes. Even though *Sátántangó* has a runtime of over seven hours, it consists of only 150 shots.[21] Similarly, Van Sant's *Elephant* only contains 88 cuts,[22] while the average movie includes approximately 1,100 shots.[23] Tarr began his career as a filmmaker by telling mundane stories about ordinary people in what he called "social cinema"—a style of film associated with *cinéma vérité*. Tarr's "social cinema" is a film genre situated between fiction and non-fiction that tells a narrative just as it unfolds.

Similar to his creative inspiration, Van Sant's *Elephant* draws on techniques associated with *cinéma vérité*. In an interview, the director noted that the film only had an outline but no screenplay.[24] Without a script, the film revealed itself in real time.[25]

For Van Sant, it was important not to cut the scene or stop the camera, but to consider the shot as one continuous piece.[26] He also incorporated aspects of the actors' and actresses' real lives, such as their names and hobbies, in his story and had them improvise large parts of the movie in order to create a very realistic insight into high school life.

Through the use of techniques associated with *cinéma vérité*, *Elephant* subtly introduces the audience to the reality of high schools. Some sequences in *Elephant* feel voyeuristic, others very mundane. This was important to Van Sant, as the film is as much about a school shooting as it is about youth; he wanted to portray the prosaic and undramatic character of a teenager's life in a school in the U.S. According to William G. Little, Van Sant's cinematography resembles what Vivian Sobchack calls the "accidental gaze,"[27] a particular form of documentary that leaves both the filmmaker and the viewer unprepared for the violence that they are about to witness.[28] Sobchack states that "the wonder and fascination generated by such films is that a death happens, is visible, and yet is somehow not seen, that it is attended to by the camera rather than by the filmmaker or spectator."[29] Little argues that the film's imitation of the accidental gaze is, in fact, "a commentary on the ethics of making death available for consumption," and, therefore, an important aspect of Van Sant's depiction of the violence inflicted in a school shooting.[30]

Elephant's focus on the shooting itself rather than on the characters also becomes apparent in its dialogues. What appears to be everyday conversation does not support action in the film, nor does it push forward a plot. This again corroborates with Van Sant's overall vision. He has stated that the dialogues "were just sort of noises that they—the characters—made between each other. They weren't gonna tell you anything. Or like the things that they said weren't gonna inform you."[31] In this way, the film creates a feeling of naturalism and displays its characters as if they are part of a zoo exhibit.[32] Moreover, all of the characters in the film appear to be rather one-dimensional. For Van Sant, it was important to show the things that happen during a regular high school day.[33] This vision of high school was initially based on his own memories, yet further influenced by the amateur actors and actresses. The characters resemble stock characters of a typical high school drama, including a student with a camera, some "jocks," and a quiet girl who works at the library.[34] According to Michael Sofair, these characters are "being barely distinguished as victims and perpetrators."[35] The students are portrayed as dull and ordinary to foreground how disconnected they are throughout their day. These scenes of everyday life draw the audience into the world of the film, but they also make the eventual disruption a lot more impactful.[36]

The nonspecific depiction of the high school simultaneously turns the setting into "everywhere, U.S.A." and "nowhere, U.S.A." As such, the school resembles the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, a place "from which we are drawn out of ourselves, just where the erosion of our lives, our time, our history takes place, this space that wears us down and consumes us, is in itself heterogeneous . . . [It is] a set of relationships that define positions which cannot be equated or in any way superimposed."[37] It could, however, also be argued that Van Sant subverts the Foucauldian notion of heterotopias. For Foucault, heterotopias are often connoted positively. By contrast, Van Sant's high school is rather dull, meaningless, and negative. At the same time, the high school showcases utopian qualities in that it does not refer to a real place but instead serves as an analogy for high schools throughout the U.S. For Foucault, utopias are "society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and . . . spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal."[38] As such, the high school in *Elephant* also evokes a "non-place," as defined by Marc Augé. The film does not provide viewers with any history of the school. Instead, it is a place without a clear identity that creates "only solitude, and similitude."[39] Not only does the location of the high school remain in question, but the film lacks temporal particularity as well. This lack of spatial and temporal specificity contributes to the dream-like atmosphere of the movie.

While the *vérité* influences showcase *Elephant*'s alternative nature, its resistance to conform to conventions of mainstream cinema regarding narrative structure and cinematography also suggest that Van Sant's film typifies aspects of postmodern cinema. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodern film critiques consumer capitalism and is characterized by the fragmentation of both the narrative and the characters.[40] This narrative disintegration anticipates the coming of a new type of cinema. As a matter of fact, Van Sant has commented extensively on interactive movies, stating in a 2004 *Guardian* interview that "cinema will become something completely different, where you are in it, and it's no longer theatrically based." According to Simon Hattenstone, who interviewed Van Sant for the *Guardian*, *Elephant* is Van Sant's version of an interactive film, as it immerses the audience by giving them clues and then allows viewers to shape the film and its meaning.[41] The film's atypical narrative structure helps negotiate *Elephant*'s possible meanings. Film critic Philip French has noted that "time is fractured and the same scenes are shown several times from different points of view."[42] *Elephant* presents significant parts of the two shooters' backstory through flashbacks that are completely indistinguishable from the filmic present. According to Peter Bradshaw, "the time frame and sense of place is constructed so that we cannot even be sure when and where the shootings have begun."[43] The resultant narrative fragmentation entails that *Elephant* has no real plot that develops from scene to scene: there are no connections between the alleged themes of the movie and the actions of any of the characters. Furthermore, because of the postmodern narrative structure, which shows different events from multiple perspectives without any clear indication of time, identifying a temporal structure is difficult. As a result, *Elephant*'s pacing as well as its content are far from obvious. However, if we define an act as a story unit that ends with a character's irrevocable decision that sets the tone for the next act, it could be argued that *Elephant* is composed of two main acts. Act one focuses on the mundanity of school life and ends when the two shooters, Alex and Eric, open fire in the school library. There is one moment in the movie when Eli—the photographer—takes a picture of Alex standing in the library, holding his gun (Illustration 1). In this particular moment, it seems as if Alex comes to understand that there is no turning back, and he starts shooting. This combination of "opening fire" and "no turning back" sets the tone for the second act of the film, which focuses on the shooting itself.

Illustration 1: Eli taking a photo seems to unleash Alex and Eric's violent outburst.

Frame captures from *Elephant* © HBO Films, 2003. Images used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

However, this separation into two acts is only a suggestion, as the film does not have a plot that proceeds in linear fashion. This lack of narrative development corresponds with the film's use of long tracking shots that show the characters' movements in the building. These tracking shots evoke tension (because the audience knows that a shooting is about to happen) and frustration (because of the lack of typical narrative progression and the characters' entrapment in their mundane lives). Although the characters are in constant motion, they do not develop from a dramatic point of view. As a result, all characters remain flat and one-dimensional throughout the film, and the audience never fully understands their motivations. The film only shows how sudden, random, and yet horrifying a school shooting is.

Remake

Van Sant originally intended *Elephant* to be a television film about Columbine.[44] However, he was warned about engaging with this topic directly. In a 2018 interview, Van Sant recalls that Colin Callendar, president of HBO Films at the time, explicitly told him that he could not pursue a project about Columbine, but should rather do *Ele-*

phant.[45] Callendar implied that employing the narrative and filmic techniques used in Alan Clarke's 1989 film might be more suitable to showcase the recent horrors of Columbine.[46] Clarke's version of the film, a BBC production, follows several snipers in the Northern Ireland conflict. It presents eighteen seemingly pointless incidents of gun violence in a rather mundane fashion, with long takes of people walking.[47] The film strips the killings of any context and works without dialogue, discernible locations, and even characters, and thereby approaches a social problem with nothing but activity.[48] Clarke's *Elephant* does not offer any kind of justification for the arbitrary acts of violence or provide solutions to the problem, which challenges viewers to find meaning in the violence.[49]

Clarke began using long walking shots in his 1982 film *Made in Britain* to establish both his characters and their environment. These shots are often long, walking soliloquies by the characters, especially in *Elephant*, as the film is devoid of both narrative and dialogue. While Van Sant's *Elephant* is considered a remake, it is the loosest possible reinterpretation of Clarke's 1989 film. Other than the pointless killings, the two films share their title and their radical style. The title of Clarke's *Elephant* was derived from a short story by Ulster author Bernard MacLaverty in which he describes the armed conflict in Northern Ireland as the "elephant in the living room" and "the taboo staring us in the face that we dare not acknowledge."[50]

While this explanation could also apply to Van Sant's film, in which the elephant in the room is the issue of school shootings, the title was inspired by a Buddhist proverb about three blind monks describing an elephant. In a 2004 interview with Hattenstone, Van Sant stated,

> One thinks it's a rope because he has the tail, one thinks it's a tree because he can feel the legs, one thinks it's a wall because he can feel the side of it, and nobody actually has the big picture. You can't really get to the answer, because there isn't one.[51]

Following this line of argument, the title suggests that nobody can explain school shootings. Each approach only offers limited insight and partial understanding. The proverb also evokes *Elephant*'s overall structure: the same event is shown from multiple perspectives and various points of view, yet none of the characters can see the whole picture. The background of the shooting is difficult to understand, and Van Sant invites viewers to uncover the truth, *their* truth, behind the shooting.

Remediate

As the media were trying to explain and ultimately frame the shooting,[52] a number of actors in the industry blamed video games and their portrayal of violent acts.[53]

According to Geoff King, Van Sant does not "choose to ignore conventional 'blame' elements such as videogames or an interest in Nazism, as would have been possible, but situates them in a less conventional mix and leaves any attempt to resolve or interpret further to the viewer."[54]

Elephant's acknowledgment of several different possible causes returns to the Buddhist proverb: the viewers are the blind monks trying to make sense of the small amount of information that they have gathered. Notably, Van Sant incorporates video games in his film; however, he refrains from establishing the causal link to the shooting that has dominated the public discourse. In line with his tendency to deconstruct narratives, Van Sant detaches video games from their negative cultural framing and instead focuses on the remediation of their aesthetics. With his remediation of video games, Van Sant became part of a growing group of filmmakers who, beginning in the late 1990s, started using video games as a narrative and stylistic influence for their films.[55]

Just as Clarke's *Elephant*, Van Sant's film features numerous long tracking shots, many of them in the hallway of the school, which slowly build up tension. Crucially, in Van Sant's *Elephant*, these long tracking shots of students rambling through hallways also emulate the video game players' third-person perspective of their gaming avatars walking through their virtual environments (Illustration 2). After the Columbine shooting, the public perception of video games changed from a new and emerging medium with immense potential to a focal point for the discussion of the deterioration of youth. People were quick to blame the video game franchise Doom and the violent nature of other first-person shooters (FPS) for the shooting at Columbine, as Eric Harris was known to be an avid player of the Doom games and a fan of the entire franchise.[56] Van Sant engages with the discourse on violent video games; however, rather than directly addressing the issue, he uses remediation strategies to incorporate some of the medium's defining formal and aesthetic characteristics in his film. Video games thus constitute a stylistic and rhetorical influence for *Elephant*. Their incorporation seeks to inspire the viewers' reflection. Two game franchises were particularly important for Van Sant's remediation: the aforementioned Doom, a classic FPS, and Tomb Raider, which employs the third-person perspective.

Indeed, Van Sant has acknowledged Tomb Raider as a major stylistic influence for *Elephant*. The long Steadicam takes recreate the third-person perspective characteristic of the Tomb Raider series.[57] The idea to follow the characters from point A to point B—which is realized through long tracking shots—was, according to Van Sant, also inspired by video games. These tracking shots frame the characters as simultaneously connected and disconnected. They do not interact with their surroundings; rather, they only pass through the frame, which creates the impression of a video

Illustration 2: Numerous tracking shots follow students through the hallways.

Frame capture from *Elephant* © HBO Films, 2003. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

game avatar constantly in motion. This emphasis on motion recalls Steven Poole's assertion that a "beautifully designed video game invokes wonder as the fine arts do, only in a uniquely kinetic way."[58] Van Sant has stated that he played video games to understand the Columbine characters better and began thinking about cinema in relation to video games.[59] He thought about the possibility of showing the audience how characters move through space in real time, similar to what people would see when they play a third-person-perspective game such as *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996). Yet *Elephant*'s remediation of video games goes beyond the third-person perspective in *Tomb Raider* to the first-person perspective of games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993).

The scene of the shooting in *Elephant* recalls the aesthetics of *Doom*'s gameplay, as it also features a first-person perspective. Science fiction and horror films often employ the first-person point of view to introduce the audience to the "position of the 'Other.'"[60] One and a half hours into the movie, *Elephant* very briefly does the same thing: a two-second first-person perspective (Illustration 3). The film shows the audience the two shooters carefully planning and talking about their shooting, with several flashforwards to the actual shooting. Then, viewers see the barrel of a rifle and hear two shots fired at students running through the corridors of the school. Although this first-person scene is very brief, it confronts the audience with the shooting through the perspective of the shooters. While other films about Col-

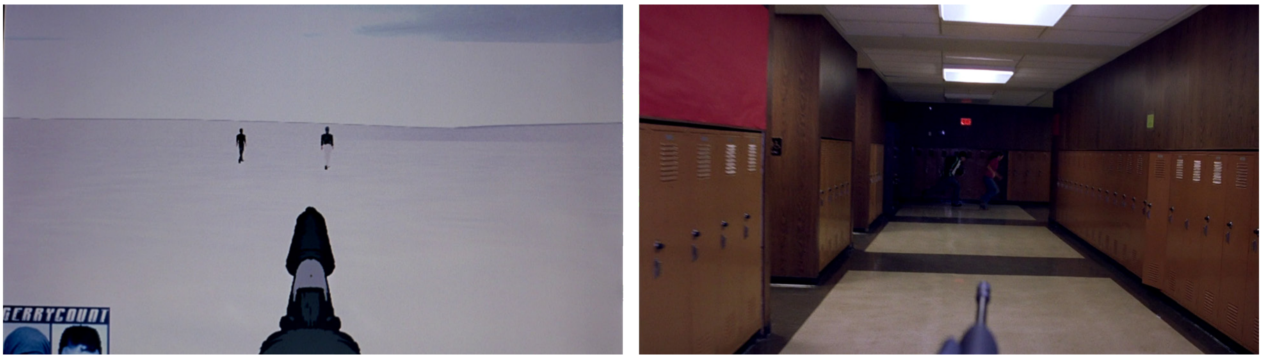

Illustration 3: Eric plays a first-person shooter (left), whose aesthetics the film then remediates during the shooting (right).

Frame captures from *Elephant* © HBO Films, 2003. Images used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

umbine, such as *Zero Day*, tell their narratives from the shooters' perspective, only *Elephant* simulates the perspective of a person firing a gun at students of a school. The first-person perspective completely strips the shooter of his identity as viewers only see the barrel of a gun.[61] In so doing, *Elephant* suggests that anybody could potentially be a shooter, even the audience members. In addition, by briefly depicting the act of killing without a villain's face linked to it, *Elephant* illustrates how horrible a school shooting is without constantly trying to make sense of it.

The direct involvement of the audience in the FPS scene also draws on the immersive potentials of video games. According to Frans Mäyrä, FPS of the late 1990s and early 2000s offer immersion not only on a sensory but also on an emotional and intellectual level.[62] By briefly putting the audience in the position of the shooters, Van Sant does the same. Viewers can hear the shots like the shooter would hear them and can see the students running away from them as if they were the viewers' targets. As the achronological nature of the film makes it difficult for the audience to really relate to any one of the characters, the immersion produced by the first-person perspective becomes more effective. The change in perspective is emotionally and intellectually challenging: while it is difficult to watch students shoot other students, it is even more difficult if the filmmaker puts the audience into the perspective of the perpetrators.

The maze-like structure of the school is *Elephant*'s third nod to video games. With its long, dark corridors and sparse lighting, the setting evokes the visual design of various shooter games. The film's lighting and composition further support this feeling of an FPS. Cinematographer Harris Savides used one of his most celebrated techniques—lighting the set rather than the actors, with minor enhancements from time to time. The light source is usually above the actors, combined with occasional side lighting. In video games, too, lighting oftentimes highlights the surroundings rather than the characters, because the environment is more important for the players.

In a similar vein, *Elephant* emphasizes everyday life in a school, not one of the main characters' narratives. Because of Van Sant's inclusion of video games in his film, the viewers are asked to reflect on the issue and make their own judgements about the discourse on video games after the shooting at Columbine.

Reflect

Elephant is a unique response to school shootings for several reasons, but its approach to endorsing reflection is arguably the most notable one. Diane Keaton, one of the movie's producers, stated in an interview that *Elephant* focuses on making the viewers think, rather than on "hammering [them] on the head with a message."[63] Reflection can thus be considered the overarching theme of the film, which is supported by both cinematography and storytelling. Over the course of the film, reflection manifests itself in two different ways. On the one hand, the film urges the audience to reflect; on the other, it reflects on the shooting itself. *Elephant* features the act of killing without big-budget spectacle,[64] as opposed to a conflict between heroes and villains. The film focuses on the suddenness and apparent arbitrariness of the shooting, as well as the horror that ensues.

The unexpectedness of the outburst of violence stands in stark contrast to *Elephant*'s key narrative element, waiting: waiting for some kind of climax and, eventually, waiting for the school shooting to happen. The viewers can use the time afforded by waiting to reflect on what is currently happening in the film. By stripping the Columbine High School shooting of its drama and suspense, Van Sant highlights the sheer senselessness of the incident and creates an even more horrific reality. Importantly, while "creating" and "reality" may seem to contradict one another, the whole film is nothing but a fabrication. Moreover, the notion of "reality" becomes particularly important in the last twenty minutes of the film, in which the shooting takes place. They stand out because of the undramatic approach that characterizes most of *Elephant*.[65] The previous lack of progression makes these minutes feel especially real.

Since the lives of the two killers are presented in a mundane fashion, the violence also appears prosaic. The gunshots seem boring and are not as loud as in action movies. This is all part of what Jennifer Rich has called Van Sant's "pre-emption of empathy."[66] For her, the promotion of reflection in the film is entangled with strategies of manipulation. These strategies consist of an interruption of all of the characters' interactions, temporal and spatial dislocation, as well as a rejection of interiority, with the result that viewers cannot immerse themselves in the narrative of the film.[67] According to Little, these aspects could also be interpreted as a simulation of post-traumatic stress.[68] Cathy Caruth has claimed that victims of trauma are not prepared for the experience and also unable to process the unfolding events. Trauma is a temporal void, and the mind returns to the traumatic experience in an attempt to transform it into a meaningful event. Caruth explains that

> The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the death, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known. And it is this lack of direct experience that, paradoxically, becomes the basis of the repetition of the nightmare.[69]

The film's refusal to comment on the violent incidents further enhances the audience's struggle with grasping what is happening and strongly encourages viewers to reflect on what they see.

Elephant's overall encouragement of reflection is also evident in its soundtrack, which is characterized by subtle *musique concrète* that was devised by Leslie Shatz.[70] Natural sounds, such as the echo-like noises of a school, are increased to the point where they become surreal and support the ungraspable overall feeling of the movie. One sequence in the library illustrates the use of sound particularly well: when Melissa, a seemingly disturbed outsider, and Eli, the photographer, hear the sound of a rifle being cocked, the sound of the gun was edited in a way that made it recognizable, yet elusive. The *musique concrète* also aids in Van Sant's deconstruction of the narrative, as the unfolding events are not supported by a non-diegetic soundtrack and its emotionally manipulative effects. *Elephant*'s soundtrack rather encourages the viewers to reflect on what they see, as the emotions derived from it are purely subjective and not deliberately shaped by the music.

The film also calls for reflection by defying expectations. After the film's famous, yet ambiguous, shower scene, which shows the two shooters kissing, the audience is left to believe that they are not only united in the desire to attack their school but romantically involved as well. Yet, at some point, Alex kills his companion Eric, shooting him without any comment, seemingly because there is no one else left to kill. This development seeks to cause confusion among the viewers, a strategy that could be considered quintessential to the whole movie: no one really knows the shooters, nor their motivation. Viewers might discover aspects of the perpetrators' personalities but, similar to the blind monks and their description of an elephant, they are unable to see the big picture.

Van Sant's decisions regarding cinematography and storytelling strongly impede immersion into the narrative drama of the film, which further encourages the audience to reflect. The film may have been inspired by the tragedy of the Columbine High School shooting, but it rather presents a study on the nature of violence and the effects of indifference. The film's distinct cinematography seems to suggest that reflection in the audience can be encouraged by long takes: the longer the take, the more time for the viewers to contemplate what they see.

Yet the topic of reflection also takes shape on a metalevel. The character of Eli, the photographer, plays a crucial role in this context because Eli functions as a counterpart to the two shooters. When he takes photos, for instance, he is "shooting his classmates (with his camera) in a frenzy of aesthetic productivity rather than homicidal destruction" and thereby shows what he is seeing.[71] However, this is not a simple reproduction of "reality." Early in the movie, Eli takes a photo of a couple for his portfolio. While doing so, he asks them to "look a little bit happier."[72] This brief utterance emphasizes *Elephant*'s self-reflexivity: cinema is never neutral, but rather shapes (a) reality. While Van Sant may have tried to approach the Columbine High School shooting in an objective way, his influence as the director remains. Moreover, the character of Eli self-reflexively comments on Van Sant and his filmmaking, for "shooting a picture is an act of moving deathward."[73] The camera distances its operator from the violence that is being filmed. According to Sofair, the scene in which Eli takes a picture of the shooters shortly before being killed carries a lot of meaning, as

> enacting such a defense mechanism at the moment of his death, when it is exposed as ineffectual, might confirm its neurotic basis, except that Elias does not seem depressed or broken in any way. He just maintains the course he is set on when the film opens, accumulating random photos intent on building up a "portfolio" to start a career, as if, absent a unifying perspective, they–and he–will acquire coherence once they find a market.[74]

Similar to Eli, Van Sant tried to illustrate different aspects of the shooting. After all, *Elephant* does convey a message: there is no discernable reason for anything. School shootings are sudden, random, and horrifying events, without any clear correlations and causes. Interestingly, the film also includes many shots of the weather that liken the haphazardness of school shootings to the unpredictability of weather patterns. In an interview, Van Sant specifies that he included clouds because the reasons for the shooting were so complex and elusive that even the weather could have driven the shooters to attack the school. Van Sant knows that this ambiguity is difficult to grasp for large parts of the audience, explaining that "it's in our interest to identify the reason why so that we can feel safe, feel that we are not part of it, that it's demonized and identified and controlled."[75] Many critics addressed the film's casualness toward violence.[76] In a 2004 interview, Van Sant claimed,

> Modern-day cinema takes the form of a sermon. You don't get to think, you only get to receive information. This film is not a sermon. The point of the film is not being delivered to you from the voice of the film-maker. Hopefully, there are as many interpretations as there are viewers.[77]

According to Barone, this multitude of possible interpretations characterizes Van

Sant's approach to the Columbine High School shooting.[78] *Elephant* does not seem to manipulate the audience but rather endorses reflection. The film does not judge any of its characters, and it does not offer any explanation for their motivation to act in the ways they do. Any emotion derived from watching *Elephant*, accordingly, at least appears to be almost entirely subjective.

The film deconstructs the Columbine High School shooting and refuses to explain it in any way. *Elephant* is not a film about the shooting; it is rather a response to it. The film provides the audience with a space for reflection and spotlights the ambiguity of school shootings as the viewers are left to decide for themselves what is true. More than twenty years after Columbine, *Elephant* remains one of the few cinematic responses to the epidemic of gun violence at schools in the United States. The film's cinematography, its editing, and its unique way of telling a story highlight the relationship between school shootings and their media representations as one that "goes beyond the genesis of the shooting itself."[79] Through remaking, remediating, and reflecting, *Elephant* highlights the fictionality of school shootings in moments of social instability, making the film a truly remarkable response to Columbine.

Notes

1 See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996).

2 Laura E. Agnich, "A Comparative Analysis of Attempted and Completed School-Based Mass Murder Attacks," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 40, no. 1 (2015): 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-014-9239-5.

3 The media introduced the term "shooters" to refer to the two assailants in a more neutral way. Hence, I will also use this term in this article.

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The Sign as Battlefield

Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel

Alekszandra Rokvity

Abstract

If we assume that culture is built by signs and their meanings and that ideology is what naturalizes those meanings, what follows is that the battle between the classes is often but a battle over the sign. Punk was an anti-capitalist movement that used this logic, making the attire of the individual the battlefield over the meaning of signs. Punks rebelled against the dominant ideology through the subversion of signs on the level of fashion, challenging hegemonic rule by destabilizing the meaning of its signs. However, as punk slipped from subculture into popular culture, the meaning of the signs once again shifted as they became re-integrated into mainstream culture. Punk thus proves to be a case study for the fluidity of the meaning of signs, one which furthermore foregrounds the sexist nature of meaning-making processes.

In this context, the contemporary fashion industry functions as a weapon that the bourgeoisie deploys to sabotage the use of style as a vehicle for carrying anti-hegemonic messages. This article aims to foreground the significance of gender in the mechanisms that attempt to preserve hegemonic rule. As I demonstrate, the journey of the meaning of the signs employed by punk illustrates the significance of female voicelessness to maintain capitalist ideology as the ruling ideology.

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The Sign as Battlefield

Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel

Alekszandra Rokvity

The 1970s saw the birth of a youth movement dubbed "punk." Bands such as the Ramones, Television, Patti Smith, Dead Kennedys, The Sex Pistols, The Clash, the Slits, and Siouxsie and the Banshees were at the forefront of what was to become perhaps one of the most notable subcultures in modern history. Drawing on garage rock of the 1960s (now often referred to as "proto-punk"), the punk movement created a uniquely distorted sound with fast-paced, aggressive instrumentals accompanied by often purposefully out-of-tune singing or reciting of politicized lyrics. Punk aimed "to disassemble traditional and puritanical value systems through musical messages, the semiotics of fashion, and public displays of disaffection."[1]

A subversive aesthetic of postmodern parody usually accompanied the music. The style that emerged from the movement "butchered" existing fashion trends and formal uniforms, only to subvert their meaning, challenge conventions by citing them, and foreground the politics of representation by doing so—strategies that conform with Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody.[2] Over time, the movement spread beyond music and fashion (and geographical borders) into realms of literature, visual art, and film, using these outlets to speak out against social issues and hegemonic rule. Punk's mode of operation was a type of artistic expression that relied heavily on the power of sign subversion.

Gender is one of the cultural constructs that the punk movement attacked most vigorously. In his book *Homopunk History* (2018), Philipp Meinert writes about the New York "pre-punk" (or "proto-punk") scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its deep ties with (homo)sexuality and gender-bending: the underground scene offered the possibility of uncensored self-expression.[3] The "artistic discussion" of gender as a concept laid ground for what we now call the "heyday of punk."

Writing about the position of women in punk, Helen Reddington remarks that "there is perhaps no better example of male hegemonic control over popular cultural history than the rewrite of punk to exclude the very large and productive presence of young women in the subculture from its very beginning."[4] Today, we predominantly associate punk with the all-male bands that went on to have international mainstream success. However, punk started as a platform for all young people to challenge the status quo and voice their concerns about the state of affairs in their socio-cultural environments. Both in the United Kingdom and in the United States, the DIY nature of punk facilitated the creation of a large feminist platform in the movement, supported by developments in the hippie subculture, the implementation of the 1975 Equal Opportunities Act, and the "equalizing effect of mass unemployment."[5] In punk, women shared the stage with men and had the same opportunities to voice their concerns about the social system they lived in. Both men and women challenged cultural myths about femininity and masculinity. Accordingly, gender deconstruction became a prominent element of the punk movement. While song lyrics and visual arts addressed issues of gender identity as well, fashion was the main tool used to highlight the constructedness of gender. The distinctive fashion style that punk invented and used as a form of rebellion has outlived the movement. However, this style has now been absorbed by the mainstream popular culture that punk once sought to undermine, and the meaning of the subverted signs that defined punk's ideology has come full circle and been re-integrated into the mainstream narrative.

This article will explore the mechanisms that transformed punk fashion from subculture into popular culture. My goal is to highlight that these very mechanisms are gender-biased and reveal the fundamentally sexist nature of capitalism. I will examine how punk culture developed its politicized style, and how it ended up in the hands of the mainstream fashion industry devoid of its intended meaning. I will illustrate how the signs that comprised punk fashion were integrated into the ideology of the ruling class that they originally set out to subvert, which, in turn, will allow me to highlight the continued cultural relevance of punk to feminism and the deconstruction of gender conceptions.

The Meaning of Punk

During the 1970s, cultural studies developed significant interest in the phenomenon of youth subcultures when the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies started viewing subculture as a subgroup of Western society that exhibited a level of integration, structure, values, and style.[6] A significant figure in bringing these issues to light was Dick Hebdige who, in his work *The Meaning of Style* (1979), clearly distinguished between the idea of youth as an age category and youth culture as a social category. In his understanding, youth subculture constitutes a social group of young consumers who challenge bourgeois hegemony. Hebdige provides an in-depth analysis of youth subcultures in their various forms from the late 1950s up to the late 1970s as he discusses hipsters, mods, teddy boys, beatniks, skinheads, and punks. He argues that the emergence of youth subcultures signaled "a breakdown of consensus in the post-war period," and foregrounds that they challenge hegemony "obliquely, in style," at the "profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs."[7] When discussing the value of how subculture uses signs to construct style, Hebdige refers to Marxist structuralist Valentin Volosinov, who understands the sign as "the arena of the class struggle," and argues that style operates as a tool for the transmission of ideas within a subculture.[8]

However, as decades passed, subculture became popular culture, and the battle over the meaning of the sign continued in a circular manner, with the fashion industry as the new soldier on the battlefield. Most notably, although not limited to these forms of expression, punk expressed its ideological resistance to the bourgeoisie through music and fashion. In music, punk puts forth its anti-establishment message both through politicized lyrics and the composition of the songs. Punk also defied the mainstream musical tastes of the time, as it purposely sounded out of tune and often aimed to create "noise" rather than "melody" to portray rebellion and discord. The music refused to obey the rules of form in the same way that the individuals refused to abide by the rules of society. The fast-paced songs with distorted cords, often interspersed with shouting, narrating, or reciting, provided a stark contrast to popular music at the time. The melodic composition was just as significant as the lyrics: both delivered the message of non-complacency. Punk fashion pursued a similar goal: style constituted a form of refusal.[9] If we accept the semiological point of view and understand culture to consist of signs that acquire meaning through their relationships with other signs, and if we accept Roland Barthes's claim that culture is ideology, using myth to naturalize the meaning of signs, then it becomes clear that the battle between the classes is the battle over the meaning of the sign.[10] When subculture rebels against hegemony, it subverts the meaning of the signs used by the bourgeoisie—it appropriates the signs; punk does so through artistic expression, most prominently through fashion.

Punk fashion was an artistic statement, a cultural text. Its unique style was constructed by re-inventing garments that already existed in a new context and thus giving them a new meaning. For example, while bourgeois ideology regarded ripped and stained clothing as markers of poverty and disgrace, punk sees them as markers of freedom. While the bourgeoisie regarded the school uniform as a symbol that indicated belonging to a system of education, order, and structured learning—a system that, by implication, is a primary agent for producing uniformity (of opinions along with moral and ethical stances), the same uniform was re-appropriated by punks. To underline the confinement uniforms originally represented, punks mutilated the fashion items, ripping apart their fabric and decorating them with politicized messages and other symbolic accessories (e.g. chains). Women, in particular, have fetishized the school uniform by sexualizing it. For instance, they made it shorter, showed more cleavage, or accessorized it with fishnet stockings and high heels. In this way, punk has taken the school uniform and turned it into a sign of rebellion against the oppressiveness of a system that imposes the uniform and produces "uniform copies" of people stripped of their individuality. Another example are Converse All-Star signature training shoes: once worn by professional athletes, who were viewed as honorable and revered members of society, the shoes were claimed by punk fashion and became the most popular punk footwear. This completely changed their symbolic value and turned them into signifiers of rebellion worn by social outcasts who belong to the lower rather than the upper class. Similarly, Dr. Martens—a shoe brand that originally created footgear for soldiers—was appropriated by punk subculture. Shoes that signified combat acquired another layer of meaning: worn by punks, Dr. Martens became a sign of combat against hegemony.

DIY culture defined punk at its core and presented a way to oppose consumer culture and capitalist forms of cultural production.[11] Gerfried Ambrosch has pointed to the differences between the punk movements in the United Kingdom and the United States: while both strands were anti-capitalist, they were differently affected by problematic consequences of capitalism. For the British punk movement, mass youth unemployment signaled the failure of the capitalist system that led them to define itself in terms of class struggle. In the United States, the punk movement emerged from disillusionment about the American Dream and the failed mythology of American suburbia.[12] They both tried to fight capitalism in the same ways, turning to cultural production rather than consumption.[13] Punk musicians had no aspirations of commercial success, and their objective was not to record and distribute music but to create live experiences and spread their message through improvised, unedited performances.[14]

Punk fashion carried the same message: punks did not purchase their outfits; they used recycled pieces of clothing and remodeled them. The key figure in the creation of the punk aesthetic was Vivienne Westwood, who, with her partner Malcolm McLaren, opened a boutique called Sex in 1974 on London's Kings Road. The shop, with its graffiti-covered interior and eccentric staff, sold original designs by Westwood and McLaren. Creating unique and provocative designs, Westwood played with "the paraphilia of pornography" and "devised confrontational rubberwear, ripped slogan-daubed T-shirts and infamous bondage trousers."[15] The boutique became the center of punk activity, not only dressing the first punks but serving as a meeting point, as well. Westwood inspired the collage-fashion of the movement, which prompted others to imitate her ideas and create outfits by combining, modifying, and appropriating already existing pieces of clothing in an unmistakably anti-consumerist move. The unique aesthetic blurred gender lines, resulting in provocative pieces of clothing undermining existing ideas of femininity and masculinity. Ren

Aldridge has argued that this DIY sentiment gave punk its political power and fueled activism: punks were building their own spaces and creating their own narratives, which inspired a feeling of control and hope to instigate tangible change. Mainstream culture, on the other hand, promoted complacency and deemphasized people's individual influence over the social and political situation.[16] Ironically, as punk eventually got entangled with the mainstream music industry, Vivienne Westwood herself became a fashion mogul, moving away from her DIY anti-capitalist roots.

The Punk Aesthetic and Gender Deconstruction

The idea of gender as a cultural construct entered academic discussion in the late 1970s and 1980s with the works of Erving Goffman (*Gender Advertisements* [1976]) and Candance West and Don H. Zimmerman ("Doing Gender" [1987]). In 1990, Judith Butler introduced the term "gender performativity." In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she argues that gender is a socially sanctioned performance, further asserting the idea that gender is a social and not a biological category.[17] We can only speculate whether any of the individuals who formed the punk movement in the mid-1970s were aware of this new way of thinking that emerged in academic and feminist circles, but inspired by one thing or another, their artistic expression started toying with the idea of the constructedness of gender, as well. Punk challenged different notions of gender in music and visual art as well as fashion. In the United States, punks rebelled against the idea of idyllic American suburbia with its rigid gender roles and the conservative, happy, pastel-colored aesthetic that it promoted. In the United Kingdom, punks used the economic crisis as a platform for the discussion of gender inequality. On an international level, the entire movement fought against the restrictive prescription of gender roles, focusing on the objectification and voicelessness of women across the Western world. Punk addressed global issues—the failure of capitalism and the oppression of women in public discourse and domestic settings alike.

Punk identifies two problems of contemporary society that are deeply connected: the first, gender, is a myth that is naturalized by the second, capitalism. Capitalism creates, perpetuates, and reinforces essential gender constructs and roles. The idea that two genders that correspond to two biological sexes with rigidly prescribed psychological and physical traits exist, keeps capitalism afloat in two ways. Firstly, this assumption allows one gender category to be considered central, while the other is subordinated. The gender wage gap and other systemic discriminations that prevent women from reaching positions of power that would allow them to influence social (infra)structures are manifestations that illustrate how one gender category benefits from the marginalization of the other. Secondly, the economy largely depends on the gender myth: there are a number of industries that sell the tools required for this performance. The beauty and fashion industries, for instance, are almost entirely built on, and sustained by, the idea of gender, as they sell products that enable people to "perform" their prescribed gender "correctly." The market is competitive and driven by the advertising industry that promotes the idea that a particular product will enable a person to be "better" at performing their gender than others, which, in turn, gives the consumer higher social standing. This is a vicious circle that allows these industries to both profit from and re-produce the gender myth that also constitutes the backbone of consumer culture. It prompts people to keep buying new products that will enhance their gender performance, and it creates demand for two versions of fundamentally identical products under the pretense of having to produce a version of the product for both men and women. Subsequently, consumers are culturally blackmailed into purchasing the product that corresponds to their assigned gender.

Being anti-establishment and anti-capitalist, punks had recognized these logics, so that undermining them became one of the most significant aspects of their rebellion. They appropriated particular gender signs and gave them new meanings. By breaking gender norms, punks questioned their presumed essence and exposed their artificiality. Punk fashion denaturalizes gender and reveals its constructed nature by drawing attention to stereotypes associated with binary notions of gender and their oppressive purpose. West and Zimmerman are known for their observation of the concept of "passing" as being of certain gender.[18] They revealed that gender is something you "do" (Butler later used the word "perform") and is not connected with biological sex: an individual "doing their gender wrong" proves that gender is a performance with a strict set of rules that can either be obeyed or disobeyed. Punk prominently featured this kind of disobedience: people started "doing their gender wrong" on purpose, turning their gender performance into a political statement. Men began to wear tight, sexualized clothing, often made of fishnets and accessorized with jewelry, while also putting on makeup and dying their hair. Women started to wear "masculine" footwear such as Converse sneakers and Dr. Martens, leather, neckties or bowties, cut their hair short, and generally appropriated men's fashion. As mentioned above, many of the appropriated fashion items were worn by women in a sexualized manner as a form of rebellion—in particular when it came to the notorious trend of school uniforms, which were, in their punk versions, defying everything considered "proper" and "lady-like." However, when it came to appropriating men's fashion, there were two ideas at play: an androgynous look that served as "deconstruction" of gender or a feminized look which served to prove femininity as equally powerful as masculinity.

Gender Boxes and the Fashion Industry

Betsy Lucal has suggested that gender codes and rules of social conduct and appearance ascribed to a certain gender are the result of a "building of boxes"—that is, "the process of social differentiation" that ultimately aims to perpetuate social inequalities.[19] The existence of such "boxes" is illustrated by the ease with which both men and women not only recognize the signs of a male and female gender, but also by how readily they appropriate those signs for their own purposes. The content of those "gender boxes" is of particular interest for the meaning of style.

The flexibility of "the feminine box" seems to be directly tied to the economic dynamics of the fashion industry. To phrase it more directly: it is a consequence of capitalism. We can speculate that if gender were to be suddenly abolished, the world economy would (at least temporarily) collapse under the shock. The female body is at the heart of entire industries, as many of them rely on the denaturalization of the female body to generate profit. Even though the fashion industry caters to men and children as consumers, as well, it is centered mainly on women, and it profits most from constantly re-defining femininity. Setting fashion trends means distributing a set of rules for gender performance to the general public. These rules are performed on the level of the body and are constructed by the dominant ideology that dictates women's appearances. The nuances of these rules change seasonally, continuously forcing consumers to purchase new items as the media and advertising exert pressure to keep up to date with the latest rules of gendering yourself. The fashion industry finds inspiration in various places—some of the trends come from the creative minds of designers, others are inspired by personal styles of celebrities or borrowed from other cultures. All in all, the fashion industry is ever-changing and ever-evolving, constantly reacting to social developments.

When the punk subculture emerged, its greatest appeal was the shock effect. Radically different, punk disturbed the status quo, provoked the general public, and therefore effectively promoted its message. In view of their goal to provoke the establishment, punks saw no limits in toying with symbolism, no matter how sensitive it was—which led to bands like the Sex Pistols and Siouxsie and the Banshees sporting swastikas although they were anti-fascist.[20] However, it was not long before the movement started to crumble under its own popularity. With the major innovators gaining worldwide fame, both the musical and the fashion styles slowly became popularized, eventually entering the realm of the mainstream. Many consider this moment of mainstreamification "the death of punk." For example, Dylan Clarke describes "the time of death" as the moment "when it [Punk] became the object of social inspection and nostalgia, and when it became so amenable to commodification."[21] While there are still active groups that sonically, visually, and artistically fit under the description of punk, I would argue that punk simply cannot exist anymore, as it was a response to a very particular time in the world, and its shock value and newness gave it its power. Clarke further argues that punk "needed a perplexed and frightened 'mainstream' off which to bounce," but when "the mainstream proved that it needed punk, punk's equation was reversed," making it negatively commercial. However, Clarke offers another interpretation, one in which the signs of punk are unimportant, with politics being its core; he argues that "punk was forced out of a costume and music based clique, but that it still exists: the actors however deny the name or that they have any uniform, what is left is a political movement."[22] The debate on "punk's death" is, however, a complex discussion that extends the scope of this article. Alive or dead, punk's political power and social engagement are presently limited due to the loss of the shock effect. It exists on the margins, but it is familiar, normalized, and kept under control. As Penny Rimbaud has remarked, the revolutionary spirit of punk was "killed with cash" as punk "degenerated from being a force for change, to becoming just another element in the grand media circus."[23] Today's post-punk represents merely a "hegemonic caricature" of the original movement: "a set of prescribed rules of music and style which is a phase mostly white juveniles go through before coming back to their prescribed mainstream roles."[24] The assimilation of certain elements of the punk aesthetic into mainstream fashion normalized punk fashion and thus rendered the whole movement "an inherited social form, and one which is heavily interactive with capitalist enterprise."[25] However, the mainstreaming of punk worked differently for men than it did for women.

Discussing the assimilation of the punk aesthetic into mainstream female fashion also requires an overview of the development of punk fashion. Vivienne Westwood described the style as "confrontation dressing," which Hebdige rephrases in the following way: "if the cap doesn't fit, wear it."[26] Punk fashion disregarded all rules: rules of gender as much as rules of color or fabric pairing and added the previously addressed symbolism. Gradually, the fashion industry took over the aesthetic punk women had created. With the rising fame of the punk movement, the fashion industry recognized the potential of the new and "scandalous" style that was getting much media attention and started to embrace some of punk's elements. The appropriation of fetishistic ensembles previously only associated with sex work was a symbolic way for female punks to claim their bodies and rebel against objectification—by commenting on the sexual degradation of women through sarcastically exaggerating sexual female aesthetics. However, this message was lost to the broad public once the industry recognized the appeal of turning lingerie items into mainstream fashion. Suddenly, the clothes representing rebellion and political engagement started to be advertised and sold as clothes that would make women more attractive to men, completely subverting the message once again. The emerging discussion of fashion and gender became the battleground for the fight between mainstream and subculture over the meaning of the sign.

A number of items that used to be signs for taboo female sexuality, for immortality, and for sex work underwent a shift in meaning, signifying female empowerment, healthy sexuality, rebellion against objectification, and the fight for (sexual) freedom by female punks. These items included corsets, fishnet stockings, leather leggings, miniskirts, as well as latex outfits. Once punk became popularized, these signs returned to the hands of the fashion industry (and thus the ruling class), where they signified modernity, youth, beauty, and high fashion—in short: they contributed to the perpetuation of prescribed gender performance. This happened to most of the items that were part of the punk look created by women. Leather jackets, gloves, ties, Converse shoes—all of these fashion items went through the same process. Initially, they represented masculinity, wealth, or the mainstream, then they were taken over by punk, becoming signs of rebellion and empowerment, and finally, the fashion industry re-appropriated them for the mainstream, either as a seasonal or a more permanent, however completely acceptable, fashion trend. In this way, the dominant culture effectively leaves women voiceless. Women's ability to rebel through fashion is erased in the process of removing the signs they use for their rebellion.

It may seem positive that, nowadays, it is socially acceptable for women to style their hair in a way they choose and to wear leather clothing, miniskirts, flat shoes, ties, and suits. Having control over their bodies and being able to express themselves through fashion can certainly be considered a victory. Nonetheless, I would argue that this freedom is not only illusory, but causes women to lose the power to rebel through fashion. After all, the outfits are constructed from the limited items available on the market and, accordingly, were previously approved by the dominant culture and sanctioned for mass production. The signs punk women appropriated for conveying their messages have been taken away from them, were assigned new meaning, and can therefore no longer communicate their messages.

Once again, we witness the inequality of the genders. While punk women became trendsetters, fashion icons, and celebrated fashion designers, the same did not apply to men. Fans imitated the looks that the frontmen of punk bands sported, but the style never entered the mainstream and was never normalized—especially not those fashion trends that were androgynous or feminine. For example, it is socially acceptable for women to wear their hair short, to have undercuts, or to have different hair colors. This acceptance, however, does not apply to men. Ties worn by women are a trend that continues to be in and out of fashion; makeup worn by men, on the other hand, has never become a mainstream trend. And this list can be extended: on women, studded leather jackets have become a fashion trend that is constantly re-invented with new colors and patterns; on men, they continue to symbolize belonging to a subculture. Multiple piercings worn by women are no longer unconventional; heavily pierced men, at the same time, are still perceived to break out of their "box."

There are two ways to interpret these observations: on the one hand, the limits and rigidity of the "male box" can be viewed as negative—that is, men are restricted in their expression through fashion, as male fashion is strictly coded and consists of a very limited number of items. This can be traced back to the codes of gender: if fashion, cosmetics, and a general focus on the body and aesthetics are associated with women, men must not be involved in these "feminine activities." However, this is exactly what gives men a voice when it comes to subculture: the signs that they are using in order to spread their message are not taken away from them, they are not modified, and they are not controlled by the ruling class. Whereas women are stripped of their voices as they try to rebel through fashion, men get to retain theirs. Witnessing men appropriate feminine fashion has not become less scandalous or less invested with meaning over time. A great example is a current punk artist, Fat Mike, the singer of NOFX. In 2016, the band released a book that detailed their experiences and inspiration, and Fat Mike openly spoke about cross-dressing.[27] Whatever his personal narrative is, being a male punk rocker wearing female clothes is just as rebellious, eccentric, and conversation-starting today as it was in the 1970s. Once again, we see privilege: the power to rebel, the power to make a statement, remains in the hands of white heterosexual men. Subcultures like punk have become equated with protest, rebellion, and power. Power, however, is associated with masculinity, which finally leads to the ultimate equation of subculture with masculinity.

Gender-Bending and the Aesthetic Legacy of Punk

We have seen elements of gender-bending in ways of dressing that have emerged during the glory days of punk, and it has remained the subculture's most appealing aspect, flourishing also in the days of post-punk. Cross-dressing tendencies became increasingly popular, especially in the gothic movement, new wave, and the new romantics. Investigating the legacy of certain gender-bending trends that were "scandalous" at the time, and their different implementations depending on the gender that is being subjected to redefinition yields interesting results. For example, the fashion industry has embraced the idea of women wearing suits, and women in suits are now often seen in daily life as well as on the red carpet. Female celebrities in suits make a fashion statement; their fashion choice is no longer a political statement as it was when the members of the Bromley Contingent did it in the 1970s. Mainstream celebrities such as Rihanna, Dua Lipa, Emma Watson, and Victoria Beckham, to name only a few prominent names, can all be spotted on various A-list events wearing feminized versions of suits.

This feminization also constitutes a form of sexualization—but unlike early punk sexualization of uniforms, which was designed to provoke and enrage, the sexualized suits aim to have a seductive aesthetic. At best, the "female suit" is seen as a daring fashion choice, but it is void of any political meaning. Importantly, the suit is not just an accessory for the red carpet, it has also entered the realm of business. It is a popular choice for women in the workplace and considered professional—once again highlighting the idea of masculinity being tied to competence, leadership, business, and power: women who aspire to be taken seriously in the workplace opt for channeling masculinity even in their choice of clothes. By contrast, skirts and dresses have never become parts of male fashion, which means that they have retained the power to carry a subversive message when worn by men. Most importantly, the trend of men wearing skirts and dresses has never entered the mainstream and is therefore still associated with subculture. Male musicians, representatives of punk and its latter derivatives, garner attention and amplify their voices when appropriating female fashion. This offers an interesting insight into the meaning of adaptation in this context. For men, adapting a dress means simply putting it on. While traditionally masculine fashion items appropriated by women were feminized, this did not apply to traditionally feminine clothing appropriated by men. When looking at the post-punk era, and more specifically at the dresses famously worn by men—for instance by David Bowie or later, in the 1990s, by Kurt Cobain, Iggy Pop, and Brian Molko—we can see that they have in no way been adjusted or turned into costumes. They were left in their original shapes, as they were created for women, and they did not lead to any mainstream fashion trends. At the same time, when Siouxsie Sioux, Annie Lennox, and Madonna wore un-fitted male suits, the fashion industry quickly picked up the trend, feminizing the look of the suits and putting them on the market as mass-produced commodities. Not only were the suits feminized and sexualized in ways that supported the sexism that they were originally intended to combat, but they also became a tool in capitalist hands, constituting yet another gendered item to be sold.

Contemporary Appropriations of Punk

In contemporary popular culture, women who wish to make a statement by cross-dressing opt for a punk aesthetic to be able to perform masculinity more convincingly and without risking a slip into the realm of "fashionableness." In recent years, the performances of Lady Gaga and Ruby Rose have stood out.

Lady Gaga, for instance, created her male alter ego Jo Calderone in 2010, which we may read as an attempt at deconstructing and exposing the artificiality of gender categories. Refusing to break character or demystify the idea, she remained committed to acting as if Jo Calderone was a real person independent of Gaga, both when she was speaking to the media as Lady Gaga and as Jo Calderone. Jo Calderone had various appearances: as a model for the men's fashion editorial for the Autumn/Winter 2010 Vogue Hommes Japan, as the star of the "You and I" music video in 2011, and during a live performance at the MTV Video Music Awards the same year.[28] Jo Calderone's masculinity was performed through a particular aesthetic: the stereotype of a "young rebel," a combination of James Dean and Sid Vicious. Interestingly, none of Jo Calderone's clothes were explicitly gendered. All of the clothing would have been appropriate for a woman, as well. Nevertheless, the implication of the outfit, the attitude, and the entirety of the image created by the clothing allude to a "rebel without a cause" and anti-establishment disposition, which renders the character powerful.

Calderone's performance at the MTV Music Video Awards openly pointed at what Lady Gaga was trying to achieve. Jo Calderone held a lengthy speech in which he addressed the notion of performing, and accused his ex-girlfriend Lady Gaga of not being "real" and incapable of having an "honest moment." He explained that she is constantly in costume, even when she is taking a shower, quoting her as defending herself by saying "I'm not real, I'm theater."[29] On the surface, this speech highlights that Lady Gaga is an invented persona that has taken over the actual person behind it. It could, however, also be interpreted as a performance meant to reveal the constructedness and performativity of gender. In her performance, which constitutes a subversive gender parody, she stages gendered acts of the body to foreground their artificiality. Lady Gaga remained purposefully evasive when speaking about Jo Calderone after he stopped appearing. She simply called it "*an invention of my mind*," and a "*mischievous experiment*."[30]

Ruby Rose is another artist who connects subculture and masculinity in a similar way. In the short film *Break Free* (2014),[31] we encounter Rose as a young woman, a very stereotypically feminine figure, slowly undressing and removing makeup. Once her body is a "clean slate," she proceeds to re-dress herself, but this time she alters her appearance to look like a man, and in this masculine form, she finally acknowledges and addresses the viewer. However, in addition to presenting a transformation from stereotypical femininity to stereotypical masculinity (like Lady Gaga, relying both on aesthetics and on body language, stance, and gesturing), Rose further presents a transition from mainstream to subculture. The beginning of the video features a traditional performance of femininity: Rose is shown with long blonde hair, nail polish, heavy makeup, high heels, and a dress. The moment her transformation begins, signs of the punk subculture begin to emerge: first, we see an undercut hairstyle, then the fading makeup reveals previously hidden tattoos, and ultimately, she is putting on an outfit that consists of mismatched socks, combat boots, low waist pants, a shirt, and a jacket with rolled-up sleeves. The latter serves well to accentuate her tattoos and multiple ear piercings. When portraying masculinity, Rose opts for recreating a punk look. Adding a comment on gender inequality and sexism, Rose's character gets a voice only when the transformation is completed—the feminine figure is silent and looks away from the camera, while the masculine figure faces the camera and starts shouting and gesticulating in a heavily confrontational manner. The meek feminine figure not only resembles a stereotypical woman but also exudes a mainstream aesthetic—conventional and socially acceptable. Thus, Rose exposes power as associated with masculinity but also accentuates this power and the ability to speak for oneself through referencing the punk aesthetic. In her video, she reveals the connection between perceived agency and gender, for her performance of subcultural masculinity entails the power to take control and to rebel. Both Lady Gaga's and Ruby Rose's performances also promote a punk legacy, as they exemplify how remnants of the subculture are still visible in contemporary popular culture.

The connotation of punk style and its absence of female participation can further be observed in the examples of The Prodigy and Charli XCX. The frontman of the electronic dance music band The Prodigy, Keith Flint, recreated the classic punk look during all his public appearances. The same can be said of pop artist Charli XCX. Because of Flint's appearance, the media has treated The Prodigy as part of the subculture from the very beginning of their career. Charli XCX, however, whose appearance was also defined by the punk aesthetic in the early years of her career, was neither seen as rebellious nor as connected to the subculture. This example demonstrates the normalization of the punk look by the mainstream fashion industry and exposes the fluidity of the sign. Fashion items such as fishnets, the sexualized school uniform, metal jewelry with spikes and studs, heavy black eyeliner, combat boots, and leather jackets have all been commodified by the fashion industry. They have become part of mainstream female fashion, while their political connotations were erased in the process. Therefore, even though Charli XCX's music was both sonically and lyrically far more in line with punk than The Prodigy's music, she has never been associated with the subculture.

Concluding Remarks

Punk was an ideological anti-establishment movement carried out by groups of young people, primarily the working-class youth. The disillusioned American and British youth fought what they perceived as social injustices through artistic expression. The egalitarian and DIY nature of the movement also created a space for a budding feminist movement.[32] Punk music, visual arts, and predominantly fashion were used to address gender conceptions, and their deconstruction was an important element of the punk rebellion. Accordingly, punk fashion makes for a compelling study of the fluid nature of the sign's meaning. The punk subculture used signs that already existed in mainstream popular culture—the culture it rebelled against—and assigned them new meaning. These signs gained momentum in the new context, but eventually transitioned back into the mainstream as punk slowly transformed from subculture to popular culture. Thus, when we trace the history of punk fashion, we can witness the battle of mainstream and subculture over the meaning of the sign. The subculture used clothing items, which already had symbolic value as markers of social status and gender, and subverted their meaning by embedding them in new contexts. Thus, clothing items and fashion accessories became signs of rebellion, discontent, and empowerment. However, as the subculture gained prominence, it was slowly integrated into the capitalist machinery it rebelled against. The fashion industry began to appropriate the style endorsed by the subculture, thus effectively reclaiming the sign. The sign has thus come full circle, as it has been reinstated as a commodity to gain profit by the very establishment it was initially extracted from with the aim to subvert and challenge its mechanisms.

In addition, the histories of certain fashion signs display a noticeable difference based on their conventionally assigned gender. The punk and post-punk movements have challenged gender norms and aimed to reveal the constructedness of gender through gender-bending fashion statements and cross-dressing. Women, however, were effectively stripped of the power to rebel through fashion when the fashion industry reclaimed and appropriated punk's subversive signs: the items that were once markers of masculinity used by women to challenge gender roles have since been feminized and popularized. They have been turned into products of mainstream fashion and have thus lost their political associations. On the other hand, it is still considered subversive if men appropriate female clothing and products to challenge hegemonic conceptions of gender. This dependence between the meaning of the sign and gender only serves to prove the persistence of (white) male privilege. The fashion industry majorly contributes to maintaining the categories of binary gender division, and the aftermath of punk is an excellent example of conserving and reinforcing the rules of doing gender. Punk constitutes a significant cultural phenomenon and milestone. While it is mostly thought of as a musical direction today, punk pioneered the deconstruction of gender as it astutely recognized that gender is a naturalized cultural myth.

Notes

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20 For an in-depth discussion of the divisive effects of the swastika trend, see Steven Lee Beeber, *The Heebie-jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2006), 163–78.

21 Dylan Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture," in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 234..

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31 Ruby, "Break Free - Ruby Rose," directed by Phillip R. Lopez, July 15, 2014, video, 5:17,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFjsSSDLl8w.

32 The large space for female voices resulted in various feminist movements within punk that didn't always agree. For example, the 1990s movement Riot Grrrls promoted feminist values and the punk vision, but did that by retaining a rather stereotypical feminine look, for which they have received a lot of criticism from fellow female punks.

About the Author

Alekszandra Rokvity is a PhD candidate at the University of Graz, working in the field of cultural studies. Her academic career includes teaching American literature and culture at the University of Graz as a student assistant and working as a doctoral fellow at the University of Alberta in Canada, where she is now a frequent guest lecturer. Rokvity's academic focus is on gender studies and medical humanities. Alongside her academic career, she is an avid activist for women's rights, collaborating with various international NGOs. She also writes literary reviews for *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine* and is a writer for the feminist section at *Medium*.

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Reviews

edited by
Joshua Parker

Abstract

Chidsey Dickson reviews Jenny Rice's monograph *Awful Archives* (Ohio State University Press, 2020); Florian Zitzelsberger reviews Erwin Feyersinger's monograph *Metalepsis in Animation* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017); Matthias Klestil reviews Christian Eilers's monograph *Paul Austers autobiographische Werke* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019); Philipp Reisner reviews Laura Marcus's short introduction to autobiography (Oxford University Press, 2018); Steffi Wiggins reviews the late Vassil Hristov Anastassov's book *Power and Truth in Political Discourse* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018); Martin Gabriel reviews H.W. Brands's book *Dreams of El Dorado* (Basic Books, 2019); and Joshua Parker review Liv Birte Buchmann's monograph *Commemorating Abraham Lincoln the Transnational Way* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020)..

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Reviews

edited by
Joshua Parker

Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence. By Jenny Rice (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 226pp.

Chidsey Dickson, University of Lynchburg

DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v2i1.133

There are a few categories of books in recent years that touch on the subject of conspiracy theory, two of which are particularly prevalent: Some are pop jeremiads about the time in American intellectual culture when (true) facts mattered, science was respected across the political and class spectrum, disagreements could be parsed honestly, when news hadn't been degraded into infotainment and argument wasn't processed into low-cal diatribe and soundbyte, and the very sourcing of information (which we know is one way we elevate some beliefs to the status of knowledge) hadn't been balkanized by cable TV and social media—a time before bunk artists, charlatans, mystics, and yarn-spinners with a disdain for fair play and reality. Others face (vertiginously) forward rather than (laconically) back. These are the narratives of social panic (gangs, satanism, transpeople, greedy bankers, insane tech geniuses, etc.), themselves echoes of older panics imagining the new as not merely disruptive but cataclysmic or, alternatively, imagining historically vulnerable groups (immigrants, the impoverished, Jews, "vocal" women, gay people, etc.) as cabals or insidious upsurging "masses" set on undermining the surprisingly vulnerable sitting duck of Western normative civilization.

If you're familiar with these kinds of books, then you will think that another book on the subject will be yet again old wine in a new bottle: alarming (or alarmist, depending on your mood or position) discourses featuring experts giving dry accounts of what's scintillatingly wrong with devolving belief systems or "new"(ly visible) social configurations (kids with mobile technology! nonbinary bathrooms!). Fretful, evidence-packed conspiracy books offer the reader a stable position of being a regular (unaffected) observer (along with the author) met with disturbing foils: the degenerate masses, the creepingly subversive subculture, transcendent evils of every stripe. Sometimes, these accounts are sober/rationalistic in tone and sometimes they are thrilling, noir-ish, and sometimes they are humorous (or read in jocular fashion). Their key feature is that they muster lots of evidence for their viewpoints, lots and lots of evidence. Rather than decrying some of these books as peddling incomplete or specious or flagrantly false evidence, which is how most cultural critics respond to what they see as conspiracy discourse, Jenny Rice, a rhetorician of public discourse, has discovered in her research that evidence is really more of an event, a process, a dynamic rather than a thing. Rice, in other words, is not joining the fray of detached, expert cultural commentators harrowed or haunted by the way the world is or was. Her interest is in how *evidence*—the word, the technologies and ambience of—is fed into, and plays out in, conspiracy theories of all kinds.

Although Rice's book contains many examples of what the sober analyst would call far-fetched thinking, Rice does not try to coral all varieties of lunacy (remote viewing, astral projection, Holocaust denying, birther bunk, etc.) into one *outré* potpourri of wackiness for her readers to fret over, snicker or moan at, or feel smugly unscathed by. Rather, her book is an attempt to draw upon a range of theories (rhetoric—ancient and modern, phenomenology, cultural studies), histories and first-hand interviews, and observation to trace how evidence feels (and unfolds) in different contexts in order to challenge academic pieties and popular doxa about how *evidential* and *archival* (a related key term) rhetoric works upon its users. The issue Rice begins with is not: How is the explanatory power of an evidence-based theory (something used in the right hands to build knowledge—as our academic lore would have it) distorted—turned to nefarious ends—to yield bullshit ideas like the Holocaust denial? Surely that particular question has been (patly) answered: bullshit ideas are those that are not falsifiable, those that can be shown to be spurred by resentiment of some kind, or virulent misanthropy or bigotry. The *why* (motives) of conspiracy thinking and collaboration do not tell us the *how*. Rice centers her work on this question: whether inside or outside the academy, when someone reads or assembles an archive, *what is it exactly that they are seeing*? *What are they finding evidence of?* Rice investigates evidence in various conspiracy scenes and does not emerge from all the engagements "untouched," which makes the book as much a personal account of her encounters with the scenes of evidence/archive as a theorizing of these rhetorical processes. I would suggest that her intellectual and moral compass throughout this intimate and critical journey into what is palpably there in this or that archive is something many of us in the world today want to know: "Why do traditional modes of argument often fail in the face of claims that rely on bad evidence?" (15). In other words, why do so many modern people have weird beliefs? Masks are governmental overreach, the lack of alien bodies signifies cover-up, AIDS is a fake disease, poisonous vaccines, international cabals, rampant voter fraud in the 2020 election, and so on. To answer that question, Rice suggests, we have to come to terms with what evidence *does*.

Rice's introduction observes that evidence is typically thought of as a thing or things; we have (hold or behold palpable) evidence of a real thing or a phony thing (6). This image, Rice says, goes back to Aristotle who conceived of "inartistic proofs" as testimony, objects, witnesses—things which can be handled by the rhetor and deployed (trajected at the audience) without artistry. Let the facts speak for themselves, might be the slogan of how this concept of evidence works. College writing teachers subscribe to this framework: we teach students how to find evidence (things) and vouch for reliable protocols for distinguishing "good" things (evidence) from "bad": look at the date, the url, the publisher, the credentials of the author, etc. Evidence exists, we counsel our students—both good and bad—and the thinker has but to locate it, sift it, and bring it on board.

Rice's thesis is that evidence, though it might smack of indelible thinginess, is also a volatile, dynamic process of conjuring the "palpable," a feeling that a watershed event has occurred that has tipped a searcher into the presence of the real thing (evidence) that will reveal to them (finally) "what the fuck is happening around us" (11). In short, evidence occurs in rhetorical situations where some form and texture of *strangeness* has pressured the thinker to ask: what's (intensely) wrong with or (discomfitingly) missing from this picture? Rice suggests that evidence, in the context of conspiracy theory, begins with a "narrative jolt" that fractures the coherence of some understanding (12). Less figuratively, I might translate this insight this way: no one searches for something without an exigency of something being amiss. The wrongness of the interpretive horizon (the feeling that we are headed for a waterfall) is a key insight Rice provides for pulling together the disparate scenes of hermeneutics (inside and outside academia, student and professional, conspiratorial and substantive inquiry). Rice believes that seeing "evidence-as-thing limits our ability to see something about the evidentiary process itself" (8), namely that we need to look past the binaries (legit/invalid, present/absent) that have framed evidence as a rather simple affair to the dynamic process by which a person encounters something as a relevant (read: pathetically charged) detail. Archives contain things (documents) to be sure, but they are also a site/scene of the *Unheimliche*: experiencing the world as (synecdochally) strange.

The first chapter, "Bits in Motion," looks at how an aura (an affective impact between two bodies that "does not reside within either one" [33]) can emerge when a researcher is pouring over items in an archive, working from Benjamin's famous article to articulate how an archival aura is like an additional unintended purpose for the archive that emerges with the user's investment of time and energy. One of her examples of how this process works comes from her own experience as archivist/parent, when she put together a baby book. Its ostensible purpose was to chart weight and other developmental milestones for a child to help a doctor identify any abnormalities, but the book—given the care and mixture of feelings that attend its making and handling—can signify a parent's vigilance and/or hope for orderly development; in e/affect, a parent's competence is not part of the archive but an e/affect (an aura) created in the process of its creation and public use. Rice's case study here is the CIA's "Stargate Project," which was the 1991 code name for a program that began in the 1970s and attempted to establish the potential use of psychic powers (remote viewing, etc.) for military use and domestic intelligence. One example Rice gives of the SP archive's auratic e/affect occurs by virtue of the scribe's use of "banal agency-speak and prosaic report language" (42) to downplay the oddity of the program's focus and methods. Rather than simply providing an account of the goings-on, the scribes were actively using humdrum language to normalize the activities they were evidencing/archiving. When someone applies a buzz term to a circumstance whose actual contours exceed the commonplace, perhaps absurdly or grotesquely so (as in the Third Reich's "obsessive documentation" [44] of their systematic murder of Jews), it invites both writer and reader(s) into an aura of inevitability, of normalcy. Another auratic effect of archiving vast amounts of information about a situation or a people that are obviously more complex than the language being used to pigeonhole them is the faux-coherence of aggregate (disparate, even contradictory) facts. In European anti-Semitic tracts over hundreds of years, Jews have been documented as being clannish *and* assimilative, secretive *and* intrusive and "what keeps these contradictory beliefs from creative cognitive dissonance" is that they can be "unified" under the same scrutinizing gaze, the animus-*cum*-suspicion behind the imperative to keep tabs on these suspects (55). This is different, of course, from "confirmation bias" because it is not that some evidence is being weighted more than others; rather, there is an aural affect/effect that "it [whatever, contradictions and all] all adds up."

Chapter two, "Notes From Trutherworld," refers to this cumulative auralizing effect by its other name, proliferation, which is "the hallmark of conspiracy theory in general" (66). What makes a theory a "conspiracy" rather than a competitive (if not very competitive) explanation is that "the abundance of words produces a rhetorical effect beyond the contents themselves" (66). 9/11 Truthers, for example, create (and are caught up) in a cascade of documents that overwhelm by their quantity and variety: some are tiny (photographs of dust particles) and some are broad jingoistic narrative devices. Chapter three, "Distal Evidence and the Power of Empty Archives," feels out the evidential rhetoric/process of (suspiciously) "empty" and "distal" (as yet unrealized) archives. The latter doesn't need much elaboration since it's a part of every murder mystery (a person lacks a motive . . . suspicious!).

Chapter four, "Disfigurement," turns to the question of what might be a "fitting" (kairotic) response to someone we find ourselves in dialogue with—someone who is practicing an evidential process that we find incredible (and yet not surprising). Rice imagines that in some cases the best way to respond to someone's weird beliefs is to "begin with yes . . . instead of starting with no" (146). Rice gives the example of the person who has been abducted or seen an unidentified flying object. She sees these accounts, like reports of ghosts and astral projection, as "real" in the sense of being "shining [clarifying] figuration . . . My voice as interlocutor is more than agreement or disagreement in that moment [of encountering another person's testimony]. I also have the opportunity [to say] yes to a conversation" and therefore yes to a "civic faith" that something good can come from the exchange of views. As for the fitting response to Birthers and Holocaust Deniers, the most constructive engagement might be to foreground the consequences of the basic deligitimizing approach/trope: denying that another person has "papers" or that someone (or six million someones) really suffered because the case is not unassailable. In both cases, what matters, Rice suggests, is the "ongoing discourse" rather than "certitude."

Just as it is true that the empirical (evidence-making/reading) method doesn't tell the whole story of the scientific process, so it is with conspiracy theory. In both, there is communal participation—debate, criticism, exchange. Knowledge—of whatever kind—is an ongoing social construction that takes place in dialogue with (rather than in isolation from) other knowledge-making activities. The final chapters, "Writing Demon Archives" and "Outro: The What and the Where," return to the question of the praxis of evidence. What is the fitting response, Rice asks, to "archives that are flawed, faulty and troubled?" Rice's response is that we need not just oppose (refute) the unstable evidenced position but inquire into what the wobble might be good for. If an archive can lead some to think Obama an alien, it might also lead us to think about the fact that none of us have papers (official documents) that cannot be alienated (in the Brechtian sense), made into an ill-fitting thing that doesn't resound with truth/comfort. I think most people have had the experience of hearing their voice recorded, their face imaged, their contribution to some place (mis)represented, so that we all understand the ways in which archiving can disorient and disappoint. Would such disorientation and negative poignancy ever be useful? Could it provide an opportunity for dialogue beyond a specific (unwinnable) debate over whether the evidence (thing) is true or false? Rice's work makes a convincing argument.

Metalepsis in Animation: Paradoxical Transgressions of Ontological Levels. By Erwin Feyersinger (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017), 164pp.

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The title of Erwin Feyersinger's *Metalepsis in Animation: Paradoxical Transgressions of Ontological Levels* provides readers with a first working definition of the narrative phenomenon explored in the book. Following research in literary studies (most prominently Gérard Genette's early deliberations about characters crossing borders between narrative levels) and the further development of metalepsis as a transgeneric and transmedial occurrence in representational media (among others, Werner Wolf's significant contributions to the study of metareference), Feyersinger sets out to contextualize and (re)conceptualize metalepsis within the framework of cognitive narratology, focusing on animated film. In particular, his book is informed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's theory of conceptual blending, which assumes that "human beings [are able to] combine differing concepts located in various mental spaces" (78). If classical narratology broadly conceives of metalepsis as a transgression of the divide between, or an amalgamation of, mutually exclusive worlds, conceptual blending, as Feyersinger convincingly demonstrates throughout the second half of his book, enables an approximation of the concept's paradoxical nature from a cognitivist point of view. Metalepsis, accordingly, constitutes "a blend of two conflicting inputs," a conflict which "is not fully resolved in the blend and perceived as a paradox" (142, 146). The perceived impossibility of metaleptic transgressions transcends the medium in which these transgressions take place; an analysis of metalepsis thus needs to consider the act of reception, an endeavor facilitated by cognitive narratology. Based on these central premises, I wish to address two points in the following, Feyersinger's examination of metalepsis in animation as well as his work on related "transgressive phenomena," such as TV crossovers and metamorphoses, "that are not perceived as paradoxical" (10).

After a brief general introduction, the book's second chapter offers a concise survey of previous attempts at conceptualizing metalepsis. Feyersinger complements this theoretical overview with examples from various media. While chapter two more specifically focuses on literature and film as the two most prominent subjects of investigation in the study of metalepsis, throughout the rest of the book, the case studies of animated films are supplemented by excursions to other formats such as music videos, cartoons, and even performance art. The diverse corpus of texts not only attests to Feyersinger's intention to develop "theories, typologies, and models that are not restricted to animation alone, but can be applied to other media as well" (146), they also allow for a diachronic perspective on metalepsis in animation. As

Feyersinger illustrates in his close reading of Romain Segaud and Christel Pougeoise's short film *Tim Tom* (2002; chapter four), animated films frequently "historicize and fictionalize the technological and psychophysiological basis of animation" (33), which is closely related to the development of the other media discussed in the book. Accordingly, chapter four situates animation within the broader historical context of metareference. Feyersinger argues that, in animation, a "meta-metareferential turn" can be discerned; since animated films are already metareferential, changing media environments and their increasing employment of metareferential devices lead to "metareferential reflections on an already metareferential art form, i.e., meta-metareferences" (33). Even though *Tim Tom* and Chuck Jones's *Duck Amuck* (1953; chapter seven) are Feyersinger's only two extensive case studies on metalepsis in animation—both having a particular thematic focus such as the historicization of metareference in animation and the contribution of metalepsis to the integrity of a character—other examples are revisited multiple times, inviting comparison.

Feyersinger's exploration of metalepsis in animation begins with the narratological tradition discussed in chapter two, before turning to the inventive and genuinely auspicious approach of the study, developing a generic model of the conceptual blending of metalepsis (chapter nine). Chapter three proposes a typology consisting of seven elementary types of metalepsis based on Genette's taxonomy of narrative levels, which Feyersinger persuasively adapts to meet the specificities of animated film. He asserts that animation is particularly prone to metareferential structures such as metalepsis since both "are often experimental and feature the transgression of borders: ontological borders in the case of metalepsis; imaginative, aesthetic, or ideological borders in the case of animation" (20). While his analysis of *Duck Amuck* in chapter seven still largely operates within the typology based on narrative levels (for instance, when describing the relationship between a seemingly omnipotent animator and their drawings, both of which are situated on ontologically different levels), this in-depth case study more importantly applies Fauconnier and Turner's notion of conceptual blending, whose theoretical foundation is curtly touched upon in chapter six, to animated film. Understanding metalepsis in terms of blending allows for metonymic substitutions of inputs such as setting, roles, and costumes (altered by the fictional animator) which, however, are not perceived as disruptions in the identity of Daffy, the animation's protagonist, but as a means of substantiating character integrity. In the process of blending, Feyersinger argues, "connections of related and unrelated concepts are established, and new meaning emerges," a meaning which foregrounds "both the stability of an established character and the spectators' flexibility in constructing the continuity of an identity" (100), again stressing the act of reception. Feyersinger's project therefore goes beyond the general applicability of cognitive narratology to metalepsis as it assesses possible functions of metalepses in animation through the pronounced shift toward reception.

Besides addressing metalepsis in animation, the study puts into critical focus other related "world-connecting phenomena" (74) such as TV crossovers (chapter five). While Feyersinger delineates how "transpositions" of elements from one series to another in a crossover "create metalepsis-like effects" (73), he repeatedly emphasizes the promotional purpose of (metaleptic) crossovers. Both metalepsis and crossovers do not necessarily have an anti-illusionistic effect; they do not necessarily foreground deconstructive tendencies readily associated with metareferential structures. Instead, reading both as related concepts fosters an understanding of animation as an artform perpetuating its own generic codes which, indeed, contributes to the commercial appeal of these phenomena. His case study of *Duck Amuck* similarly responds to an economic argument, for example in the conceptualization of "animated characters as film stars" (99). Instances where Feyersinger moves away from metalepsis as such and turns toward its intersections with related concepts—this also applies to chapter eight, which considers metamorphosis in animation—are perhaps the most outstanding achievements of the book. These chapters broaden the scope of the study. Even though the title of the book leads to expectations of yet another work exclusively centering on metalepsis, in actuality, *Metalepsis in Animation* includes additional information on the background and various contexts of both metalepsis and animation which speak to the main approach of the book: the inclusion of metalepsis-like, yet evidently different, concepts mirrors the blending of seemingly disparate inputs, the cognitive process activated in the reception of metalepsis and metamorphosis in animation as well as in the reception of crossovers, which proves to be heuristically sensible in the study of metalepsis. The comparative and contrastive nature of these chapters therefore provides readers with valuable insights into the workings of metalepsis in animation.

Metalepsis in Animation: Paradoxical Transgressions of Ontological Levels in many ways constitutes a convincing contribution to the fields of both animation studies and cognitive narratology, addressing aspects ranging from the genesis of metaleptic effects in animation to, more importantly, the reception and decoding of this phenomenon. While the book does not feature an index, cross-references between individual chapters still make the text reader-friendly and accessible, and establish coherence. In addition, Feyersinger concisely lists and summarizes the central points of his argument throughout the book and includes conclusions for the thematic/analytic chapters of the study. The text is augmented by numerous screenshots from animated films and, in particular in the chapters on conceptual blending, greatly useful illustrations which enhance the overall comprehensibility of the book and strengthen the presentation of Feyersinger's argument. Finally, *Metalepsis in Animation* not only offers readers ways to rethink transgressive phenomena in animation and other media, it also successfully demonstrates the increment value of cognitive narratology and conceptual blending for the study of the paradoxes of metalepsis.

Paul Austers autobiographische Werke: Stationen einer Schriftstellerkarriere. By Christian Eilers (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019), 326pp.

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Christian Eilers's book *Paul Austers autobiographische Werke: Stationen einer Schriftstellerkarriere* turns to an understudied part of Paul Auster's work: his autobiographical writing. Although the writer's oeuvre has been the subject of academic debate for decades, the majority of scholarship has dealt with Auster's novels, sometimes in conjunction with, but more rarely with an explicit focus on, his memoirs. In its attempt to fill this gap, Eilers's book, a comparative analysis of texts identified as "immediate" ("unmittelbare" [4, 307, 314]) autobiographical works, will be of interest to scholars looking for a biographical lens on Auster and readers eager to learn more about the writer's life.

Framed by an introduction and a conclusion, the four thematic chapters of the book, which is based on Eilers's dissertation, consider four texts written by Auster over a period of more than 30 years: *White Spaces* (1980), *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), *Hand to Mouth* (1997), and *Winter Journal* (2012). In these, Eilers identifies dominant motifs that will be familiar to readers of Auster's fiction, such as the quest for truth, the failures of language, defeat, hermetic space, or solitude, which Eilers links to the author's biography. Methodologically, the study proposes to combine a text-based analysis of its selection of autobiographical texts with a biographical approach (6). Explicitly set against poststructuralist and deconstructivist methods (6), Eilers's readings rely on a traditional focus on the author that takes the selected texts as evidencing Auster's gradual approximation of himself (304), and as fragments of a bigger picture of the man. The study addresses Auster's autobiographical work as a growing whole ("sich stets erweiterndes autobiographisches Gesamtbild" [201]), a notion also conveyed through the images of stages or a mosaic (194, 201, 209) that suggest a hermeneutic approach to Auster's writing that seeks root causes for the texts' motifs in the author's life (3, 12).

The biographical events Eilers reads as formative for Auster's motivic world range from the deaths of his parents and the divorce from his first wife, Lydia Davis, to Auster's years in Paris and his existential crisis in the late 1970s. The latter figures prominently in the first two thematic chapters, which examine the eight-page *White*

Spaces and the best known of Auster's autobiographical texts, *The Invention of Solitude*. Chapter two interprets *White Spaces*, written under the impression of a ballet performance in December 1978, as both "therapeutic" (19) and an early manifestation of familiar Auster topics such as causality and chance, defeat, and the writing subject's relation to space. The following chapter expands on this idea by reading Auster's first prose text, *The Invention of Solitude*, produced in the aftermath of Sam Auster's unexpected death in 1979, as an autobiographical response to, and search for a way out of, the writer's crisis. Much of chapter three focuses on Paul Auster's relation to his (often absent) father Sam, in particular through the text's first part, "Portrait of an Invisible Man," which introduces one of Eilers's central theses: that of a traumatic, guilt-ridden father-son constellation, in which Sam Auster emerges as an "other," a representative of antagonistic values ("wertebezogenen Gegenspieler" [151]).

This constellation, later extended to Auster's mother Queenie, becomes a dominant element of Eilers's biographical explanation of the writer's motifs and recurs not only in this chapter's reading of the multi-perspectival second part of *The Invention of Solitude* ("The Book of Memory") but throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter four addresses *Hand to Mouth* as a new form of Auster's dealing with his past, one that leaves a postmodernist aesthetic framework behind and implements a retrospective and unfragmented mode of representation (210–12). Following an extensive amount of biographical information presented through *Hand to Mouth* (161–91), Eilers discusses motivic parallels to the earlier works (197–208). In the 1997 text, he suggests, the dominant motifs, while remaining connected to Auster's underlying unresolved conflict with the dead father (200, 309), become the writer's means of expressing social and political critique (159, 161–75). Chapter five completes the main part by reading the second-person narrative *Winter Journal* as a combination of earlier perspectives and techniques (278). Eilers views the text as an autobiography of the body that returns to a postmodernist style and premises physical finitude (257). Here, by now well-known motifs recur to function as retrospective lenses rather than self-therapeutic means to change a state of crisis (247).

How readers will perceive the book will depend largely on how well its author-focused approach will suit them. Even those who favor a more traditional methodological lens, however, may wonder whether certain kinds of theory could have been dealt with more rigorously to buttress and refine the study's claims. One may wish, for example, for a more exhaustive engagement with more recent autobiography theory (beyond regular references to Philippe Lejeune), trauma theory (since trauma seems to be essential to Eilers's take on the father-son relationship), or potentially fruitful ideas from narratology such as the "implied author" (given the proposal of a text-based approach). Furthermore, there is the more general question why post-structuralist thought is rejected out of hand when subjectivity is so central to the study and when such thought, even if not involved in a methodological framework, seems important as a thematic context for a writer such as Auster.

While (not) taking these paths is obviously a matter of choice, what seems problematic is what not broaching such issues and theory from the start is reflective of, namely the tendency in the book to leave its own methodological premises and limits largely unquestioned. The study proposes a focus on the biographical through the autobiographical but misses the opportunity to reflect on the particular merits and potential shortcomings of this idea. Neither suggesting an opposition to poststructuralist and deconstructivist thought, nor acknowledging that an interview Eilers conducted with Auster in September 2013 cannot be a basis for a scholarly approach, help fully clarify the study's approach in itself. Readers will look in vain for initial definitions of central terms such as "autobiographical" or "motif" against extant scholarship, or take issue with the underlying notion of gaining biographical evidence through an autobiographical text, which, if unexplained, seems to ignore not only postmodern critiques of subjectivity and representation, but also basic theoretical questions of life writing. One might ask, for example, in how far it is logical to translate a problematic father-son relationship (no doubt identifiable in *The Invention of Solitude*) into what seems to become a biographical master-narrative taken as general subtext for all subsequent autobiographical texts, if simultaneously suggesting a text-based analysis. The biographical at such points seems a way to yield to an urge for a teleological reading that risks circumventing fundamental questions of autobiographical representation as textual representation—questions that Auster's texts themselves address by self-reflexively playing with the issue of authorship and consciously sabotaging the authenticity of the autobiographical prism. Auster, in other words, complicates the functioning of what Lejeune calls an "autobiographical pact" that Eilers, on a methodological level and via footnotes at the beginnings of chapters (31, 57, 160, 215), takes for granted.

Despite such methodological question marks, the monograph has its strengths in its familiarity with, and survey of, a set of largely underrepresented texts, and is a useful and timely contribution to Auster scholarship. As pioneering book-length study of Auster's autobiographical texts, it conveys new insights for German-reading Auster scholars and adds to a notable turn to Auster's autobiographies and memoirs in the recent past that may also gain further momentum through the publication of *Groundwork* (2020), a compilation that gathers nine of Auster's autobiographical works. Besides potentially inspiring further research on understudied texts such as *White Spaces* and *Hand to Mouth*, the study should also, as is its author's expressed hope (314), invite more scholarly engagement with the topical interlinkages between Auster's autobiographical texts and his novelistic and essayistic work.

In a broader context, one might add that a study like Eilers's, which reveals motivic and stylistic shifts in Auster's autobiographical writings, could moreover help draw attention to the general role of forms of life writing in contemporary departures from the long realm of postmodernism. With respect to his fiction, scholars are increasingly discussing Auster in relation to what has been labeled (by some) post-postmodernism. With respect to his nonfiction, on the other hand, such an emphasis seems still missing, yet a suggestion like Eilers's to look at Auster's autobiographical texts beyond a postmodernist lens may, by extension, help address the question of how recent and ongoing transformations in life writing represent a facet of a broader turn to newly emerging aesthetic forms. Auster, as a writer who has shaped the literary landscape of the U.S. in the past four decades, his fiction but also his nonfiction, and especially the often fuzzy lines in-between, are certainly worth considering in explorations of whatever it may be that comes "after" or through postmodernism.

Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction. By Laura Marcus (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 148pp.

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The recent surge in the field of life, memoir, and biographical writing illustrates the relevance and timeliness of Laura Marcus's short introduction to the genre of autobiography. Marcus teaches English literature at the University of Oxford and published the monograph *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* in the 1990s (Manchester University Press, 1994). Her earlier work explores autobiography as a genre and as an organizing concept in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought. In so doing, she shows how autobiography and biography were critical to eugenics and have been key to concepts of the public and the private in feminist theory. In addition, *Auto/biographical Discourses* discusses the "new biography" by Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf and considers then-recent theories of subjectivity, contemporary autobiographical writings, and feminist theories of life-writing.[1]

In the more recent, shorter publication under review here, she takes up these same interests in eight short chapters that discuss confession, conversion, testimony (chapter one), the "Journeying Self" (chapter two), "Autobiographical Consciousness" (chapter three), psychoanalysis (chapter four), family and childhood (chapter five), "Public Selves" (chapter six), different autobiographical media (chapter seven), and the relation between fiction and autobiography (chapter eight). Marcus's account reveals how a broad spectrum of personal writings have been central to the work of literary critics, philosophers, historians, theologians, and psychologists, who have found in autobiographies not only an understanding of the ways in which lives have been lived, but the most fundamental accounts of what it means to be in the world.

In her introduction, Marcus presents useful distinctions between the vast array of terms introduced by "autobiography," including "autography," "autothanatography," and "autobiografiction," all of which have become important fields in their own right. She argues that "life-writing" and "personal writing," taken together, cover a broad range of texts, such as letters, journals, diaries, and (family) memoirs (1). She considers autobiography an important window into how particular societies, cultures, and historical periods understood self, identity, and subjectivity (2).

In her survey, Marcus touches on a host of important topics and sub-genres: the rise of literary autobiography (the "literary life") in the nineteenth century (2), spiritual autobiography and conversion narratives (12–14), confession and testimony in the modern age (21–23), testimony and trauma (23–28), and narrative identity (41–43), each chapter focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She surveys autobiographers of diverse writers, including Augustine, John Bunyan, Benjamin Franklin, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, Charles Darwin, Walt Whitman, Simone de Beauvoir, A.J. Ayer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Paul Auster, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

Along the way, Marcus stresses that, unlike Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as (a retrospective linear prose) narrative,[2] there are many forms of poetic memoirs that put this very definition of "autobiography" into question (for example, Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* [2013]). Lejeune's work becomes one of the theoretical cornerstones against which Marcus unfolds her own reflections on autobiography (3–4, 98, 117).

Overall, Marcus's book is an excellent overview of autobiographical writing from diverse literatures and genres, paying particular attention to women writers and philosophical questions. Her innovative fifth chapter, "Family Histories and the Autobiography of Childhood," proves particularly insightful. It is striking, however, that she makes reference to Philippe Ariès's theory of the birth of childhood without addressing the critique Ariès has faced in recent decades (66–67). Furthermore, her initial terminological observations could have gone into greater (historical) detail, specifically about the origin and (intended) readership of testimonies. The fact that the terms "life-writing" (2) and "autobiography" both originate in the eighteenth century suggest that the history of the genre actually started prior to the nineteenth century, the purportedly "most autobiographical century."[3] This is significant for the field of American studies since the eighteenth century has not traditionally been at the center of scholarship, especially in European American studies. Future research on the rise of the memoir will have to take this aspect into consideration.

Like all volumes in the series, Marcus's study contains a list of illustrations (xix) and references by chapter at the end of the volume (123–35), a short bibliography for further reading (which lacks a commentary, 137), and a useful index (141–48). I recommend this book to anyone interested in autobiography, life writing, and literature. Marcus's "short introduction" is best read alongside works the author suggests in her list of further readings and Hermione Lee's *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* in the same series (Oxford University Press, 2009), as this growing and fascinating field becomes ever more challenging and difficult to survey.

Notes

1 Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

2 Philippe Lejeune, *Moi aussi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986).

3 Marion Montgomery, *The Reflective Journey Toward Order: Essays on Dante, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Others* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 285.

***Power and Truth in Political Discourse: Language and Ideological Narratives.* By Vassil Hristov Anastassov (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 107pp.**

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The title of Anastassov's book evokes two concepts that are key to this study: language is power and it is political. And where there is power, there is a dominant speaker who, by using certain strategies, gains and maintains that power over others.

The major claim of this book is that speakers engaged in any kind of discourse impose political power on each other. An agent manipulates a target by concealing the "(political) truth" (1). Anastassov investigates the role of "actors-manipulators" and the language used between "the state" and the average citizen (xiv). As a result, political discourse is neither equal nor mutual since speakers and hearers are in binary opposition.

The author uses this framework to create a linguistic model of the power of political discourse in relation to the philosophy of politics and the philosophy of language. He claims that the manipulative force of language itself, when applied in political rhetoric, steers the average citizen away from real knowledge of the political truth by creating the "myths-narratives" that suit the narratives of the rulers (1).

Anastassov determines that the imposition of political power is a linguistic capacity of humans and applies this idea to the political governance of communal life. The author describes the state of an institution in relation to how it maintains governmental power and imposes it on average members of the community. The conclusion posits that power imbalance in the linguistic interaction of humans is historically inseparable from the imbalance of power in their communal life. Communal life is defined as a complex model of dynamic relationships and it uses as a base the linguistic capacity to impose and maintain political power by generating new ideological narratives.

In the book, the analysis begins with an introduction to the linguistic basis of political discourse. Anastassov argues that due to the "balanced role-shifting" of speakers and listeners, there is always a stronger side that dominates communication with its will to power (1). Barthes's concept of myth and his discussion of cultural manifestations through modes of speech laden with meaning (i.e., the polysemy of the linguistic message) contributes to the creation of ideological narratives that maintain the power of political discourse. Anastassov assumes that in human social interaction, imbalances in communication result in the stronger part exercising power over the weaker one. This results in a superiority of "my" narrative over "your" narrative (10). Narratives are accordingly used to impose and maintain social order, which invariably affects the political status of a community (14).

The author further uses classical rhetorics to explore ideological narratives. Aristotle's basic components of rhetoric in drama performances are shown to play a significant role in political governance. Human language used in communal life can be modified with the result that discourse itself takes on a different code and becomes something else by means of combining "logos" with "ethos" and "pathos" (15). However, the use of emotion to artificially manipulate "political truth" suggests the power of language, which can be used to create a discourse that plays a central role in the formation of communal order (25). The concept of language as political power is further explored by highlighting the correlation between "language" and "thinking" (27). Anastassov applies the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and language relativity theory as he investigates the issue of "political truth." Two questions are central to this section: What comes first, language or thought? And: If language reflects reality, whose reality is it? The author concludes that neither the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis nor language relativity theory can claim dominance over the other. However, he admits that there can be more than one reality since politicians can use language to manipulate thinking. This concept is illustrated in the context of George Orwell's *1984* (1948) and the invention of "Newspeak" (32). This creation of "reality" is also applied in Turkey, as those in power shape the vocabulary of the country's official language (33).

Continuing that thought, the author moves on to illustrate how language conceals "political truth." Anastassov explains how constructed realities reflect a constructed worldview, just one "truth." This concept relies on the arbitrariness of language. The author relates the idea of "concealing the truth" to Michel Foucault's definition of "discursive relations" and his observations on madness (35). Madness signifies non-reason, which leads to the "freedom of language." The author delves into the literary madness and identifies three types of characters and their attitudes toward political "truth." This section concludes with the idea that since language is arbitrary, many versions of "truth" exist. However, humans tend to choose which "truth" to accept because people often reject "truths" that are inconvenient, which, in turn, sometimes leads to "the fear from freedom" (44). The tactics that political leaders employ to create ideological narratives in order to impose and maintain power depend on the individual who will further their agenda by influencing social behavior. This is possible by indoctrinating the average citizen because political leaders take the role of "authors" in order to impose their narratives on the weaker members of the community (56).

This construction of "truth" is evident in the discourse surrounding Brexit and globalization as a "disguised form of imperialism" (58). The author thus challenges the idea of democracy in Western communities, as the majority, which stands for public opinion, is by no means a reliable source of democratic "equality." Anastassov claims that when there is a majority, minorities exist whose position is unequal compared to that of the holders of public opinion. The author goes on to discuss power imbalance from a structural and post-structural social semiotic perspective. He considers Derrida's political deconstruction in opposition to Saussurean binarism and concludes that power imbalance is inseparable from political governance. The last section of the book points toward a post-structural reading of social media as an instrument of mass communication and its role in political interaction. Anastassov argues that social media are not reliable sources of political information and therefore support the concept of "my narrative" vs. "your narrative" (95). The author's concluding remarks state that language creates ideological narratives in the political community. The democratic principle of equality is unattainable in politics, since the community is divided into "majority" and "minority" (99). Finally, the author reiterates that language participates in the construction of alternate worldviews and contributes to the formation of ideological narratives in the process of power imposition.

This book presents an informed and productive discussion of the linguistic base of political discourse. It is not only representative of the consideration given to the importance of language in creating ideological narratives, but also provides a dynamic account of communal interaction. Anastassov creates a solid framework in his assessment of the manipulative force in political rhetoric. These concepts are explained well and supported by illustrative examples. Furthermore, Anastassov demonstrates that the imposition of power creates an imbalance whereby equality as a democratic principle is impossible. Overall, this book offers a promising direction for the study of political discourse from a linguistic perspective and is valuable for those working in the fields of political science and linguistics. It is a great resource for students and educators alike.

Dreams of El Dorado: A History of the American West. By H.W. Brands (New York: Basic Books, 2019), xvi+524pp.

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In his monograph *Dreams of El Dorado: A History of the American West*, H.W. Brands explores one of the greatest myths in the history of the modern world—the "winning of the west," to draw on the title of Theodore Roosevelt's saga about the settlement of the American West. Brands, who holds the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in History at the University of Texas at Austin, tackles this colossal topic through the prism of individual (hi)stories.

The first part of the book centers on the Lewis and Clark expedition, a key component of President Jefferson's plan "to write the federal will" (10) on the Trans-Mississippi landscape's *tabula rasa*, and the entrepreneurial endeavors of John Jacob Astor, an ambitious man who "endured sub-Arctic winter weather, hostile Indians and cutthroat . . . competitors" (42). This description of Astor is paradigmatic of a perspective that privileges a White actor locked in battle with nature. Meanwhile, Indigenous people function as little more than props for these narratives of white "heroics." Brands repeats this pattern in depictions of fur trader Joseph Meek and other frontiersmen.

Brands's focus then switches to the Rio Grande region. The story of Texas and the Alamo are regurgitated with little regard to the economic, political, and structural contexts of the events. Catchy phrases such as "Sam Houston did his best to ensure that Texas would be lost" (101) do not even try to mask their biases, while details of Davy Crockett's grim end at the hands of Mexican officers provide spectacular anecdotes. The exodus of European families fleeing from Texas was, without any doubt, "most heart-wrenching" (121); even so, the prose produces an image of (Anglo-)Americans as perpetually victimized people who seldomly resorted to the use of lethal force (and even less so to "brutality").

The fate of missionaries such as Marcus and Narcissa Whitman in the "Oregon country" also makes for a great story and Brands excels in describing it. While the migrants' religious zeal is depicted in detail, there is almost no information about the societies that they tried to convert. Indigenous groups are reduced to extras in the grand drama of Euro-American interests. Telling the fate of immigrants caught in a profiteering scheme, the chapter "Business of the Trail" (184–97) is one of the strongest parts of the book. Although Brands, for example, mentions the Nez Percé (Nimi'ipuu) wife of fur trader Joseph Meek in this chapter, he does not discuss the couple as an example of North America's Métis culture; rather, he uses their relationship as part-amusing, part-tragic anecdote.

While providing valuable information on issues such as technology and institutional racism, Brands's remarks about the post-1848 California gold rush and the building of the trans-continental railroad privilege individual experiences. Even though Mexicans, Chinese, and Irish play more important roles in this part of the book, Native Americans are (again) primarily depicted as anonymous victims without agency. This approach also permeates the chapter on the Mormon presence in the Trans-Mississippi West: "so good were Mormon relations with the Indians that Brigham Young could credibly threaten to unleash the tribes against westbound emigrant trains" (314). When Mormons and Paiute massacre a settler train in 1857, the White attackers "dispatch" the migrants, while the Paiute "kill brutally" (315). While employing such different terminologies may have been accidental, their use is inappropriate and arguably reveals the author's (and/or editor's) biases. The chapters on the histories of the Oglala and the Modoc tribes are replete with more descriptions of massacres. Brands's elaborations on the "treacherous" killing of General Edward Canby by the Modoc in 1873 stand as one of the book's most spectacular (and least informative) passages.

The history of cattle ranching focuses on legendary cattle baron Joseph McCoy. While Brands acknowledges the Spanish background of the western hemisphere's cattle industry, he does so in the briefest manner possible. His notes on Spanish traditions take up about us much space as one quote by an anonymous cowboy. Chapters 44 to 46, which deal primarily with John Wesley Powell's Colorado Expedition of 1869, the story of the Yosemite region, the "Buffalo Soldiers," and the Dawes Act, finally reveal the potential of this book—a synergy of structural and individual perspectives, enriched with quotes such as those of Powell, which, after 150 years, are still captivating: "the great river shrinks into insignificance as it dashes its angry waves against the walls and cliffs that rise to the world above; they are but puny ripples and we but pigmies" (403).

Brands then turns to one of his long-time heroes, Theodore Roosevelt. *Dreams of El Dorado* highlights the performance of the 1st Volunteer Cavalry ("Rough Riders"), in which Roosevelt served during the invasion of Cuba in 1898, but the critical commentary on this episode of history is rather underdeveloped. Brands celebrates the myths of Roosevelt and his glorious military success while ignoring facts about the massive logistical and organizational shortcomings of U.S. Army operations. Although the "Rough Riders" came to embody the victory, the unit was saved by regular army units (most of which were majority African American). Whereas "Teddy and company basked in the public spotlight,"[1] the actual heroes were too ignored to be forgotten.

Dreams of El Dorado proffers two important strengths: it is an easy-to-read book that succeeds in drawing readers into the individual stories of both well- and little-known historical characters. However, Brands's glib word choices and inconsiderate ways of telling stories make it difficult to differentiate between his viewpoints and the attitudes of the people he writes about. Several chapters are missing key information on their historical contexts. He all but ignores the pertinent work of ethnohistorians who have included Indigenous and other minority traditions (written, oral, material) in their work for decades; Indigenous names for places and/or persons are absent. While claiming that myths of the "West" tend to focus on individuals instead of recognizing the important structural processes such as federal land policy, the author, in most of the chapters, in fact does the same: time and again, individuals (or small groups of individuals) are at the narrative core of his epos. Thus, the very strategy that makes *Dreams of El Dorado* so readable and intelligible undermines one of its basic assumptions. Most of the historical figures Brands focuses on are White and male. The book's index (seventeen pages) shows only about twenty names of women, Native Americans, and ladinos/Hispanics. While the Oglala chief Black Elk (Hehaka Sapa) features quite prominently as a source, historians have questioned the reliability of the chief's autobiography. As Donald Fixico notes, "American Indian communities possess internal histories of relations defined according to their separate cultures," which need to be adapted in order to make them comprehensible to White audiences, arguably rendering them inauthentic in the process.[2] However, Brands offers little to no information on this matter. Similarly, readers familiar with the history of Spanish America will likely be simultaneously amazed and dismayed by the fact that Brands uses the term "El Dorado" in the book's title without explaining this particular myth. Indeed, while he does mention the Mexica ("Aztecs") and Maya, the Muisca of Colombia—from whom the story of the "golden man" (*el dorado*) originated—do not appear in the book. In addition, the way Brands comments on nature and natural phenomena is reminiscent of Turnerian views of an Anglo-American westward expansion and the "rapid conquest of the wilderness."[3] Although White settlers encounter some obstacles on their westward journey, there can be little doubt about the final success of the new nation-state—a state whose historiographers were among the people defining "success" in the first place.

Dreams of El Dorado is masterfully told. Unfortunately, it also fails to promote new and critical perspectives on historical sources, United States expansionism, multi-ethnic societies, and cultural contact in the long nineteenth century.

Notes

1 Dan Gagliasso, "Rough Riders, Moviemakers, and History: Hollywood Images of Theodore Roosevelt and the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry," *The Journal of Arizona History* 41, no. 3 (2000): 310.

2 Donald L. Fixico, "Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History," *American Indian Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1996): 34, https://doi.org/10.2307/1184939.

3 Frederick J. Turner, "The West and American Ideals," *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1914): 246.

***Commemorating Abraham Lincoln and the Transnational Way: Lincoln Monuments in Great Britain*. By Liv Birte Buchmann (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020), 311pp.**

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Buchmann's monograph Commemorating Abraham Lincoln and the Transnational Way, which lays out a long history of Lincoln studies and iconographic studies of the United States' sixteenth president, focuses on three public monuments to Lincoln erected in Edinburgh, Manchester, and London, presented to the British people by U.S. private initiatives. The sculptures, erected in 1893, 1919, and 1921, respectively, highlight the Anglo-American "special relationship" period of the early twentieth century, but are of particular interest today, as radical "conservatives" in America attempt to co-opt Lincoln's legacy as a Republican politician, while Black Lives Matter activists seek to reframe his image as the great emancipator to instead stress nineteenth-century African Americans' work in liberating themselves.

The volume begins by queering the essential ambiguity of such iconography with a quote from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), then goes on to untangle the sculptures' complex histories, through research in the Manuscript Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Archives, the New York Public Library, Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the British National Archives at Kew, Manchester's Central Library, and the Edinburgh City Archives.

The Edinburgh monument's tale began when a U.S. consul, approached by the Scottish widow of a Union soldier for support, discovered the late veteran had fought in a regiment of mainly Scottish descent, and was among others buried on Calton Hill, the "Scottish Valhalla," a space already charged with significance, since the mausoleum of David Hume (a key figure of the Scottish Enlightenment) and the Scottish Political Martyrs' Monument (commemorating an exiled group of Scottish reformist "Friends of the People" who lobbied for universal suffrage) are located there. Lincoln's addition to this space boosted these other monuments' "still unfulfilled desire for political reforms" (122). But the Lincoln monument itself is not without its contradictions: like New York's now much-contested statue of Theodore Roosevelt leading (while towering above) an African American and a Native American figure, still standing on the steps of New York's Museum of Natural History, or Washington DC's Lincoln Park sculpture showing Lincoln looming over a cowering slave, Edinburgh's Lincoln depicts the "god-like" (109) president towering placidly above a ragged, barefoot freedman who seems to appeal from below, holding a book and embellished with sculpted thistle and cotton branches. Buchmann elegantly teases out the ambiguities of this spatial relationship, as well as the sculpture's relationship to the other monuments on Calton Hill. However fraught such iconography seems in retrospect today, Buchmann suggests that the trio of monuments is symbolically linked to represent the "universal fight for political and intellectual freedom and democracy" (114), commemorating "political underdogs who fought actively or passively for reforms . . . and for a change in the perception and acceptance of human nature" (125), but also to demark Scottish nationalism and identity. It is worth noting that Scotland's final official call for independence in 2004 was with the Declaration of Calton Hill. Buchmann adds a final nuance by noting that the U.S. Civil War's fight to maintain the Union held, in 1893, clear symbolic links with Scottish Unionist Nationalism.

Manchester's and London's Lincoln sculptures, meanwhile, were clearly meant to mark the centennial of "Peace Among English Speaking Peoples 1914–1915" and, belatedly, the international peace movement of the early 1910s, which, in the United States, lobbied for cultural diplomacy outside the Department of State, which would itself not take up such efforts until 1938. Laudable goals, but Buchmann again nuances this trend: Anglo-American diplomatic rapprochement in this period "was accompanied by a strong wave of Anglo-Saxonism" among intellectual, political, and business elites, a racist ideology with strong beliefs in "the innate moral and cultural superiority of the 'Anglo-Saxon races,'" emphasizing "the natural duty of the Anglo-Saxon race to lead the world which also served as a convenient justification for nationalist and imperialist notions" (49–50). London's bid to accept a Lincoln statue in Parliament Square was complicated when George Grey Barnard, the artist chosen, depicted Lincoln not as great statesman or icon of Anglo-Saxon superiority, but as a modest man of the Midwestern prairie, with humble posture, wrinkled face, simple shoes, and unkempt hair. The image displeased both American funders and the British establishment. Barnard's statue was instead sent to Manchester and set on a simple unpolished granite boulder, to represent top-down "British 19th-century initiatives for public parks in urban areas" for "promoting health, recreation, cultural and political education, as well as conveying civic norms of behavior for the working classes and distraction from political unrests and possible radical tendencies" (136-37). In this setting, in a largely working-class city, Lincoln was depicted as a "benefactor of the working classes" and as "a role model through his image as the self-made man" (137). It suited Manchester's history, as well, as a place where cotton mill workers in the 1860s had lobbied through unions for the abolition of slavery in the United States, sparked in part by a letter sent from Lincoln to the "Working Men of Manchester," while the British establishment had remained neutral. Buchmann lays out the history of this transnational connection, and of the re-inscription the statue's base in 1986 to change reference to the working "men" of Lancashire to the working "people" (a change which, decades later, sparked another outrage by conservative politicians).

Parliament Square in London itself, two years later in 1921, opted for a copy of Augustus Saint-Gaudins's 1887 more majestic Lincoln, the original of which stands in Chicago. This was partly the result of a flurry of discussion at the time on setting up a monument to George Washington in Westminster Abbey, or even of creating a monument to Queen Victoria in Central Park (both extremely fraught suggestions, for obvious historical reasons). Lincoln, meanwhile, during a time of debate on Irish Home Rule prior to the Irish Civil War, made a convenient screen for both the British establishment, Unionists (as the leader of the U.S. Union), and Irish Republicans (as the great liberator). Gaudins's statue, with its aristocratic pose before a stately chair, in the words of Kirk Savage, "emancipated Lincoln from emancipation," but also set the US president in the "political heart" of the United Kingdom, a space first purchased by Washington's opponent George III, and already set about with images of British prime ministers, of which Buchmann takes due note and makes extensive survey in terms of symbolism and iconography (George Canning, Sir Robert Peel, Disraeli, the Earl of Derby, all to some degree reformers, Derby himself involved in support of the Lancashire cotton workers during the US blockade of imports in the U.S. Civil War). It's this teasing out of connections, in the landscape, and in adjoining monuments that makes Buchmann's work so rich and rewarding to read.

Her volume is divided into a section on the three statues themselves, and a second on the pageantry surrounding their unveilings, with extensive quotes from the speeches given, the politicians and religious leaders in attendance, the way their first presentation was framed to the public, the political motivations (sometimes complex) behind such framings, and their "bilateral dynamics" (255), as Lincoln, in this era, "travelled the world" (258). These were, after all, the first three statues of any foreign dignitary ever erected in the United Kingdom. Beautifully written, the volume includes a fascinating collection of 29 black-and-white photos of the monuments in question, as well as others relating to them.

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