

# ESSAIS

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LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY AND CRITICISM

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Department of English and Literature, CB 407

Utah Valley University

800 West University Parkway

Orem, UT 84058

(801) 863-8577

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Cover Design: Emily Leggett

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## Editors' Note

As our cover asserts, *Essais* is an undergraduate journal for literary and cultural theory and criticism; we publish academic writing that analyzes, critiques, or applies theory to literary or cultural texts. In past editions, these texts have typically been novels, poetry, or an occasional film. This semester, though, as we made our final selection of essays, we found that the subjects of this group were much more varied. This journal is bookended by two essays that are each about novels; however, in between, you will find essays about a film, a television episode, an album, and a video game.

Our intent was not to create a multimedia-themed edition of *Essais*. Rather, this outcome reflects the values of this specific group of editors. This semester, before we read a single submission, the six of us met to discuss our vision for the journal. We found that as a group we favored papers with original ideas, clear and accessible prose, and grounded and relevant stakes. When it came time to make the final selection, these were the essays that best met that criteria.

Unintended as it was, we are happy with this result. The more mediums we accept as analysis-worthy forms of literature, the more diverse the literary canon becomes. Who knows what subjects will be covered in coming editions of this journal? Perhaps we'll see an essay that analyzes a webcomic, or that applies Derrida to a graphic novel, or that considers the Marxist implications of a series of tweets. We hope that *Essais*, in all its future efforts and endeavors, continues to evolve and welcome these new voices as future staff encourages the next generation of academics and writers through publication of their work.

We'd like to thank everyone who has made this edition possible. Our advisors, Dr. Ruen-Chuan Ma and Dr. Ashley Nadeau, who have guided but never stifled us, whose dependable support granted us the freedom to make this journal our

own. They have offered us their wisdom and given us their time; they have baked us scones and overcome flat tires to deliver them to us. *Essais* could not exist without them!

We'd also like to thank all the general staff members who took time away from their own school work to help us edit topic sentences, format ellipses, eliminate passive voice, and check the hyphen placement for all end-of-line instances of the word "analysis." They've been paid primarily in pizza, but we want to let them know how much we appreciate them, and that they are indispensable members of our team. A special thanks also goes out to Nick Foster, the strongest English major and a triple-threat who authored a paper, served on the general staff, and taught us InDesign, all in one semester. We appreciate all the staff members from previous semesters that have returned to lend their expertise to this semester's edition.

Additionally, we'd like to recognize the work of the UVU faculty who make this journal possible by instilling their students with a love of literary criticism and theory, assigning and workshopping academic papers, and encouraging their students to submit to *Essais*. We would also like to thank Brian Whaley, English and Literature Department Chair, and the Dean's Office of the College and Humanities and Social Sciences for their collegial and financial support.

We are proud to present the Fall 2019 edition of *Essais*.

Sara Stanworth, Editor-in-Chief  
Suzanne Chappell, Managing Editor  
Emily Leggett, Technical Editor  
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Laura Huysmans, Associate Editor  
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## Advisors' Note

It is a delight and an honor to write the advisor's note for the Fall 2019 issue of *Essais*. The journal has continued the collaborative, student-driven model developed over the past few years and emphasized a culture of self-directed, hands-on editorial experience. We believe this approach gives students invaluable experience as critical writers and thinkers, as well as resourceful leaders capable of articulating and carrying out their vision for the journal. This semester, the editorial board—led by Editor-in-Chief Sara Stanworth, Managing Editor Suzanne Chappell, and Technical Editor Emily Leggett—have outlined a bold, forward-looking plan for the journal's future. They have taken steps to streamline the submission process, collected data that will enable the journal to reach out to a greater range of student authors, and mentored fellow members of staff to take on future editorial positions. As faculty advisors, we are constantly impressed by their critical acumen and thoughtful approaches to literary theory and criticism.

We are grateful for the hard work, meticulous care, and initiative shown by the three main editors and the associate editors—Jordan Bianucci, Laura Huysmans, Alex Monroe—throughout the semester. We are also grateful for the efforts of the contributing staff and for the innovative thinking of the six authors whose pieces we are proud to bring to print. Last but not least, we are heartened by continued support from the English and Literature Department, especially Department Chair Prof. Brian Whaley, and from UVU's College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

With the inclusion of articles on music lyrics, streaming TV series, and video games alongside those on works of literature, the Fall 2019 issue marks an expanding sense of the meanings of “text,” “theory,” and “criticism”—concepts at the heart of the journal's goals. Members of the *Essais* staff have taken the challenge head-on and devoted much energy to

upholding the rigor of their training in literary criticism, all the while crafting critical expectations for newer, less explored forms of narrative. Their collegiality and enthusiasm have been central to these groundbreaking efforts. We look forward to nurturing this momentum and continuing to increase interest in the work of journal.

Dr. Ruen-chuan Ma

Dr. Ashley Nadeau

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## Author Abstracts and Bios

The Ship Steers You: Mind-Body Duality in *Lord Jim*

**Hillary Hunt**

Startling statistics reveal that men, particularly white men, comprise most suicides every year. To explore why this may be, I apply the theories of Michel Foucault to my reading of *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad to suggest white men have inherited a legacy that positions them as the captains of their ships, potential Lords and masters who through sheer determination of will *can* and *should* realize their dreams—a notion setting them up for disappointment more often than not. Foucault's theories regarding the punishing powers that lurk behind even seemingly benevolent epistemologies work in tandem with Conrad's own critique of distinctly masculine romanticism. I use both to deconstruct a binary in Western men that contributes to isolation, anger, and depression.

**Hillary Hunt** has realized a long-held dream to have completed her bachelor's degree in English this year with an emphasis in writing studies. She is currently working as a copywriter and content creator while she contemplates the possibility of grad school. Hillary is a mother of two and thrice published author in *Essais*. She'd like to thank the excellent English professors at UVU whose instruction confirmed everyday that she'd found her intellectual home.

Is Wakanda Black? Frantz Fanon's Epidermal Schema,  
Afrofuturism, and *Black Panther*  
**Nathan Tucker**

Marvel's *Black Panther* has been presented as a historical milestone in cinematic black representation and celebrated as a popular example of Afrofuturism. Yet by positing the fantasy of a never-colonized nation, *Black Panther* complicates this straightforward narrative. Reading the film through Frantz Fanon's concept of the epidermal schema, I examine how it imagines a situation in which that epidermal schema—the worldview, developed by colonialism, that categorizes human beings by skin color—does not exist and how Afrofuturism works to establish other understandings of the situation of black bodies and their being in the world. I then explore how the challenge this Afrofuturist vision presents to the epidermal schema is complicated by its need to contrast with a present and an audience enmeshed in the epidermal schema in order to have meaning. Either the text can be read for the present and lose its connection to the future, or it can be read for the future, lose its link to the reality of the present, and fail to speak coherently to the world it actually exists in. This tension within Wakanda, that it must be read as equally black and not-black in order to say anything, shows how the understandings projected by Afrofuturism are complicated by the inability of its texts to fully extricate themselves from the context of the epidermal schema.

**Nathan Tucker** is a senior at UVU studying philosophy, with minors in religious and classical studies. His academic interests include Mormonism, the history of theology, and existentialism. He currently works as a research assistant with UVU's Center for the Study of Ethics.

*Bloodborne* as a Writerly Text: Lovecraftian Lineage,  
Convolved Narartive, and Difficulty

**Nicholas Foster**

The 2015 Japanese video game *Bloodborne* is widely considered a horror game in the lineage of American author H.P. Lovecraft's style of horror. While the majority of critics agree that *Bloodborne* is Lovecraftian, the similarities they highlight are mainly aesthetic similarities. I argue that while *Bloodborne* is Lovecraftian, it is because of the way that the narrative is presented, such as the complexity of storytelling inspiring multiple interpretations of the amorphous narrative, not merely visual and thematic similarities. To prove this, I use Roland Barthes's theory of readerly and writerly texts, in which he claims that writerly texts are text which requires the player to work to understand the content, whereas readerly texts require very little of the reader. *Bloodborne*, as a work inspired by Lovecraft, is a writerly text. I also show that *Bloodborne* is a writerly text due to its difficulty, which causes forced replay not only through small sections of the game, but eventually the game entirely. While it is a consumer good, *Bloodborne* functions as a writerly text due to the work of the player.

**Nicholas Foster** is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Spanish. He is the strongest English major at UVU and competes in powerlifting. When he graduates he plans to write more about video games. He was the Technical Editor of *Essais* the Spring 2019 semester.

“Stamp[ed] as Commodities”: The Ironic  
Misrepresentation of “Fifteen Million Merits”  
Self-Referential Satire

**Taylor Draney**

The television series *Black Mirror* has been widely praised by popular critics for its penetrating looks into the harmful effects of society’s rising technology consumption. Many of these critics, such as Medium’s Howard Chai and Film School Rejects’ Samantha Olthof, have read the episode “Fifteen Million Merits” specifically as a call to action—an indictment of current behavior surrounding technology use and an admonishment to change before it’s too late. However, this criticism’s focus on the episode’s implication of audience responsibility diminishes its critique of the infiltration of technology into every aspect of life under capitalism specifically, and the ways this economic system works together with our rapidly increasing reliance on technology to create systemic societal problems. Through a Marxist and Baudrillardian critique of “Fifteen Million Merits,” I will shed light on the way the proliferation of technology in American capitalist society works to subjugate individual citizens. Through an exploration of the connection between Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality and Marx’s critique of capitalism, I will reveal the prominent roles of the formation of identity through money as well as the alienation of workers from their labor and other workers in this subjugation. I argue that “Fifteen Million Merits” functions as a self-aware critique of capitalism by satirizing the appropriation of any successful criticism of the reigning ideology through its protagonist’s journey. By closely examining the popular reception of this episode as a critique of audiences rather than the capitalist system it was produced under, my analysis elucidates a metatextual

understanding of “Fifteen Million Merits” as a critique of capitalism that has been ironically misinterpreted by popular critics. Using the episode as fodder to promote a capitalist ideology, these critics implicate the audience in their own destruction via technology in the same way the power structure in “Fifteen Million Merits” convinces its citizens their misery is their own fault, rather than placing the blame on the capitalist system as the narrative of the episode itself promotes.

**Taylor Draney** is a junior studying English literature with a minor in philosophy. She will graduate in 2021, at which point she plans to backpack and hike as much as possible before the planet collapses into climate change-induced ruin. Eventually, she aims to attend graduate school, but for now she focuses her energy on enjoying nature, dancing, and seeing live music whenever she can.

*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Its Intersection  
with the Lacanian Real

**Carmen Thorley**

With such a ubiquitous presence in pop culture, one may think there isn't much more to be said about the Beatles and their music. This analysis presents a fresh interpretation as it filters the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* through the lens of Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist theories about "the Real" and "the Big Other." From this viewpoint, certain aspects of the Beatles' experiences with LSD are brought to light, namely their experience in a world unruled by systematic categories. This analysis provides a fresh look at the artistry of *Sgt. Pepper*, delving into the implications of the bizarre lyrics and contrasting musical styles, as well as the fictional band the Beatles invent to perform the songs. Using this theoretical approach, listeners can relate much more intimately to the Beatles and their experience in transferring their drug trip into the famous concept album *Sgt. Pepper*.

**Carmen Thorley** is studying English with a literary studies emphasis and will be graduating with honors this semester. Carmen has grown to truly love the process of academic writing and is excited to have her work published and read. Besides writing, Carmen enjoys hiking, classical piano, and spending time with her partner and two cats.

Effective Activist Literature: Nuances of First-Person  
Narrative in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

**Lauren Johnson**

Louise Erdrich's 2012 novel *The Round House* has been generally heralded as an exemplary piece of activist literature. However, previous critics have neglected to address the implications of Erdrich's use of first-person narration from the perspective of an arguably problematic male character and this tactic's effect on the novel's feminist message. This paper engages in the discussion of Erdrich's narrative choices—with special attention to native theoretical considerations and other examples of native literature—by responding directly to Julie Tharp's critique of the novel, as well as considering literary theory concerning first-person narration and activist literature in general. Through this careful examination, this paper reveals the way in which the novel's design not only structurally erases women from the novel and frames their stories in a discussion of male development and issues, but invites white, male readers to empathize and identify with the narrator's problematic behavior without sufficiently confronting the behavior or providing readers with alternatives. In conclusion, I argue in this paper that Erdrich's choice to cater to a male audience undermines her feminist message and leaves the novel open to misogynistic interpretations of the novel's message. This project, by closely examining the impact and difficulties of choosing the best narrator for an activist piece, thus sheds new light on the effort activist authors must perform in order to portray narratives that elicit holistic understandings of nuanced messages.

**Lauren Johnson** is a senior pursuing a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis in literary studies and a minor in



French. She has been involved as a volunteer staff member for *Essais* since Spring 2018 and served as Editor-in-Chief for the Fall 2018 edition. Lauren's academic achievements also include presenting in March 2019 at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference and in April 2019 at UVU's Humanities Symposium. Following graduation, Lauren intends to pursue either a juris doctorate or a PhD in Literature.



*Journey* (Photography)  
Jenny Brown

# The Ship Steers You: Mind-Body Duality in *Lord Jim*

Hillary Hunt

In the year 2017, white men made up 66.67% of all suicides in the United States (“Suicide Statistics”). Moreover, men across all demographics comprise 77% of all suicides every year according to a 2018 Slate article by Gary Barker. He posits that “restrictive ideas about manhood” and socially constructed beliefs like the American Dream have left men, particularly white men, lonely, disappointed, and depressed. But how have we gotten here? Many have speculated, looking to gun access, geography, gender norms, mental healthcare access, and shifting global economics as various contributors to the high rate of suicide in men, and each of these topics offer valuable insight into the problem. However, I offer that Michel Foucault—the French philosopher, theorist, and literary critic—provides one more inroad into understanding high rates of male and white male suicide. In his book *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault asserted that we can analyze our present by studying our past, which he described as “writing the history of the present” (31). In other words, our pres-

ent circumstances with high rates of white male suicide can be better understood by looking to how past cultural narratives aimed at men have shaped our expectations of what it is to be a man. Guided by Foucault's suggestion, I contend that white men have inherited a legacy that positions them as the captains of their own ships, potential Lords and masters who through sheer determination of will *can* and *should* realize their dreams—a notion setting them up for disappointment more often than not. To help write the history of our present, I will use Joseph Conrad's novel, *Lord Jim*, to suggest that we can trace this captain-like mentality back to a Western, imperial tradition of privileging the soul over the body, or in other words, privileging beliefs that live only in the mind over material reality.

Joseph Conrad, the late Victorian and early Modernist writer, perceived this clash between mind and body, as evidenced in many of his novels; *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Agent*, and *The Golden Arrow* to name a few. One of his most celebrated novels, *Lord Jim* (1899), abounds with examples of the consequences of mind-body duality as a structuring binary in Western consciousness. *Lord Jim* tells the story of a young sailor turned water-clerk whose romantic ideals goad him to continually run from every fortuitous opportunity. Jim's romantic ideals, and his desire to join the mercantile marines, are inspired by "a course of light holiday literature . . ." consisting of heroic, sea-faring, adventure fiction common to the Victorian era. These sea-faring narratives of heroism and adventure make Jim prone to imagining himself as "a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers, . . ." (6) and "as unflinching as a hero in a book" (7). But early in the story we learn that something has gone amiss, and Jim's dreams have clashed with reality. The reader is told, "Jim had always good wages and as much humoring as would have bought the fidelity of a

fiend. Nevertheless, with black ingratitude he would throw up the job suddenly and depart” (5). As the story unfolds, we learn that Jim is driven less by churlish ingratitude and more by enduring shame for the part he played in the abandonment of a sinking ship, called the *Patna*, carrying 800 pilgrims on their way to Mecca.

Though the 800 pilgrims are eventually rescued by another boat, Jim must still face trial for having failed to live by a maritime code that demands the captain and crew go down with the ship. At the trial, his sailor certification is revoked, and Jim’s shame at this sentencing compels him ever away from the European naval community where his humiliating story lives on “with a sort of uncanny vitality, . . .” (81). Mired within his romantic ideals, Jim’s only foreseeable path to redemption is to eventually take up a post on a remote Malay island called Patusan. Considering the island a clean slate where his heroic story can finally be realized, Jim does manage to do some good for the natives, earning their respect and the title Tuan Jim, meaning Lord Jim. Of course, Jim cannot keep out the world forever as reminders of his past eventually find him and make him vulnerable to his shame. From that vulnerability, Jim makes another mistake that puts the natives of the island in peril and the Chieftain’s son is killed as a result. In penance, Jim submits himself to execution, veritably committing suicide by surrendering his life.

A schism between Jim’s mind and body is apparent throughout the novel, demonstrating the privileging of mind over body that happens within Western ideology. The narrative of *Lord Jim* repeatedly emphasizes that the romantic ideals Jim is driven by are immaterial and spiritual in nature, and that he privileges them over practical, material factors. The immateriality of the mind, or the soul as it was known in 19th century romanticism, and the material of

the physical body are divided in Jim's consciousness. Elizabeth Klaver affirms that mind-body duality "is perhaps the most stubborn of all Western binaries . . ." (678). To privilege the mind in Western thought is to privilege the notion of a soul—who someone *truly* is—that supersedes bodily weakness and mortality. This privileging of the soul, or the mind as we modernly call it, is in keeping with the 19th century romanticism that Conrad critiques in *Lord Jim*. Alexia Hannis corroborates that the novel presents an "implicit critique of excessive idealism . . ." (49) in that Jim's "idealism leaves him unprepared for the intrusion of his all too human fear" (56). In reaction to these human limitations that remind him of his own mortality, Jim perpetually isolates himself, even to the point of martyrdom.

I claim that the heroic identity Jim fantasizes about is underwritten by other binaries that parallel the mind-body, and that such binaries motivate imperial practices. In the construction and maintenance of Jim's soul, the passive, expendable otherness of the body extends to anything outside of Jim's centrality. Colonial subjects, women, material objects, and the land itself are otherized along with the body, and must submit to Jim's romantic idealism of the mind. Equating imperialism with "cultural romanticism," Richard Ruppel defines imperialism as "efforts to impose the conquering nation's vision of an ideal world on people who do not necessarily share that perspective." As an individual rooted within the cultural romanticism of the conquering British Empire, uses these others—colonial subjects, women, material objects—to hold up his romantic, idealized self. True to Conrad's consistent themes throughout his extensive body of work, romantic ideals fail his characters to tragic effect and are interwoven with the project of imperialism. Ruppel verifies that in *Lord Jim*, "Imperialism becomes equivalent to romantic idealism, and both fail in

the book.” Borrowing from these scholars and the theories of Michel Foucault, I argue that Conrad’s critique of mind-body duality in *Lord Jim* problematizes a romantic idealism that believes in a stable human subject who, with sheer force of mind alone, can be and is the sole master of their ship.

### **The Soul is the Prison of the Body**

At Jim’s trial regarding the abandonment of the *Patna*, readers are introduced to Marlow who then assumes narration of the tale while also becoming an active participant in Jim’s story. Within Marlow’s description of the trial, Conrad’s writing seems to anticipate Foucault’s theories about the shift of disciplining power in society from the corporeal to the incorporeal. Marlow describes Jim’s sentencing, the canceling of his sailor certification, as “chill and mean . . .” despite the fact that “[t]here was no high scaffolding, no scarlet cloth . . . no awe-stricken multitude to be horrified at his guilt and be moved to tears at this fate—no air of somber retribution” (92). As Foucault would confirm decades later, the spectacle of execution no longer exists in Jim’s world, but this doesn’t necessarily lessen the extent of Jim’s suffering. On the contrary, Marlow emphasizes in the text that the sentencing was “infinitely worse than a beheading. A heavy sense of finality brooded over all this, unrelieved by the hope of rest and safety following the fall of the axe. These proceedings had all the cold vengefulness of a death-sentence, and the cruelty of a sentence of exile” (93). The finality of death is preferable to the perpetual self-punishment and shame Jim will carry long after the sentencing is over. The intangibility of such a lingering punishment points *exactly* to Foucault’s theories regarding the emergence of discipling powers aimed at the soul and the mind.

By the 19th century—the period in which Jim’s story takes place—Foucault reminds us that “the great spectacle

of physical punishment disappeared; . . ." (14). Governments drew away from visible performances of state sanctioned violence via executions or torture, but Foucault insists that bodily punishment meant to enforce social order did not cease but was rather sublimated into a sort of bureaucratic web of power, or "coercive technologies of behaviour" (293). He explains that "a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationists; . . ." (11). As described by Foucault, these networks of power were made up by institutions and epistemologies, diffusing punishment into bureaucracies of knowledge such that the penal process evolved into the realm of "abstract consciousness" (9). Rather than laying hold of the body, punishment now aimed its disciplining power on the soul, or the mind, as we would know it. Employing more incorporeal ideals of proper behavior, society began to punish more abstract crimes like "aggressivity," "perversions," and "drives and desires" (17). For Foucault, the modern soul is on trial to the effect of producing "docile bodies," in that we are easier to control and thus more useful commodities—hence Foucault's famous line, "the soul is the prison of the body" (30). Which is to say, our bodies do not house a soul so much as the idea of a soul has a hold on our bodies and thus our very lived lives.

The physical effects of Jim's sentencing acutely exemplify how the soul becomes the prison and punisher of the body. When Marlow later watches Jim coming to terms with the sentence, he observes, "convulsive shudders ran down his back; his shoulders would heave suddenly . . . he was fighting—mostly for his breath, as it seemed" (100). Jim's physical manifestations of trauma and torture, and the fact that he is driven across the world to escape his shame, denote that Jim has fully internalized the disciplining



powers of punishment. No external, bodily pain is warranted when his mind will do all the punishment required.

Moved by Jim's plight, Marlow tries to help the young man get back on his feet but is continually frustrated by Jim's disconnect between mind and body, as it is causing him to overlook the necessities of life. While Marlow busies himself trying to provide for the "material aspect of his position" that might "keep body and soul together" (106), Jim's "adventurous fancy" is "suffering all the pangs of starvation" (88). Marlow observes that Jim is "holding fast to some deep idea" that is beyond Marlow's ability to help. "I had given him many opportunities, but they had been merely opportunities to earn his bread" (117). What Jim "starves" for is not something to feed his body, but sustenance for the romantic ideals attached to his mind and his soul—these are what form his identity and what he must ultimately protect out of self-preservation.

Foucault's theories regarding disciplinary power aren't merely an outgrowth of the penal system but rather point to how the soul, or identity itself, is constructed. Foucault elaborates that "the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline" (302-303). Instead of punishing us after deviancy has occurred, disciplinary power works to preemptively produce, correct, and shape us into useful bodies. Through "a mixture of legality and nature, prescription and constitution" we come to understand "the norm" (Foucault 304), or rather, what is expected of us. The effect being that the "modern individual is produced by a power that individualizes precisely in order to better control" ("Michel" 1471). Which is to say, when forces of power-knowledge label and categorize Jim—male, white, European, sailor—then they create more ways for Jim to fall short of the norm, gaining more points of intervention to correct and control his course.

Viewed in this light, “Foucault turns the usually celebratory narrative of the rise of the individual in modern Western societies on its head by connecting that rise with a tremendous decrease in freedom” (“Michel” 1471). To put it another way, Jim is individualized by a process that undercuts his freedom as it marks, or fixes, who he is and who he may be. For Foucault, in a “carceral” or prisonlike society such as this, “each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements” (304). Paradoxically, when Jim yearns to feed his “starved” soul in order to shore-up his identity, he functionally subjects himself to disciplining forces that constrain him and make him less free. Jim’s story exemplifies how we essentially give up freedom in order to feel safe within the comfort of belonging and conforming to the norm.

Jim’s identity, the soul of him that wracks his body with pain, is informed by various “mechanisms of discipline” (Foucault 303) that can be observed within the story. Conrad situates Jim’s reading proclivities within the tradition of Victorian adventure fiction, a genre Conrad was familiar with as he himself had “read adventure stories and fiction about distant lands, steeped in the Romantic tradition of quest and exile, . . .” (Szczeszak-Brewer 3). In keeping with didactic Victorian literature’s strict demarcations of gender, an impulse to moralize and reinforce desirable masculine attributes occurs within these heroic tales. A romanticized view of masculinity works to enculturate Jim into a norm that makes his body useful to prevailing societal expectations of men.

Simultaneous to the cultural narratives of adventure fiction, Christianity is another disciplining power that exists in Jim’s upbringing. We are told in the novel that “Jim’s father possessed such certain knowledge of the Unknowable

as made for the righteousness of people in cottages without disturbing the ease of mind of those whom an unerring Providence enables to live in mansions” (6). Interestingly, this line suggests that belief in the “Unknowable” makes people docile bodies, in that they are sustained by the spiritual despite drastic material inequalities, and this outcome suits the ruling class just fine. For Foucault, cultural narratives about masculinity and religious knowledge constitute “disciplinary institutions” whose punishing function “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (183). The disciplining power of these institutions causes Jim to conform to the norms of society by getting a hold on his mind and soul. In short, there is a confluence of complex factors outside of his control that shape Jim’s identity, but his belief in a discrete, self-determining soul, separate from those external factors deceives him into believing he is the captain of his own fate.

### **Marlow’s Motivation**

Throughout the story, Marlow struggles to articulate why he is so compelled to look after Jim, to the point that Marlow eventually comes to consider Jim something of a burden. My reading agrees with William Freedman who says of Marlow:

Virtually all of his pained introspective musings on the case indicate that Jim’s betrayal menaces his own cherished beliefs and sense of safety. It is because, as Marlow admits, Jim always appeared to him as a symbol that he maintained this relentless interest in his fate. And what he symbolizes is the shakiness of a putatively fixed standard of conduct, distinctly masculine and heroic, . . . (72)

In short, Marlow is trying to protect his own romantic ideals of masculine heroism in his efforts to help Jim, which he

implicitly reveals at several points throughout the narrative. For example, Marlow says of Jim's trial, "It seemed to me I was being made to comprehend the Inconceivable— . . . I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and the essential sincerity of falsehood" (56). For Marlow, Jim's story unveils the upsetting possibility that truth could be mere convention and that falsehoods could be sincere; an adept rendering of how disciplining powers function, and how they evade our detection. Marlow further bemoans that "ideas" are like "tramps, vagabonds" that come "knocking at the back-door of your mind, . . . each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easily!" (28). To put it succinctly, Marlow helps Jim to defend his own romantic ideals, and to assure himself that his previously cherished certitudes, *in his mind*, still hold true.

Marlow's motivations reveal something Foucault emphasizes about disciplinary power. Well intended as Marlow's assistance may be, Foucault contends that even mechanisms meant to "alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort . . . exercise a power of normalization" (308). Once made to conform to Marlow's world view, Jim's body, or rather his presence, is made useful and docile as Foucault would say, because his story no longer disrupts "simple notions" that allow someone like Marlow to rest easy. In short, it could be said that our attempts to fix the errancy we perceive in others are an attempt to fix ourselves and what we want to believe.

Like Marlow, Jim is motivated to protect his romantic illusions, but he needs others to do so. As outlined by Hannis, "Jim's own flesh—mortal, limited, and subject to weakness—is antithetical to the protection of his ideal self-image, to his excessive identification with the imagination and mind" (51). Jim must cut off the signals he receives

that interfere with his romanticized self-conception. In doing so, he must ignore not just his body, but the material—the other. This is the cost of the disciplining powers Foucault describes; it is the cost of dividing, fixing, and categorizing individuals in order to make concrete the “knowable man” (305). In Jim’s need to secure his identity he must divide and distance himself from other people and the material factors of existence. Hannis supports this reading, stating that in the novel there exists “a critique of modern notions of progress beginning with Enlightenment positivism and following through to the nineteenth-century attempt to reduce the human body to a defined, knowable text.” Hannis further reads this critique as “a warning against [a] willful race into the future that seems on the surface to depend upon cutting away anything that seems to burden or weigh down the human in flight” (56). What Jim must cut away to precipitate his own flight is not only his physical body, but non-Europeans and their land, physical objects, and women. In other words, he must cut away all that is outside the centrality of the heroic, conquering, and brave man he aspires to be.

### **Cutting Away the Other**

In the latter half of the novel, and out of some exasperation, Marlow comes upon the opportunity to practically dump Jim off on the remote and isolated island of Patusan. He describes Jim’s exodus to Patusan as entering a “totally new set of conditions for his imaginative faculty to work upon” (127). And it works; Jim views Patusan as his second chance, his very own “clean slate” (108) and that once he was there “it would be for the outside world as though he had never existed” (135). Of course, his imagination once again overlooks material reality: Patusan isn’t merely a blank spot on the map “over which hangs the

mystery of unrecorded ages” (152)—there are people who live there. Nor is it a separate world discretely separated from Europe—reminders of his past will inevitably find him. Though Jim does eventually help the natives of Patusan and seems to finally realize the heroism he’s so craved, he does so out of service to his romantic ego, similar to how Marlow is helping Jim to protect his own illusions; both offers of help are ultimately self-serving attempts to protect *and* project their romantic ideals. Ruppel confirms that Jim’s relationship to Patusan constitutes an “anti-romance that reveals the dark underside lurking in Jim’s romanticism. Jim’s effort to impose his dreams on Patusan seem altruistic, but they could also be characterized as attempts to ‘make them all dance to his own tune’” (Ruppel). The natives and the island they inhabit are the other to be projected upon in order for Jim to conform to the high ideals inscribed in him by the disciplinary power of his European roots. Jim himself has become a wielder of that European power-knowledge himself, exerting disciplining force upon the natives. Foucault claims that “the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating” (303). Jim, as the white colonizer, brings power-knowledge from his own culture to bear upon the natives in the guise of altruism. But Foucault underscores that this is not purely selfless, as it serves a greater “strategy,” (308) one I suggest is meant to maintain and reinforce Jim’s identity and the identity of white European culture at large.

The troubling suggestion of the white man fulfilling his romantic destiny upon the “land without a past” (Conrad 157) “over which hangs the mystery of unrecorded ages” (Conrad 152) is exemplified in the passage where Marlow watches Jim set sail for his great adventure in Patusan, gun in hand. The text reads,

He sat in her [a boat] leaning forward, exciting his men with voice and gestures; and as he kept the revolver in his hand and seemed to be presenting it at their heads, I shall never forget the scared faces of the four Javanese, and the frantic swing of their stroke which snatched that vision from under my eyes. (Conrad 138)

For Jim, this is the exhilarating beginning of his hero's journey, while for the Eastern natives he is a frightening, threatening, white man. Along with the fear of the natives who are assisting him, Jim ignores the physical others that disperse his agency; in this case, a visible gun. In retelling his adventure, he suggests to Marlow that upon reaching the interior of the island, it's his brave decorum alone that saved his life—the gun being empty and of no use to him. Marlow's narration slyly observes, "I refrained from pointing out to him that they could not have known the chambers were actually empty. He had to satisfy himself in his own way" (142). Jim is blind to the material, physical things that aid him in maintaining his heroic, brave, and manly sense of self, a blindness in keeping with the privileging of mind over body.

But it is not only the land, the natives, and objects that Jim overlooks in order to make stable his grand sense of self—women are part of the material other that are cut away in his flight to greatness. First, it should be remembered that material elements in Conrad's writing, as they were in his time, are frequently gendered as female. Ships are female, as is nature, underscoring the centrality of men in the Victorian era and beyond. When Jim makes his initial sojourn into Patusan, the narration reads that "his opportunity sat veiled by his side like an Eastern bride waiting to be uncovered by the hand of the master. He too was the heir of a shadowy and mighty tradition!" (141). This metaphor encompasses and entangles Eastern people, women,

and land as passive objects to be acted upon by Jim in order to fulfill his romantic ideals. The mighty tradition superimposed onto these others is almost assuredly imperialism; conquest “carried out in the name of high ideals” (Ruppel). Jim’s high ideals, his romanticism and privileging of the mind, are maintained by objectifying the other, and cutting them away, to use Hannis’ phrase, when they disrupt his dreams.

After achieving some measure of heroism on Patusan, earning the title *Tuan Jim*, or Lord Jim, he also has the good fortune of securing the affections of Jewel, a young woman who loves and adores him. When he eventually martyrs himself in penance for his mistakes, Marlow describes Jim as “an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at . . . the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct” (240). Jim’s “exalted” egoism, and his “shadowy ideal of conduct” are both products of the privileging of mind over body, of spirit over the material. Jim’s penchant for “tearing himself away” is echoed by the words of one of Jim’s former employers who decried Jim’s abandoning a good position: “You haven’t as much sense as a rat; they don’t clear out from a good ship” (113). Meaning rats have more sense than Jim because rats have *no conception of a soul* that can be used against them, but a man like Jim does. Consequently, he is vulnerable to being driven from good ships, good women, and from life itself. To reiterate, the soul, and all the disciplining, masculine romanticism imbued therein, is the prison of Jim’s body.

### **The Ship Steers You**

In *Lord Jim*, Conrad rebuts many of the Romantic Victorian writers who likewise used grand, sea-faring adventures as



a metaphor for men realizing their own heroic greatness. Consider the romantic prose of William Ernest Henley, who in his poem *Invictus* (1888) penned the famous refrain:

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

Much like Conrad, Henley uses the metaphor of a ship on the sea of life, causing us to imagine our soul as a thing we can steer to triumphant glory. External, material factors like a strait gate or charged punishments are nothing compared to the unconquerable soul in such rhetoric. But my reading of *Jim* troubles this romantic idea of the soul—Jim’s story suggests that we are not the captains of our own ship-souls. Rather, our minds, as shaped by disciplinary powers, *captain us*. Using Foucault’s theories, it is more accurate to say that “individuals are constituted by power as subjects prior to having any standing as individuals” (“Michel” 1471). The application of Foucault’s theory and Conrad’s own skepticism suggests that our subjectivity isn’t entirely under our control, having been produced by “historical discourses of power and knowledge . . .” (“Michel” 1471). Marlow implies as much; when thinking on Jim’s youthful optimism, he muses, “A clean slate, did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock” (108). I argue that the *word* is the discourse of power and knowledge that structures our identities, while the *rock* is the material, the body, the world, that we cannot escape, try as we might. They are not separate, but one engraved upon the other—coexisting and co-constituting each other.

## Conclusion

I believe it's fair to say that mind-body duality is more pronounced in men today, just as it was in the men Conrad wrote about. Especially white men, whose historical privilege has allowed them to remain incognizant of the material effect of their bodies; unhindered by race or gender, their bodies become more invisible than those of women or people of color. It is a privilege we see in Jim, such that he is practically disembodied, more enabled to separate his mind, spirit, and romantic ideals from material circumstance. But modernly, that invisible body has shifted more into view. An article from the Economist confirms, "research suggests that one factor behind the rising suicide rate is an erosion of the privileged status of white men" (C.K.). And yet, the heroic, self-determining narratives aimed at men continue, perpetuating a mind-body duality that necessitates division and disconnection; in other words, isolation. As Jim's story illustrates, maintaining the self-conception of a manly, romantic hero destined for greatness comes at the cost of dividing oneself from others, such that loneliness, disappointment, and despair is practically inevitable.

Would deconstructing the mind-body binary in Western thought help suicidal men who struggle to reconcile their lives with their dreams? It would be hubris to say that such a complex issue could be tidily answered. However, from this reading of *Lord Jim*, I will humbly suggest: if you truly believe you're the master of your soul—a temptingly heroic and romantic ideal—then it is easy to suppose that it's entirely your fault when things don't go to plan. It's a short step to assume that you just weren't a good enough captain if a squall arose and knocked you off course. When we don't give the external, material and bodily factors their due in dispersing our agency, we run the risk of not only

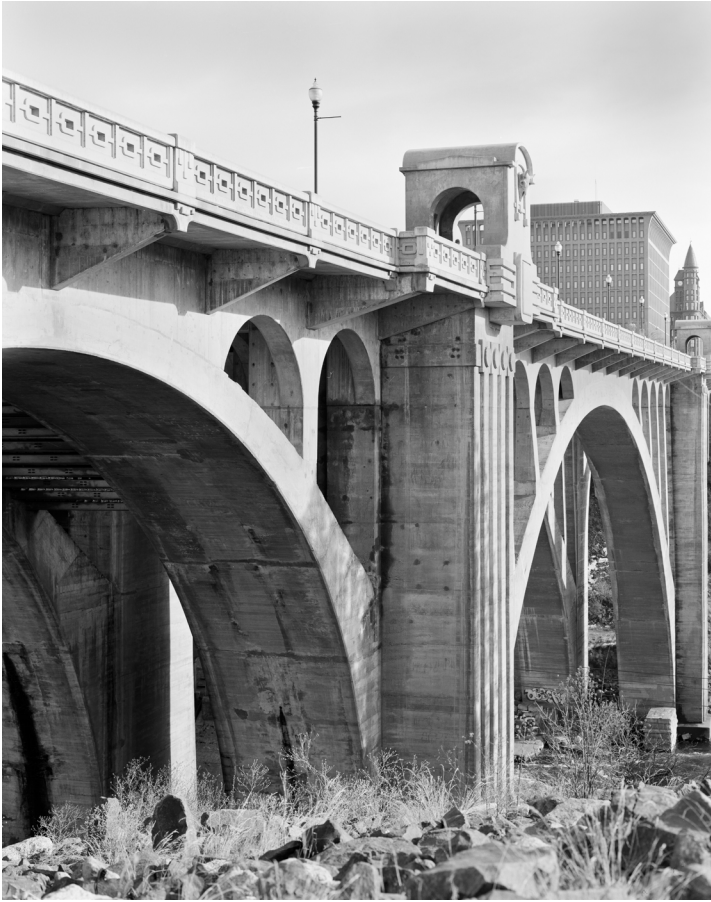
giving ourselves too much credit, but also of giving ourselves too little grace—just like Jim.

In admitting as much, we may give up being masters, captains, or Lords, but we gain the potential to be more responsible with ourselves, and significantly, more responsible in our relationships to others; women, other cultures, and the environment. Drawing upon Derrida, Hannis affirms that “it is only possible to recognize and thus be responsible to others, through a recognition of the other within; for a subject constituted by the Western philosophical privileging of mind over body, mortality or the flesh becomes the other that must be reclaimed or acknowledged” (41). Hannis’ observation underscores that the problem of mind-body duality is not only how it negatively impacted Jim, but how Jim’s need to realize the ideals embedded in his “soul” drove him to “cut away” others—and this is essentially the violence that underwrote imperialism and all forms of domination to this day.

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*Monroe Bridge* (Photography)  
Alexandra Webb

# Is Wakanda Black? Frantz Fanon's Epidermal Schema, Afrofuturism, and Black Panther

Nathan Tucker

When Marvel Studios released *Black Panther* in February 2018, it presented the film as a historical milestone in cinematic black representation. The film, written and directed by Ryan Coogler, “mark[ed] the first time that a major studio has greenlit a black superhero movie with an African-American director and a primarily black cast, . . .” (Setoodeh). That narrative fueled the film’s ascent to its status as a commercial success, a critical darling, and a cultural phenomenon. *Black Panther* was the first film in the Marvel mega-franchise to feature a person of color as the lead; it outgrossed all seventeen of its predecessors at the domestic box office and was the third highest grossing film ever in the United States before being demoted to fourth by *Avengers: Endgame* the following year (“Top Lifetime Grosses”). The film’s almost \$65 million foreign gross defied the Hollywood myth that “black films don’t travel” (Wilkinson) and led to a \$1.3 billion worldwide box office take (“Black Panther (2018)”). *Black Panther* was hailed by critics as a film that “transcends the superhero genre,” “raises movie

escapism very near the level of art,” and was “jam-packed with social relevancy” (Henderson, Travers, Rainer). The height of this acclaim was its reception of the first Best Picture nomination for a comic book movie at the Academy Awards. *Black Panther* prompted fans to dress up for screenings and sponsor school groups to see the film. The catchphrase “Wakanda forever” and its accompanying salute permeated the culture as a symbol of “black excellence”: black athletes flashed the salute in triumph and congressional representative Maxine Waters used it to accept applause at Aretha Franklin’s funeral (Weaver, Associated Press). *Black Panther*’s success reframed the commercial viability of black-led films and increased opportunities for black talent throughout Hollywood; likewise, any underperformance would have been dredged up as an excuse for writing off black-led films as poor investments at the blockbuster scale. For a culture that was ready to welcome a long overlooked perspectives on-screen, *Black Panther* was an impactful moment.

*Black Panther* has also been particularly celebrated by cultural critics as a popular example of Afrofuturism, a speculative fiction genre that attempts to imagine a future in the context of Africa and its diaspora. Mark Dery, the literary critic who coined the term, saw Afrofuturism as raising the “troubling antimony” of whether “a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out” can “imagine possible futures” (Dery 180). Because their connection to an African heritage was intentionally severed by slavery and colonialism, black people throughout the world are limited in their ability to draw upon that shared past when envisioning the future. Afrofuturist works often resolve this tension by creating fictional situations in which that past is reclaimed and the colonial worldviews that erased African identity were never imposed. *Black Panther*’s fictional



African kingdom of Wakanda is a distinct example of this Afrofuturist trope. The film posits that Wakanda used its vast deposits of vibranium (a fictional super-strong metal) “to hide in plain sight” as the world “descended it chaos,” a descent visualized onscreen by slavers loading their human cargo aboard a ship (00:01:20). By evading the encounter with colonialism, the theft of its natural resources, and the exploitation of its peoples, Wakanda has been able to maintain its status as a technological utopia into the present day. As a fiction, Wakanda harnesses the potential that historically was spent in the struggle against colonialism. The concept of Wakanda shows what society might have existed if that energy had instead gone into developing levitating trains, impact-absorbing armor, or medical advancements.

By positing a fictional society with a different understanding of African identity, *Black Panther* undertakes one of Afrofuturism’s central projects: challenging a colonial hermeneutics constructed on a racial division of black and white. The post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon calls this worldview the “epidermal racial schema”: an understanding of an individual’s identity based exclusively on the color of their skin (92). The imposition of the epidermal schema is a historical consequence of colonialism and is directly brought into question by imagining a future in which that past was avoided. However, the challenge these Afrofuturist visions present to the epidermal schema are complicated by these texts’ need to contrast with a present and an audience enmeshed in the epidermal schema in order to have meaning. A fundamental disconnect exists in presenting a text that posits a society existing beyond categories like black and white as “black representation.” Either the text can be read for the present and lose its connection to the future; or it can be read for the future, lose its link to the reality of the present, and fail to speak coherently to the world it actually

exists in. If Wakanda and its inhabitants are black, then the entire point of Wakanda—to imagine what an African country that had never been colonized would be like—is lost. Yet Wakanda is inevitably read as black by audiences of *Black Panther* and any meaning it can impart depends on it being understood as a black future. This tension within Wakanda, that it must be equally black and not-black in order to say anything, shows how the understandings projected by Afrofuturism are complicated by the inability of its texts to fully extricate themselves from the context of the epidermal schema.

In the following paper, I use Frantz Fanon's concept of the epidermal schema in *Black Skin, White Masks* and Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist analysis of oppression from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to analyze how *Black Panther* uses its imagined, never-colonized country and its attempted coup by an antagonist who subscribes to the epidermal schema to envision how the epidermal schema can be resisted and out-thought by a more expansive identification with humanity as a whole. I then turn toward the generally unacknowledged tension that exists within *Black Panther* as it negotiates its meaning as a text between a real present enmeshed in the epidermal schema and an imagined future that exists outside it.

Fanon understands the epidermal schema as an ontological problem. Colonialism has “abolished” the “metaphysics” of black people “because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own.” Having abolished these former understandings of being, Fanon writes that the epidermal schema replaces them with a negation: “Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (90). Fanon's insight is that the concept of blackness can only be understood as the opposite to whiteness because it was purposefully constructed to communicate this

understanding: “*It is the racist who creates the inferiorized*” (73). The epidermal schema is a tool the racist constructed during the historical moment of colonialism in order to carve up the world according to the distinction they found most convenient. To be black means simply to *not* be white; the term itself defines nothing beyond skin color. This definition is entirely negative (not-white) and offers no content as an ontological statement by itself.

This negativity creates a situation of objectivity and permanence that impedes the ability of black people to construct identity. Because they are defined as opposites, the black person becomes a tool the white person uses to define their own being and reassert their ability to act as a subject—that is, the black person is used as an object. The black individual is “*fixed*” into this definitional relation by the white gaze, a gaze fixated on skin tone. They are “over-determined from the outside” (Fanon 95) and locked into a schema already assembled in the mind of others perceiving them from a bricolage of “legends, stories, history, and . . . *historicity*.” The black person’s own understanding of themselves and their body is “attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema” (Fanon 92). The subjectivity or individuality of any black individual can have little to no influence against this schema so long as the gaze is determined to see them as black, as a fixed object with a preconceived meaning of “not-white.” What is perceived as a fixed object cannot simultaneously be perceived as changing. But whenever a black person enacts being, they inevitably change—like any other individual, they have unique talents that improve with practice and a personal set of knowledge that increases with experience. The epidermal schema must actively ignore and deny all this evidence in order to maintain the illusion of black people as unchanging objects who can be defined exclusively by the

color of their skin. The result is a situation where colonial society forces the black person to always play catch-up: “The black man wants to be white,” writes Fanon; meanwhile, “the white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man”—striving, in other words, to situate themselves and their being-in-the-world as universal (Fanon xiii).

This fixed construction of blackness has material implications that, at their worst, push black individuals to destroy their own identity. Fanon shares personal anecdotes about being forced to an awareness of how he was viewed through the epidermal schema: how passengers on the train would leave him “two or three” (92) seats instead of one or how his mere presence on the street provoked “a little white boy” to run away afraid that “the Negro’s going to eat me” (93). Fanon’s relation to his own body is altered by the perceptions of others. These encounters make Fanon wish “simply to be a man among man” (92) capable of being “anonymous” and “forgotten,” the default, the universal (96). But within the epidermal schema, these concepts are defined as synonymous with whiteness. Fanon recognizes that before he can assert his being in the world, “there was this myth of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs” (96). Having already seen colonialism “explode” their being and “the fragments put together” by the epidermal schema, the black person must again explode themselves (89). A term developed by Fanon’s fellow existentialist Simone de Beauvoir in her description of oppression is useful here. The oppressed are put in a situation where they “can justify their life only by a negative action”—in Fanon’s case, by attacking their own being as it occurs through the epidermal schema (Beauvoir 81). Cut off epidermally from the goal of a subjectivity made synonymous with whiteness, the black person’s transcendence “is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself” (Beauvoir 81). All of the effort they would otherwise direct

toward “discoveries, inventions, industries, culture, paintings, and books” are instead wasted on attacking and breaking down their own being (Beauvoir 80). This reduction of identity to negative action is the ultimate result of all oppression.

Recognizing the futility of this negative action, Fanon attempts to find a way outside the epidermal schema to “shout [his] blackness” (101). He looks towards rhythm, poetry, a relation to “the essence of the world,” and a relation to historical cultures of Africa as various overlapping possibilities (107). But whenever Fanon reaches for these more expansive definitions, he finds himself fixed once more by the gaze of white observers, which reinterprets all these definitions as another form of the same epidermal dichotomy. The way the world intends to continue perceiving him creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fanon finds that there is no self-definition he can attempt that is not systematically consumed into the epidermal schema.

Afrofuturism inserts itself as a solution to this crisis. Instead of attempting the negative and futile action of changing the black body, Afrofuturism uses the intervention of fiction to change the situation surrounding the black body. It evades Fanon’s predicament by leaving facticity altogether. Rhythm, history, and worldliness can all be perverted into the epidermal schema because they share a reality with it; like all facts of existence, they must be perceived through a worldview and the epidermal schema is one way of perceiving. But fiction transcends individual perception. The author’s narration, the director’s camera, the cartoonist’s pencils: each exercises an intention over the perception of their audience that, if not capable of strictly enforcing a specific reading of a text, at least guides towards some and away from others. Fiction creates an idealized perception of a world, one in which some facts are reaffirmed and others conjured or discarded. Afrofuturism, specifically, creates a fictional

landscape in which the epidermal schema is rendered irrelevant. The body, the person, the culture: all of these remain recognizably African and are readily, even enthusiastically, read as “black” by the audience. It is the epidermal schema and its limitations that dissolve as a post-colonial (or never-colonial) future is rendered.

But here lies the irony and the complication. Afrofuturistic texts can never fully extricate themselves from the epidermal schema because their meaning and impact relies on the contrast they offer to the epidermal schema held by their audience. The schema remains in the text the way a photo-negative remains in the photograph. The envisioning of a future is only meaningful to those in the present in the ways it challenges that present; otherwise, it is just that same present rearticulated and not a future at all. A flying car would be meaningless as a future if flight were a common feature of cars in the present. Likewise, the Afrofuturist fantasy of *Black Panther*'s Wakanda as a place outside the epidermal schema would be meaningless if the epidermal schema were not pervasive in the culture of our present. This is what Fanon means in saying that the “future edifice is linked to the present insofar as I consider the present something to be overtaken” (xvii). The future is quantifiable as a future only in the ways it overtakes the present. Through its link to a present, the projected future reinforces the existence of that present. Even as they envision a future without the epidermal schema, the observations of Afrofuturist texts are shaped by the very schema they challenge.

As an Afrofuturist text, *Black Panther* imagines a fictional space where the epidermal schema does not exist, introduces an antagonist who subscribes to the epidermal schema and threatens the fiction, and concludes with an affirmation that a more expansive commitment to humanity can overcome the epidermal schema. T'Challa

(Chadwick Boseman), the titular *Black Panther*, starts the film as the newly-ascended king and protector of the African nation of Wakanda. T'Challa is forced to call this long-standing policy into question when he faces a coup d'état from his cousin, Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), who grew up as an orphan in inner-city Oakland. Killmonger wants to use Wakanda's superior technological might to arm black liberation movements throughout the world, topple colonial regimes, and establish a Wakandan empire; after seizing the throne in the light of T'Challa's apparent death, he comes close to achieving these objectives. Killmonger's ideology of racial solidarity pushes T'Challa to realize that Wakanda's isolationism has led to it abdicating its moral responsibility. Upon his return to the throne, T'Challa opens Wakanda up to the world through an international aid program, starting with an embassy built over the Oakland projects Killmonger was raised in.

Wakanda has constructed a positive identity for itself based on its technological prowess. Because this identity exists outside the epidermal schema, it can only be maintained through a sustained policy of national isolation. In effect, Wakanda has taken on what Beauvoir calls "the aesthetic attitude" as an entire country (74). They are able to stand at a remove from the oppression that engulfs the rest of the African continent, unaffected. The Wakandans are not unaware of the outside world: they have a network of spies "embedded in every nation on Earth" and some banter implies that the nation's late king enjoyed watching *Back to the Future Part II* (*Black Panther* 01:30:10, 00:39:03). Their inaction against colonialism cannot be chalked up to ignorance, not when the history is common enough knowledge for a teenaged Wakandan to intuitively identify a CIA operative as a "colonizer" (*Black Panther* 01:09:23). As a nation, Wakanda is collectively choosing to claim "no other relation

with the world than that of detached contemplation” (Beauvoir 74-75). T’Challa has a conversation early in the film with W’Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya), the leader of a border tribe, about a proposal that Wakanda provide “foreign aid” and “refugee programs” (00:35:12). W’Kabi dismisses the idea: “You let refugees in, they bring their problems with them. And then Wakanda is like everywhere else” (00:35:15). W’Kabi distills everyone outside Wakanda into an indistinct and separate entity. For him, the distinctions between oppressed and oppressor are apprehended “only in the indifference of their differences” (Beauvoir 75).

This isolationist status quo is rendered untenable by *Black Panther’s* inciting action: the arrival of Erik Killmonger in Wakanda. Raised outside Wakanda, Killmonger views the world through the epidermal schema. He was thrown into the white world, abandoned in Oakland as a boy after his father (a Wakandan prince operating as a spy) was killed by T’Challa’s father for trying to smuggle vibranium weapons to black communities. Because of his background, Killmonger is the only character in the film (besides his father, who calls African-Americans “our people” in a flashback) who identifies himself with the idea of “blackness” and categorizes the world by race (01:05:53). The film’s only direct reference to blackness as a social category is Killmonger’s observation that “when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or the resources to fight their oppressors” (01:29:55). He makes references to “my own brothers and sisters right here on this continent” (01:18:36) and “my ancestors that jumped from the ships,” articulating his own sense of kinship to African peoples across a broad swath of space and time (01:57:59). When he appears before T’Challa to present a challenge for the Wakandan throne, Killmonger’s opening salvo is an attempt to guilt the Wakandans by appealing to epidermal solidarity: “Y’all sittin’ up



here comfortable. Must feel good. It's about two billion people all over the world that looks like us, but their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate 'em all" (01:14:23). For Killmonger, it is not the fact of African oppression that condemns Wakanda's inaction, but that the people being oppressed "looks like us." His sense of morality rests on the epidermal schema, on aligning himself with those who share his appearance.

The Wakandan characters do not understand themselves through the epidermal schema. As a result, Killmonger's monologues are not rhetorically effective for them. Instead, they address the audience outside the film who share his epidermal schema; in many ways, Killmonger is actually the film's viewpoint character. Because Wakanda never experienced colonialism and never had the epidermal schema foisted upon the psychology of its people, Killmonger's appeals to solidarity based in the concepts of "black folks" (01:29:55) and people "that looks like us" (01:14:23) are irrelevant (perhaps even unintelligible) for the film's Wakandan characters. Even as he takes over Wakanda, Killmonger's broader ideology and its emphasis on ethnicity is ignored. W'Kabi, the character who collaborates most closely with Killmonger's coup, is swayed by the prospect of an aggressive Wakandan foreign policy—the geopolitical calculus that the world "is getting smaller" and "soon it will be the conquerors, or the conquered" (01:31:00). His motivation has nothing to do with racial solidarity; that is not how he sees the world. Killmonger's speeches are aimed squarely at an audience who exists alongside him in the epidermal schema and who read the Wakandan characters as black. In that metatextual context, they are highly compelling. But in order for the Wakandans to buy into them, they would have to surrender their understanding of the world to the premises of the epidermal schema. They would have to stop dividing the world by

nationality—Wakandan or not-Wakandan—and submit to the epidermal dichotomy. The threat and the tragedy of Killmonger is that in trying to liberate the black diaspora from colonialism he is infecting the one place spared from that horror with the colonial worldview. W’Kabi may not realize it, but Killmonger’s new world order would make Wakanda precisely “like everywhere else” (00:35:15).

T’Challa’s turning point in the film comes when he recognizes the validity of Killmonger’s arguments against inaction in the face of oppression while continuing to reject the epidermal schema those arguments are articulated through. As he faces his father and the previous kings of Wakanda in the ancestral plane, T’Challa rejects their isolationist policy and the harm their inaction has indirectly caused:

You were wrong! All of you were wrong! To turn your backs on the rest of the world. We let the fear of our discovery stop us from doing what is right. No more! I cannot stay here with you. I cannot rest while [Killmonger] sits on the throne. He is a monster of our own making. I must take the mantle back, I must. I must right these wrongs. (*Black Panther* 01:37:20)

T’Challa’s breakthrough is not a conversion to Killmonger’s vision of pan-African solidarity enacted through Wakandan imperialism. Instead, it rests on a realization that “all forms of exploitation are identical, since they apply to the same ‘object’: . . .” (Fanon 69) and that “any abstention is complicity, and complicity in this case is tyranny” (Beauvoir 86). Wakanda has common cause with the oppressed African diaspora, not because of a shared skin tone, but because of a shared humanity. What T’Challa realizes is the immorality of inaction. There is no way to exist outside of the world. *Black Panther* closes with T’Challa committing Wakanda’s “knowledge and resources” (02:05:25) to international outreach, based in a worldview where humanity “must find a

way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe” (02:06:00). As a fiction, *Black Panther* uses its imagined, never-colonized country to demonstrate how the worldview imposed by the epidermal schema can be resisted and out-thought by a more expansive identification with humanity as a whole. The fluidity of fiction allows for T’Challa and the entire country of Wakanda to successfully model this orientation towards the world without the complications that would be expected in reality if a secret and hyper-advanced nation suddenly made itself known to the world.

The epidermal schema may be vanquished within the text, but the metatext—that web of discourse and description that surrounds the text—cannot help but be defined in relation to it. As a text, it becomes defined—*fixed*, Fanon might say—by this real-world context. The film is abnormal simply because of its blackness. It makes a statement by the mere fact of existing. It says even more because of its success. As a text alone, *Black Panther* is not trying to carry the weight of all this meaning—and yet, it cannot avoid saying them. It cannot avoid being shaped as a text by the conscious awareness that it will be pressed into speaking for blackness as a whole. It is irrelevant to *Black Panther’s* place in the cultural conversation that most of the film’s characters would not see themselves as black: as they are projected onto the screen, the gaze of the audience (black and white alike) fixes them as black and draws out the implications from that point of departure. No matter the disconnect from the epidermal schema that occurs in the text, no matter what other ways the being of its characters are defined, the schema will always be reasserted by the culture consuming the text. Fiction might preserve the Afrofuturist text from the epidermal schema, but the metatext can never be safe from it.

This metatext can be powerful, necessary even. The recent push for increased and improved black representation in media—a movement that has lauded *Black Panther* as an especial triumph—is positive and significant. Providing positive depictions of black characters in a major studio blockbuster was, by all accounts, a conscious intent on the part of the black cast and crew behind *Black Panther*. The qualities the internet has codified into the hashtag slogan of “black excellence” demand celebration after being ignored in mainstream culture for far too long. To the extent that it catalogs a set of positive meanings for blackness, that celebration can be its own salvo against the epidermal schema—even if it also risks the same pitfalls Fanon’s attempts to “shout [his] blackness” did. An example of this pitfall in the metatext surrounding *Black Panther* is how its representation of an underrepresented demographic was used as a capitalist incentive. It was the very potency of black representation, sharpened by a cinematic century of neglect and by Disney’s own reluctance to invest in black filmmaking at this scale, that allowed the corporation lining its pockets with *Black Panther*’s profits to sell the film as “making history” and buying a ticket to see it as a political act. It is worth being skeptical of what is, effectively, a mega-conglomerate’s colonization of fiction: mining the Afrofuturist vision at the heart of *Black Panther* and selling it as intellectual property. Of course, this “colonization” of Wakanda must be repackaged into a perspective that is more immediate and more convenient for audiences to understand. Regardless of how Wakanda is depicted in the film itself, the epidermal schema reasserts itself.

In this way, an ethos of racial pride exists in a generally unacknowledged tension with the Afrofuturist vision of *Black Panther*. A society entirely untouched by the epidermal schema would not require any sense of pride based on skin

color to try and counter-balance centuries of discrimination based on skin color. Black representation cannot be found in a text positing a society that exists beyond categories like black and white without there being an interpretative tension. Either the text can be read for the present and lose its connection to the future, its transcendence beyond the epidermal schema—or, it can be read for the future and see its immediate relevance diminish. In both cases, meaningful potentialities for Afrofuturism as a genre are gained and lost.

Wakanda is not black; the entire point of Wakanda is that it *cannot* be black. Yet Wakanda only achieves meaning, as a fiction and a future, because of its blackness—because it is read as black and requires its readers to compare it against the epidermal schema. If there really were an African nation that had evaded the ravages of colonialism and developed into the world's foremost technological superpower, there would be no need to imagine Wakanda. Another kind of black future would have been built from that different black present. In a press junket interview, Michael B. Jordan rejected a Wakandan salute eagerly thrown up by white interviewer with an exhausted retort: “I ain’t from Wakanda” (Garrett 0:49-0:52). Jordan’s reply acknowledges the claim of his present reality as having a priority over that of a fictitious future. While it is insightful and even useful to imagine a world where the epidermal schema does not exist, the lived experience of black people in the present cannot be ignored. The given world necessarily determines our response to it, even when that response is the projection of a future that transcends it. This echoes Fanon’s own concession about temporality: that he is “resolutely a man of my time” and that “in no way is it up to me to prepare for the world coming after me” (xvii). Likewise, we could say that Afrofuturism is resolutely a future of its time. Any projection

of the future will end up saying more about the present it is contrasted against than itself. That limitation is no reason to stop envisioning futures. But an awareness that this limitation exists can prompt a deeper reflection among creators and audiences of Afrofuturist texts about the implications these futures have for today.

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*Frankenstein's Monster* (Graphite on Paper)  
Nick Lawyer



# *Bloodborne* as a Writerly Text: Lovecraftian Lineage, Convoluted Narrative, and Difficulty

Nicholas Foster

Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Bloodborne* is an enigmatic and challenging role-playing video game that takes place in the fictional city of Yharnam, a decrepit city with towering Gothic and Victorian architecture. The game begins during the night of the hunt, and the player character, hereafter called the hunter, wanders into the dingy city. The silence is only punctured by the hunter's footsteps, plodding along the cobblestone walkways. Unseen monster screams haunt the once glorious city, and even in the most tense encounters between the main character and plagued humans, only the sounds of weapons swinging, guns firing, and flesh breaking perforate the eerie stillness of Yharnam on the night of the hunt.

Released in 2015, *Bloodborne* still leaves players theorizing over every aspect of the game. Typically, after initial coverage around a video game's release, gaming publications often move on to new launches. This press cycle is not something I hold against the video game journalism industry, but I bring it up to highlight the

broader conversation about video games, which takes place on forums, subreddits, and YouTube videos. The gameplay, lore, and story of *Bloodborne* live on in unacademic corners of the internet. The majority of this content is explicitly non-critical. From the “git gud” responses to forum posts asking for help with difficult sections of the game to YouTube videos using Beyoncé lyrics to show how to defeat the slinking, emaciated Blood-Starved Beast boss, critical assessment of the game is few and far between. This critique does exist, however, and what’s there is impressive.

Since the overarching narrative of *Bloodborne* is not explicit, much of the discussion in online forums has to do with unravelling the mysterious story. The game hints at a narrative through scant dialogue between characters, the Yharnam’s architecture, and occasional notes found on the ground. However, no aspect of the narrative is officially decided, no bit of story that can be explained beyond the shadow of a doubt. Despite the ambiguity of *Bloodborne*, many have attempted to unravel the story. An anonymous author named Redgrave wrote a 107 page analysis of the lore of the game. They realize the futility of trying to find a true meaning of the story. They assert:

*Bloodborne* . . . doesn’t have the answers to be solved within the game itself. There’s no dialogue or item description which can provide the player with that crucial piece of information that explains everything. . . . Bloodborne is a book where half of the words can’t be understood, and the reader must fill in the blanks on their own. (4)

In other words, the story cannot be solved. As Redgrave argues, while the game gives the player information, it always leaves questions unanswered, mysteries unsolved. Therefore, the player is left to their own devices

to answer the unanswerable, but they are not given enough information to truly draw a conclusion from the text. As this analysis by Redgrave illustrates, thoughtful critique of *Bloodborne* exists beyond academic spheres as players search for meaning in a game that lacks an explicit, linear storyline.

What Redgrave's analysis is missing, however, is that *Bloodborne* is not only a consumable piece of fiction, but a writerly text. *Bloodborne* operates under the guise of a consumer text, but it is much more. Deeper looks into the influences of the game's style and cyclical content reveal that it is not the consumer good it appears to be. In fact, I argue that *Bloodborne* functions as a writerly text, or a text which requires the player to work to understand the content. I will show this through comparisons to Lovecraftian fiction, that not only focus on the surface-level aesthetic similarities, but also through the complexity of storytelling and the unknown present in both works. Next, I will highlight that *Bloodborne* is also writerly because of the way the story is conveyed to the player, and how the amorphous narrative inspires multiple interpretations of the game. Finally, I will show that *Bloodborne* is a writerly text due to its difficulty, which causes forced replay not only through small sections of the game, but eventually the game entirely.

*Bloodborne* draws influence from the works of H.P. Lovecraft, an American author who published his fiction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work inspired the term Lovecraftian horror, which is, for the purposes of this essay, the horror of everyday people coming into contact with unknowable entities called great ones. The horror, however, stems from the knowledge that the unknowable great ones have always and will always exist. This concept is so grand and terrifying that it drives the

protagonists mad. Patricia MacCormack, professor of philosophy at Anglia Ruskin University, summarizes this style of horror, asserting that “the dreadful realisation overcomes Lovecraft’s protagonists that they have always been in relation with and related to monstrous entities” (2). According to MacCormack, the horror of Lovecraft is a permanent, eternal horror. Therefore, for MacCormack, the minds of the characters who come into contact with the great ones cannot handle nor comprehend what they have witnessed. McCormack continues by positing, “those who cannot cope become the atrophied Body without Organs, while those who allow themselves to dissipate into their dream worlds scatter into particles—a schizo-madness” (21). In other words, the consequences of encountering a great one are death or madness. In MacCormack’s view, then, ‘incomprehensible’ is not simply a superlative in Lovecraft’s work, but rather a veritable description of a being whose mere existence cannot be comprehended while maintaining sanity. That being said, while H.P. Lovecraft’s work is inextricably connected to *Bloodborne*, he was also a virulent racist and homophobe, whose hateful views I strongly condemn. Regardless, the way in which Lovecraft constructed his narratives is incredibly important when discussing *Bloodborne*, so his work is still noteworthy.

Of equal importance to *Bloodborne* is Roland Barthes’s theory of readerly and writerly texts. According to Barthes, writerly texts are texts in which the reader has to actively engage the content to understand the presented ideas. Regarding these types of texts Barthes writes that “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). In other words, a writerly text is a text in which the reader has to endeavor to understand and piece

together the contents while becoming a part of the creation process. Writerly texts are not easily understandable without significant effort on the part of the reader, whereas readerly texts very little of the reader. Of readerly texts Barthes theorizes, “Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text” (4). In other words, these are works that are easy to consume. Readerly texts are a countervalue to writerly texts because they require only a minimal engagement on the part of the reader. I believe that Jean-Francois Lyotard can help clarify Barthes’s statement and help us understand readerly texts further. Lyotard might not use the term readerly, but he writes that in modern texts, “the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure” (81). Thus, according to Lyotard, readerly texts are supposed to be enjoyed and consumed, not thought about. Barthes postulates that because of readerly gratification

“[the] reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness . . . instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text” (4).

In other words, Barthes posits that readerly texts ask nothing of the reader, it is only a matter of consumption rather than work. Therefore, without the ability to produce and think about the text, any critical thought becomes a question of taste. *Bloodborne*, I argue, functions not as a readerly text, as a writerly text.

Turning now to *Bloodborne*, it is important to note that the player is given little knowledge to go off of. It is

a video game in which the hunter, an outsider coming to the city of Yharnam, participates in the night of the hunt. The hunter begins in the city of Yharnam, with no guidance for where to go or what to do. The winding corridors of the city are maze-like, plagued with monsters around every corner. Eventually, the player finds ways to traverse the dark, labyrinthian city, opening shortcuts and memorizing the locations of enemies. It is not open world, but rather focused on the architecture of the city. The player discovers new paths, delving deeper into the streets, sewers, churches, universities, and homes of Yharnam. Throughout this exploration the player is fed tidbits of Yharnam's history and the plague that destroyed the city. As the player continues through the game it becomes apparent that the beasts are only part of the problem; great ones and ancient eldritch gods sought by men of previous generations caused the scourge of beasts in Yharnam. The hunter must face these ancient horrors and power-hungry men alone.

*Bloodborne* is a horror game and, more specifically, a game inspired by Lovecraftian horror. This perspective is not unique, it has been written about in countless reviews and analyses of the game. Video game critic Aaron Suduiko notes the comparisons and argues,

“This is not, in and of itself, a new observation—at this point, only a few months after the initial release of the game, you can throw a stone in any direction and hit a piece pointing out that the game pays due homage to H.P. Lovecraft” (Suduiko).

The comparisons between *Bloodborne* and Lovecraft appear apt. On the surface, it seems obvious that *Bloodborne* is considered Lovecraftian. For one, there are bosses in the game called great ones, a direct naming

convention after the deities in Lovecraft's stories. Great ones are incomprehensible deities that care little for human affairs; men that seek them are driven mad, being unable to comprehend the mere existence of such deities. Additionally in the corner of *Bloodborne's* screen, a number indicates the hunter's insight, which is a representation of how much knowledge the hunter has gained. As the hunter earns more insight the game becomes harder; more enemies appear who do more damage, and areas that were once familiar become alien, not only crawling with the plagued beasts, but celestial and alien entities that haunt the player. Furthermore, insight is also connected to frenzy, which is a mechanic that causes the hunter to lose vast amounts of health when confronting certain enemies. During these encounters, a meter indicating frenzy appears on screen; when the meter fills the hunter loses 75% of their health. In these instances, frenzy is not a physical attack that causes the hunter to lose health, rather the diminishing health is caused by the presence of certain enemies. The speed of the meter depends entirely on the hunter's insight. If it is low it fills slowly—however with high insight the frenzy meter becomes an unstoppable enemy in and of itself, leaving the player little time to react to the frenzy. This imitates the madness of Lovecraftian fiction, as the more insight a character has, the faster they go mad. Between great ones, insight, and frenzy, *Bloodborne* clearly draws influence from Lovecraftian fiction by mimicking encounters with great ones and the resulting insanity they produce.

Some may find issue with this connection, however, as this surface level reading that *Bloodborne* mimics Lovecraft's horror appears to fall apart upon further inspection. Lovecraftian fiction is often characterized by characters descending into madness when confronted

with great ones. In *Bloodborne*, neither truly happen to the hunter. Death carries consequences, such as losing experience points and healing items, but the player is free to try again until they achieve victory. Insight may make the game harder, but it is still playable. Additionally, great ones cannot be killed in Lovecraft's work. They are eternal, always existing. The insignificant mortals who come into contact with great ones face death or madness—fighting back against the deities isn't even an option. In *Bloodborne* finding a great one is almost always punished by death during the first encounter for all but the best of players. However, with practice and patience it is possible to defeat great ones, which demonstrates that *Bloodborne*, at times, does not align with the genre conventions of Lovecraftian horror.

Both of these readings are shallow. The content of the stories and concepts like great ones and madness are not the only similarities between *Bloodborne* and Lovecraftian horror. The focus on elements such as frenzy, insight, and death does not consider deeper readings of either text. MacCormack provides a deeper analysis of Lovecraft's narratives and writing style. She posits:

[There] is a secret that constitutes the work. Along with his protagonists, we meander around Lovecraft, but his is a labyrinth with no centre . . . Each event of writing and speech is incomparable to anything and thus its own opening toward the beyond of itself. The stories are not narratives as they seek no end, the speech silent and unheard because it cannot reveal the solution to the secret of the unsayable. (20)

Here, MacCormack questions the narratives of Lovecraft, if they can even be called that. She argues that there is something larger in his work, something that cannot be uncovered. In other words, there will always be some



un-known, some questions purposefully left unanswered. I argue that *Bloodborne* functions on the same level. The reason there are countless articles, blog posts, and forum threads about *Bloodborne* is because, as a Lovecraftian work, “it cannot reveal the solution to the secret of the unsayable” (McCormack 20). While this sounds defeating, it actually invites more thoughtfulness and analysis. If the answers are given in the text, then there is no need to think about the text. The lack of a definitive narrative makes what exists more important.

This facet of Lovecraftian fiction is frequently highlighted in *Bloodborne*. For example, a non-hostile non-player character in the first area of the game cautions, “This town is cursed. Whatever your reasons might be you should plan a swift exit. Whatever can be gained from this place, it will do more harm than good” (*Bloodborne*). The character is talking to the hunter, but there is a broader point that this man makes: if the *player* of the game searches for narrative provided by the game itself, it is meaningless. A more salient example of this comes from one of the final bosses, Gehrman. He approaches the hunter in the first few hours of the game and says, “You’re sure to be in a fine haze about now, but don’t think too hard about all of this. Just go out and kill a few beasts. It’s for your own good. You know, it’s just what hunters do! You’ll get used to it . . .” (*Bloodborne*). Again and again the game commands the player not to think about the text. Play it, but do not expect the game to give any deeper meaning. Seeking to understand a text has value, but in a work like *Bloodborne*, the text will not provide complete transparency.

The interpretation of *Bloodborne*’s story is given over almost entirely to the player. Remember that McCormack writes, “Along with his protagonists, we meander around

Lovecraft, but his is a labyrinth with no centre” (20). In other words, there is no singular key, no piece of information that will make everything make sense in Lovecraftian stories. Furthermore, Roland Barthes argues that interpretation of a text is not just searching for meaning, but rather understanding that the meaning is nonexistent. In his view, “To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it” (5). According to Barthes, interpreting is not assigning a hidden meaning to the text, but rather putting the text in context and working to understand it. For *Bloodborne*, application of Barthes’s theory means an explicit understanding that the narrative is missing is an integral part of piecing together the fractured narrative. No piece of lore, no dialogue, no progression in the game will unlock the secret of Yharnam. The story of what happened to Yharnam can only be obtained through diligent seeking and work to put the given pieces of dialogues and lore notes together. However, there will never be enough pieces to definitively say that the story is complete, the mystery solved. This reading of the game is not just an idea put forth by the anonymous Redgrave, the author of the 107 Google Doc, but also through a mysterious location in *Bloodborne* known as chalice dungeons.

Chalice Dungeons are a microcosm of the Lovecraftian nature of *Bloodborne*, asking the player to traverse deeper while providing no reward. These dungeons are underground caverns, randomly generated with different enemies. There is a mysterious atmosphere in the dungeons, set deep underground in structures that, while manmade, feel menacing and alien. The fact that these dungeons are randomly generated and always changing reflect this desire for more knowledge, that maybe they

will hold the key to *Bloodborne*'s mysteries. And why wouldn't they? Even today I discover new creatures, new arrangements of dungeons and bosses that I never experienced in Yharnam. This constant discovery is also experienced by other players, as is evident in an examination of *Bloodborne* by Jacob Geller, a games journalist. He writes,

This is what I found in the chalice dungeons. A bottomless pit of gameplay, an irresistible fixation with the unknown. *Bloodborne*, in every conceivable way, has been conquered. I've destroyed every boss, I've obtained every trophy.

But those dungeons are still there. And they want me to go

**Deeper.** (Geller)

The game suggests that these dungeons are where the characters Willem and Laurence discovered the ancient blood from great ones used for blood ministration, which eventually caused the plague in the city. They pushed deeper and deeper into the dungeons, pursuing something that eventually caused a madness to tear throughout Yharnam. Just as Willem and Laurence pushed deeper, the game asks the player to delve deeper. What might the player find that has never been discovered? Even when the *Bloodborne* has been beaten, every inch of Yharnam explored, the chalice dungeons offer something unknown and enticing. As MacCormack writes, the game itself provides a "labyrinth with no center" (20).

Beyond these reasons, *Bloodborne* is a writerly text because of its difficulty. *Bloodborne*'s difficulty means that death is inevitable in the majority of gameplay situations. In order to see the world, read the lore notes, and understand the story, the player has to work hard and trudge through areas multiple times. As Barthes says,

rereading is critical to writerly texts, and that “rereading is no longer consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different). If then . . . we *immediately* reread the text, it is in order to obtain . . . not the *real* text, but a plural text: the same and new” (16). Barthes argues that rereading a text makes it writerly, because it is new again during the time in which it is read, constantly reproduced by the reader with new thoughts and analyses. Note Barthes’s use of the word play. Rereading is play. Play is also the verb used to describe ones interactions with video games. They are not watched, they are *played*. In the case of *Bloodborne*, the main gameplay loop requires Barthes’s notion of rereading. Each new area the player arrives in seems difficult, if not impossible. The enemies do more damage, and the hunter often dies quickly. Because of the frequent deaths, *Bloodborne* forces players to either continue replaying areas or give up on the game. Each death brings new knowledge to the player, who, with proper execution, should be able to get further with each death. After getting through a new area the hunter often has to fight a boss, which is a more difficult battle against a stronger enemy or group of enemies. When the hunter dies, they have to start the area again, from the beginning. While this may be a forced reread, it is a reread nonetheless, the same and new with each death.

Death is not the only time when the game forces the player to replay. When the player finishes *Bloodborne*, they are immediately taken to the beginning of the game. There is no option to continue playing in the same world. While the hunter stays the same, everything else starts over. In the words of Barthes, it is “the same and new” (16). The game is the same because nothing has changed—the player must repeat all of the same actions

that they did before. However, it is also a new experience, because it is a replay. This repetition does not just happen once, but every time the players finishes the game. In this way he game is cyclical, restarting with every death, and restarting with every victory. This format is also Lovecraftian. MacCormack writes, “Far from disappearing or being consumed, Lovecraft’s characters are unable to escape, through death or victory, the reality of their metamorphoses” (12). The game never ends, the hunter can never escape. Were the game to definitively end it would not be Lovecraftian; the endless cycle of death, victory, and renewal undeniably link the words of Lovecraft and *Bloodborne*. Even in Lovecraft’s fiction, dead gods may continue to live. He writes, “That is not dead which can eternal lie / and with strange aeons even death may die” (Lovecraft 65). In other words, even death cannot kill great ones in eternity. In *Bloodborne*, when the hunter kills a great one they are dead—until the player beats the game. With every victory, ancient, horrid deities come back again and again in a never ending cycle. The only ending to the game is the one the player gives it by not returning to the game. Replaying is not just an option in *Bloodborne*—it is mandatory.

Although the game draws upon Lovecraftian fiction and is a writerly text, *Bloodborne* is a consumer good, which might seem contradictory to Barthes’s definition of writerly texts. Barthes argues that readerly texts are consumed, while writerly texts are produced. It is fair to argue that *Bloodborne* is a consumer good. It is a game only released on the PlayStation 4. Each game released for this console has trophies, or achievements, that players unlock, and includes a percentage of how many players of the game have obtained the trophy. In *Bloodborne* there is a trophy for each boss. The first boss, the

Cleric Beast, has only been beaten by 49% of players as of October 2019. That means that less than half of the people that *bought* the game beat the first boss. The game is so difficult that 51% of players gave up without beating a single boss. Does this sound like a consumer good, an easy readerly text where the signified is obvious? I would argue that, due to the difficulty of the game, it is not.

While I believe that *Bloodborne* is a writerly text, some might argue that it is not. For instance, Barthes argues that “the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore” (5). I did not have a hard time finding *Bloodborne*; it is \$20 on Amazon. However, this is not just a problem with *Bloodborne*, it is a truth inherent in all media. The sports journalist John Bois laments the consumerist nature of mixed martial arts, a sport that he loves, in the documentary *Fighting in the Age of Loneliness*. He ends the video with the harrowing, threatening message that there is no hope for untouched art. He states,

“If you somehow made it to the end of this and you’re not an MMA fan, I hope you take one thing away from all this: this will happen to everything that you love. Nothing you like will remain untouched, and it will get further and further monetized into meaninglessness. This isn’t just our problem in our idiotic bloodsport; you’re fucked too.”

This is the case of *Bloodborne*. It was released in March 2015, and by November its developer had released downloadable content, or a paid download, to add another area to the game. In December of the same year, Sony released a collector’s edition. Sony has merchandised a lot of this game, from plushies to t-shirts. As Barthes writes, “instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of

writing, [the reader] is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text” (4). Barthes’s language here is almost nostalgic, sorrowful of the possibility of what could be, the magic of the signifier, the pleasure of writing, drowned in the inevitable sorrow that nearly every text is a readerly text. Barthes would argue that *Bloodborne*, as a consumer good, is not inherently a writerly text.

However, *Bloodborne* shouldn’t be overlooked. It is a writerly text because of how it is played, not how it is sold. Bois ends his video series, just minutes after telling the viewers that nothing will remain untouched by monetization, with the message, “for the rest of your life, go out, touch gloves, and fight.” This is not just empty advice to fight through life because it’s hard. Rather, fighting is, in fact, the only way to survive. As Barthes argues, “Yet reading is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority. It is a form of work . . .” (10). In other words, reading writerly texts, and reproducing them through reading, is work, which is the only way these types of texts can exist. *Bloodborne* can only function as a writerly text through our work, continued replay and analysis, and the search for something new and the same.

*Bloodborne* may be easy to write off as a consumer text rather than a writerly one. In the same way, the aesthetic similarities between *Bloodborne* and the work of Lovecraft may be easy to observe with the mindset that the comparisons are only surface level. Treating a work as a readerly text is simple. On the other hand, treating something as writerly requires effort on the part of the reader. Barthes argues this when he states that writerly texts “make the reader no longer a consumer, but a

producer of the text” (4). I am not arguing that video games are inherently art, but rather that we can treat them as such. Significantly, my argument does not only end with video games, but can be extended toward everything imaginable, including mixed martial arts. Not every video game, movie, book, or sport exists solely to be consumed. Rather, these texts need to be analyzed and treated as important works. It is the responsibility of the reader to not only read, but also to participate in conversations, analyses, and criticisms regarding texts. Therefore, *Bloodborne* exists as a writerly text—only in part because of its Lovecraftian lineage, convoluted narrative, and difficulty. However, the true reason it is a writerly text is because of the work of the players.



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*Melancholy* (Photography)  
Jenny Brown

# “Stamp[ed] as Commodities”: The Ironic Popular Misinterpretation of ‘15 Million Merits’ Self-Referential Satire”

Taylor Draney

Unafraid to tackle the controversial issues of our day head-on, the television series *Black Mirror* was widely hailed upon its release by critics as this era’s iteration of *The Twilight Zone*, each standalone episode offering nihilistic commentary on society’s growing reliance on technology. Like *The Twilight Zone*, *Black Mirror* is easily read as a collection of cautionary, often morally-driven vignettes. Reminiscent of its groundbreaking predecessor, this spirit of warning in *Black Mirror* has seemingly left many of its popular critics eager to leave the audience with a call to action—an indictment of current behavior and an admonishment to change before it’s too late. The episode “Fifteen Million Merits” has inspired a particularly strong critical response in this vein. Samantha Olthof of the film and TV blog *Film School Rejects* sums up the episode as “a direct shot at audience members to reassess their own priorities and relationship to technology.” Howard Chai, a blog writer for *Medium*, similarly turns the episode’s critique onto viewers, writing, “technology makes it so that the people whose suffering

we revel in are just distant people on a screen. *Black Mirror* points the finger at us.” Despite this widespread interest, however, popular criticism’s focus on the episode’s implication of audience responsibility diminishes what I feel is the more stinging and relevant critique found in the episode—the infiltration of technology into every aspect of life under capitalism specifically, and the ways this economic system works together with our rapidly increasing reliance on technology to create systemic societal problems.

My paper explores the way that the permeation of technology in our world perpetuates a hyperreality that supports a capitalist ideology. I argue that “Fifteen Million Merits” functions as a critique of capitalism by satirizing our contemporary consumer society through its fictional world. By overtly connecting the worth and identity of human beings to money, and alienating them from their work and each other, the fictional society in this episode serves as a scathing critique of our real-life capitalist system, imbued with and ruled by the use of technology. Karl Marx’s theory regarding the fetishism of commodities and Jean Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality together serve as an apt theoretical lens through which to understand the satirization of contemporary American society in “Fifteen Million Merits.” While Marx’s theory serves as a basis for understanding the capitalist economic and social structure satirized in the episode, the addition of Baudrillard’s theory offers a more nuanced view of technology’s role in American capitalism specifically.

In the process of reading the fictional society of this episode through Marx and Baudrillard’s theories, my analysis will not only reveal the exploitation of workers under a technologically-run capitalist society, but it will also show that any widely-distributed criticism of this reigning hierarchy, including *Black Mirror* itself, only serves to strengthen

that very system. In addition to satirizing our modern capitalist society, “Fifteen Million Merits” also ultimately acts as a darkly humorous meditation on the ironic appropriation of any successful criticism of capitalism by that system—effectively, the episode itself is the subject of its own satirical jabs. Further, the deeper understanding of this capitalist system’s ability to co-opt criticism for its own maintenance offered by a Marxist and Baudrillardian analysis will shed light on the seemingly mystifying tendency of popular critics to lean toward interpretations of the episode that place the burden of action on the audience as well as provide reasoning for their staunch avoidance of the interpretation I offer: one critical of the technology-driven capitalist society that produced it.

“Fifteen Million Merits” begins by immersing us in a futuristic, dystopian society that seems to epitomize Baudrillard’s understanding of the trajectory of the consumer-driven United States he wrote about in the 1980’s: huge screens cover almost every wall of the underground bunker in which all citizens live and work. These screens are the medium through which every meaningful interaction in their lives occur, from their work, to their personal gifts, to their individual expression. The protagonist, Bing, is presented as an average person in this society, and as such, his days are spent like everyone else’s—pedaling stationary bikes to earn currency. This job seems to be the only one available, aside from the janitorial duties forced upon anyone who refuses to continue pedaling. Referred to as “lemons,” these people, in refusing to earn currency by pedaling, cede their ability to earn currency altogether. Instead, they are forced to work for the benefit of others without pay. There is only one other option for work—fame. Although it is the rarest position to occupy, it is the one that dominates the media that all citizens are forced to constantly

consume, at work and at home. Any hope that a regular citizen has of achieving fame balances on one talent competition that anyone can enter, but that costs a nearly unattainable sum.

Bing is resigned to his monotonous life as a pedaler, apparently uninterested in the possibility of fame that the media constantly propagates, until he meets Abi. When he overhears her singing, he becomes entranced by her beautiful voice and, after befriending her, he insists that she audition for the talent competition. He gives up nearly all of his currency to get her there, only to be let down when, instead of being offered the fame she aimed for, she is coerced into becoming an actress on the channel featuring the most ubiquitous type of media in this society: pornography. Full of despair at this outcome, Bing pours his frustration into pedaling with the singular goal in mind of getting himself to the talent competition stage. When he finally makes it there, he takes the opportunity to make a bold statement onstage denigrating the unfair system he lives under. He makes this statement directly to the judges, the few people who profit off the life's work of vast amounts of regular citizens who never see any reward for their labors. Bing risks everything to tell the truth, but to his surprise, instead of being thrown out for his rebellion, he is offered a job—a time slot on a media channel a few days a week to express himself to the masses the way that he had onstage. Stuck between being true to his rage at the system and securing a comfortable life for himself, he ultimately chooses the latter. In this tragic twist, even Bing's rage against the judges, the few people in his society that have any sort of individual autonomy to effect meaningful change (or so it seems), is only capitalized on to perpetuate the unfair system he aimed to indict with his performance. We are left with an overwhelming impression of the hopelessness

of change in a system that consumes, to its benefit, all efforts to tear it down.

This hopelessness is rendered more poignant through Bing's society's striking similarity to our own. The technology-driven, talent show-obsessed dystopian society presented reads like an eventual point on the trajectory of American society. This depiction of our society's potential future highlights the relevancy of both Marx's and Baudrillard's theories to modern American capitalist society due to the emphasis they both place on the way commodities relate to each other under a strict hierarchy. Baudrillard's theory concerns simulacrum, a term he coined to express the idea of an image which has no referent in the real world. He theorizes that there exist four successive phases of the image. The first phase is the "reflection of basic reality; the second, the masking and perversion of basic reality; the third, the masking of the absence of basic reality; and finally, the state of bearing 'no relation to reality whatever'" (Baudrillard 1487). The third and fourth phases are markedly different from the preceding two in the way that basic reality is absent rather than represented. In the final two phases, images instead serve to create the illusion of a real, represented reality. The world of "Fifteen Million Merits," like our own, exists in Baudrillard's fourth phase of the image. This fourth and final phase of the image ushers in the state of hyperreality, in which every image refers only to other images.

Within hyperreality, a state wherein all images refer to other images, commodities must derive their value from their comparison to other commodities. Marx discusses this concept in terms of exchange value. He speaks of the way products are valued under capitalism—through their ability to be exchanged for other products—as opposed to being valued for their utility. He argues that "the character of having value, when once impressed upon products,

obtains fixity only by reason of their acting and re-acting upon each other as quantities of value” (Marx 670). Under capitalism, Marx argues that things are seen as valuable only insofar as they compare with other things of different values. A product which obtains value in this way, he maintains, is a commodity; this is the state of all products under capitalism. When comparison is the method of assigning value to products, they are “stamp[ed] . . . as commodities, [and they] have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom” (Marx 669). This state of commodity fetishism divorces the value of all products from their physical properties as well as from the labor performed to create them. This perpetuates the hyperreality that Baudrillard discusses by only allowing commodities to be valued in their relation to other commodities, just as images, in a hyperreal environment, only derive their value in relation to other images. As Marx argues, this is the state of our contemporary capitalist society, and it is also the state of the fictional satirization of capitalist society in “Fifteen Million Merits.”

The concept of hyperreality is demonstrated in this fictional world from the moment the protagonist, Bing, wakes up to the moment he goes to sleep. His room, like those of all other inhabitants of his society, is enclosed on all sides by large screens that display cartoon images of different outdoor landscapes. As a viewer, we, like the inhabitants of this fictional society, have never seen the real landscapes to which these images supposedly refer. For all we know, the “real” landscapes depicted do not exist anymore, or perhaps they never existed. The only thing that exists for reference are the myriad of screens belonging to all of the other inhabitants. Without any actual relationship with the outdoors, these other screens are the only things that give the inhabitants of the episode’s world any



point of reference for the landscapes they display. This forced reliance on images of images for context demonstrates the absence of reality that characterizes Baudrillard's fourth phase of the image. While a society in Baudrillard's first or second phase of the image might be filled with screens that represent basic reality (in this case, the outdoors), and a society in the third phase of the image might use screens to display images of an outdoor landscape that does not exist in an effort to hide that absence, a society in the fourth phase of the image lacks the point of reference of the actual outdoors entirely. While as an audience, we might have that point of reference, the characters do not—all they have to understand the images displayed on screen are the many other screens displaying the same thing. As such, it is clear that the society of "Fifteen Million Merits" exists in Baudrillard's fourth phase of the image: a state of hyperreality.

Though they do not invoke Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality specifically, popular critics take every opportunity to point out the estrangement from human authenticity that results from the proliferation of images via the domination of technology in the fictional society of this episode. Alec Bojalad, a blog writer for *Den of Geek*, repeatedly juxtaposes the few displays of genuine human emotion in the episode against the "sea of uncaring machines" that characterizes the environment of this society. He recognizes that the honest emotion necessary for human relationships to flourish is incompatible with the technology that serves as the medium for the vast majority of the characters' communication. In his analysis of the episode for *Medium*, Chai describes the pervasion of technology in a similar way, acknowledging that it had become "inescapable" in the society of the episode. "Technology has enslaved us," he writes. "It's made people care about things that don't physically exist, such as how many 'merits' (which is the

digital currency in Bing’s world and an analogy to our world’s ‘Followers’) they have. It enrages him, because he cares for none of it. He wants something *real* (Chai). Here, like Bojalad, Chai recognizes the incompatibility of the “real” connection between Bing and Abi and the use of technology for nearly every societal need, but he doesn’t stop there. Chai pushes his interpretation further by apprehending the way in which most things of importance in this society do not physically exist—they have meaning only in relation to other technological entities that are not grounded in physical reality. This observation, which he specifically mentions in regard to “merits,” the fictional currency in the episode, bears the mark of Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality even if Chai does not use his terminology. However, Chai fails to invoke another theory that is more directly relevant to the relational value of currency: Marx’s critique of capitalism.

Though they are keen to blame the dispassionate distance between people in the episode on the ubiquity of technology, popular critics tend to stop short of assigning similar blame to the capitalist economic structure that the hyperreality of the episode supports. Baudrillard’s idea of hyperreality conceptualizes the proliferation of the screens in the world of the episode as being characterized by a system of exchange value in which commodities attain value through their comparison to other commodities. While critics such as Chai and Bojalad recognize the relational nature of value in technological entities as Baudrillard does, they do not go so far as to point out the way people themselves are not exempt from this system of comparative value assignment. Marx argues that under capitalism, it is inevitable that humans will attain social value, and therefore individual identity, in the same comparative way that nonhuman entities do. For humans, this means value is obtained through

comparison to other workers. In a capitalist society dependent on exchange value as such, Marx observes that “the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities” (656). The worker is constantly competing against other workers, and therefore attains value according to how well they measure up to other workers. This concept is viscerally demonstrated in “Fifteen Million Merits” through the way Bing’s currency is constantly displayed on screen every time he purchases anything. Every move that he and every other member of his society makes is shown to be worth a certain amount of currency, and consequently, that is the only way their value is measured by themselves and others. The name of the currency itself, “merits,” is telling of its function in this story—currency in this society directly translates to worthiness, or merit. These “merits” are constantly visible to others, and subsequently, how many merits each person has is functionally indicative of their role or identity in society. All members of the working class wear matching gray outfits that leave no room for distinction—the only way to differentiate oneself is to purchase new clothes and accessories for one’s “dopple,” the cartoon version of every person that can be seen on screen. By stripping citizens of every mode of expression of individuality, aside from things like one’s dopple that can be enhanced with money, identity is tied directly to currency and how one’s wealth or lack of it measures up to others.

A Marxist critique of capitalism is evident in “Fifteen Million Merits” through its depiction of the exchange value of workers and commodities, and it is further explored through the clear stratification of the social classes in the society of the episode. There are three classes in this society: the upper echelon made up of the people who own the few television channels and programs, the working class that

bikes all day to earn merits and power the society, and finally, the “lemons”—the lowest class who are essentially the janitors for the working class. The upper class and the working class in this society mirror Marx’s conception of the two major classes that are the necessary result of competition in society —“the property-owners and the propertyless workers” (Marx 656). The distinction between these two classes can be recognized through their conspicuous consumption of the property that they have, which is the way people in this society are ultimately defined. This distinction of class based on property is driven home in “Fifteen Million Merits” through the focus on the barrenness of the working class’s rooms. When Abi, Bing’s friend and love interest, gives him an origami penguin as a gift, he has to take care to fold it flat and tuck it under his mattress lest it be swept away by a “lemon,” as we are shown that all unnecessary, unhidden personal items will be. This lack of personal property further encourages members of the working class to strive to make it to the upper class through success in the “Hot Shots” talent competition, so that one day they might be able to have property of their own and thus flaunt their upper class position that serves, due to the way this capitalist society functions, as their only meaningful way of defining themselves.

Identity formed by wealth and class not only encourages members of the working class to strive for upward mobility, but it also, perhaps more importantly, encourages them to redirect their existential angst towards members of the lowest class instead of those of the highest. While working class people dress in plain gray clothes that blend with the gray concrete constantly surrounding them, members of the lowest class, “lemons,” wear bright yellow uniforms. This creates a striking visual contrast between the “lemons” and the working class. The jarring distinction of color

emphasizes the larger distinction that exists between the groups based on class. While working class people earn “merits” by riding stationary bikes, “lemons” have no way to earn currency, instead laboring for the profit of the owners. This distinction prompts one working class man to constantly rebuke “lemons” who he feels infringe on his pedaling by cleaning the space around him. He feels he deserves the commodities he is able to afford with his pedaling, and he has no tolerance for disruption at the hands of lower class citizens such as themselves who have not, in his estimation, worked as hard as he has. Working class people are positioned to have more animosity towards those of the lower class who are not able to earn currency for themselves because in a society built upon the connection between currency and identity, having no money is equivalent to having no identity. In their conspicuous bright yellow uniforms, the physical manifestation of this lack of the only thing this society values in a person, “lemons” are completely reduced in the public estimation to their role as janitors—those who pick up after the higher classes. This connection between currency and ultimate human value creates gaping social divides between the working and “lemon” classes. While this social divide is just as large between the working and higher classes, however, the equivocation of money and value causes the working class to idolize the few famous citizens in the class above them as much as they despise the class below.

This celebrity-worship prevails despite the upper class being split between so few that their wealth and certainly their power and influence far outweigh the work they ever put into getting there. This point is emphasized in “Fifteen Million Merits” when Abi goes to the talent competition for the first time. Upon arriving, she enters a holding room full of eager participants waiting to be selected to perform.

Many of them, we learn, have been waiting there for days, but Abi is chosen to perform the second she arrives purely on the basis of her good looks. Despite the myth that permeates this society that wealth is based on merit, an inside look at the system shows us that this is not so. Even Abi, as beautiful and talented as she is, is not accepted into the upper echelon, instead being coerced into accepting a far lesser position on the pornography channel than the fame for which she auditioned as an actress. The upper class is a very selective and small group and admission is not often granted. One judge on the “Hot Shots” talent competition, Wraith, is not only one third of that show, but is also the owner of the one other ubiquitous channel in this fictional society, the pornographic channel “Wraith Babes.” There are only two other channels mentioned at all throughout the episode, which sends a strong message that all the power in this society has been concentrated in the hands of a very few. This exemplifies Marx’s idea that “the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands” (656). In a capitalist system, Marx argues that wealth will inevitably eventually be controlled by a miniscule portion of society as compared to the number of citizens as a whole.

Marx’s observations regarding class are all indicative of systemic workings specific to capitalism that serve to subjugate individual citizens, and as such, the striking connections to his observations found in “Fifteen Million Merits” can only be symptomatic of a similarly oppressive capitalist structure within the world of episode. The textual support from the episode that so closely supports a Marxist reading works contrary to generalizing, technology-blaming popular critiques such as Chai’s and Bojalad’s. A Marxist reading also more markedly disputes another popular interpretation of the episode as a warning for the audience.

This interpretation implicitly asserts that individuals bear the responsibility for the unhealthy reliance on technology in contemporary American society by assuming that a warning against the dangers of pervasive technology would give the audience an opportunity to use their autonomy to choose a different outcome for our society than the one presented in “Fifteen Million Merits.” Such an interpretation completely disregards the all-encompassing role of economic and social structures such as the oppressive capitalist structure in the episode in determining the fates of citizens in a manner largely beyond their individual control.

Despite the evident critique of capitalism as a system (rather than a critique of the individual) within the episode itself, the overwhelming majority of popular criticism of “Fifteen Million Merits” draws the ultimate conclusion that the episode is meant to implicate the audience in what most critics regard as the central crime of the fictional society—that of an over-reliance on technology. These critics disregard the nature of that over-reliance as rooted in a larger social and economic structure, instead focusing on the culpability of the individual. This tendency is evident in critical approaches to the episode from multiple angles, one of which is advertising. In “Fifteen Million Merits,” the role of incessant advertising is largely to broadcast the charmed life of one big star that became famous through the society’s single talent show, “Hot Shots.” The show is a dominant facet of life for all citizens, including those who do not audition, but the narrative the ad encourages is one in which anyone can work their way to the top of society if they have what it takes—she did it, after all, so perhaps anyone can. These ads propagating the potential success of any citizen coax viewers to save up their merits and audition, an outcome that both drives individuals to keep pedaling day in and day out, and perpetuates the widespread

consumption of the entertainment offered to the masses by “Hot Shots.” It is evident that the desire in many citizens to audition, then, is not natural; rather, it is manufactured by the advertising itself.

This desire created by advertising mirrors Baudrillard’s description of hyperreality through a story by Jorge Luis Borges about a kingdom that sought to perfectly map a territory. Baudrillard argues that “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory... it is the map that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard 1483). Here, he explains that the very thing that was being used to codify reality, a map, was actually the force that “engendered” or created the idea of the territory at all. This applies to the advertising for the “Hot Shots” competition as well. People in this fictional society think that they have an honest desire to become famous, but in reality, these desires are completely manufactured by their society to encourage them to play into the system and endorse the structural hierarchy. Through their fruitless efforts to become famous, they will accept their monotonous lot to contribute power to the society without complaint or rebellion, persisting under the belief that they are getting closer to a fame that they will, in reality, never achieve.

A Baudrillardian understanding of the desires manufactured by advertising as such serves to reinforce the power of societal structure to inform citizens’ daily routines and even their inner, seemingly personal desires. However, the popular understanding of the issue of advertising in the episode takes a directly contrasting approach: one that focuses on the responsibility of the individual. Despite the episode’s overt presentation of the ads in Bing’s daily life as unavoidable (beyond his ability to mute them for a monetary cost), Chai interprets the advertisement-saturated



dystopia as the result of citizens' free choices. Speaking of online ads in contemporary American society, he says,

[T]hey're getting worse, they're getting more invasive, and we are kind of the reason why. Because we've trained ourselves to ignore certain areas of a webpage, and invented ad-blockers, advertisers have been forced to escalate. We ignore ads on the side of the page, so they place them in-text. We scroll past video ads, so they — with the help of social media platforms whose lifeline is advertising — make videos autoplay. Fast forward to the future and advertising may look like what we see in 'Fifteen Million Merits.'

As Chai sees it, the desire people have to avoid constantly consuming the mind-numbing fodder of their consumer-driven society is bad because it has resulted in the escalation of that fodder. He frames that escalation as the fault of the individual consumer, rather than the fault of the system predicated on preying on consumers. It seems like popular critics are willing to go to great lengths to avoid direct critique of capitalism, even when that avoidance reads as almost desperate.

The closest popular criticism comes to positioning blame for the downfalls of the "Fifteen Million Merits" society on a larger structure than the individual is in its discussion of the alienation caused by technology. Amazingly though, after acknowledging the power of that larger system, however vaguely defined, they double back and insist on turning the critique again onto the audience. Marx understands alienation as a necessary result of a capitalist system, asserting that under capitalism,

[T]he worker is related to the *product of his labor* as to an *alien* object... the more the worker spends himself,

the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. (Marx 657)

Because the sole purpose of pedaling, the only labor the citizens perform throughout their entire lives, is done solely out of the manufactured desire for potential fame, the results of that labor have no bearing on the individual—they are only a means to an end, and that desire usurps the control of every individual from their own hands. In a capitalist society such as the one portrayed in “Fifteen Million Merits,” the more work a person puts in, the more power the prospect of fame has, in the case of our fictional subject society, over the individual. With every effort they expend with the sole purpose of gaining wealth and social standing, they belong more to the capitalist system, to the members of the upper class, than they belong to themselves.

While estrangement from the product of labor and the labor itself is manifest in Bing’s society, popular criticism has been mostly concerned with the alienation citizens experience from other people. Many popular critics have compared the audience’s alienation from the humanity of the characters on screen to those characters’ similar indifference toward the pain of their fellow citizens when engaging with them through yet another screen. The characters’ social system, as demonstrated through the “Hot Shots” talent show, is based on competition, which causes viewers of the talent competition to see the humiliation of its contestants as inconsequential. Olthof explicitly compares *Black Mirror* viewers to “Fifteen Million Merits” fictional talent show audience, arguing that “[the episode] equates the audience to the crowd of Mii Doppels cheering and

booing other peoples' suffering." Chai furthers this comparison critique by advising us to

Look no further than *Black Mirror's* medium: television. Do you watch 'reality' TV shows like *The Bachelor* [sic] and laugh when someone is humiliated? Does it make you feel happy? Why do you think that is? One explanation is that technology makes it so that the people whose suffering we revel in are just distant people on a screen.

These critics blame the medium of technology for our indifferent and even hostile reactions to the pain of the people on screen, framing it as something that dilutes or distances us as viewers from the humanity of those people. While Chai unambiguously ends his critique with the assertion that "Black Mirror points the finger at us"—again arguing that this emotional estrangement, although caused by technology, is somehow still the fault of the individual consumer—Olthof states further that the series is "a direct shot at audience members to reassess their own priorities and relationship to technology." She not only assigns responsibility to the individual, but she also asserts that individuals have the capacity to meaningfully change their relationship with technology.

While this is a hopeful sentiment, this perspective does not take into account each individual's lack of ultimate control over their technology consumption in a capitalist society intimately intertwined with technological escalation. Olthof's argument seems even less viable when the narrative of "Fifteen Million Merits" is taken into account—the narrative arc of Bing's character ultimately ends in his inability to escape his oppressive societal system despite his best efforts. If we compare *Black Mirror's* audience to Bing as individuals in a hyperreal capitalist system, Bing's eventual failure to positively change his relationship to his

societal structure says nothing particularly encouraging about our chances. Bing's journey toward a shot at justice began in the episode with the profound desire he felt in the midst of his emotionless, screen-filled society for something “real.” Baudrillard recognizes this feeling, nostalgia, as a natural consequence of living in a hyperreal environment where images only refer back to each other with no originating point. In such an environment, he argues that “there is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience... there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential” (Baudrillard 1487). Bing was desperate to prove to himself that unlike his hyperreal environment which only referred back to other replicated images, Abi's talent and friendship were referential of a real ability and authenticity. Fueled by that desperation, he pedaled insatiably, accruing merits until he could finally afford an audition to unleash his unfettered rage to the “Hot Shots” judges. After making it to the stage and delivering a passionately subversive speech railing against his unfair system, Bing is surprised at the judges reaction—instead of kicking him out, they offer him a job. Bing is presented with a choice between continuing a life of unrewarding labor and selling out and joining the elite few in a life of ease gained through the work of others. Faced with an impossible decision, Bing reluctantly chooses the latter, and in doing so, his real passion and anger against the system are commodified into a twice a week, thirty-minute program that serves to sedate any rebellious citizens in the audience, thus supporting the very system he aimed to decry.

In a parallel manner, popular critics' evident eagerness to place the burden of change on the individual audience member rather than a larger structural problem demonstrates the same nostalgia for the “real” that Bing displays. While Bing's nostalgia is exhibited in his manic push to

speaking up against his society's structure in a meaningful and "real" way, these critics' nostalgia manifests itself in their earnestness that our individual ability to enact change is similarly "real," forcibly ignoring the idea that perhaps each individual in our society does not have that power. Despite "Fifteen Million Merits" fairly overt critique of capitalism as shown through my Marxist analysis, popular critics frame the episode itself as an authority and the audience as the responders—the dutiful students of an expert teacher, who, according to these critics, wants us to think about what we can do differently regardless of the control our societal system exercises over us. If we continue with the parallel between the episode's audience and Bing, this authority/subject relationship between audience and episode makes the episode, and therefore its writers and producers, the equivalent of the "Hot Shots" judges. If this is the case, at least some of the blame I advocate for in my Marxist critique of Bing's society (and therefore ours) lies with *Black Mirror* itself as a part of the greater capitalist system. Bing certainly directs his frustration with the system at the judges, fully blaming them for the unfairness of his society with the repeated refrain of "fuck you." However, to fully blame *Black Mirror* for the societal problems brought about by our economic system as a whole, as Bing does, would be reductive. Though, like the judges, *Black Mirror* is in a position of greater power than most of its audience, Bing's ascension to a similar societal ranking demonstrates that even in a higher position, everyone in a capitalist society remains beholden to the constraints of that system. From his fancy new TV presenter's suite, Bing looks out onto a vast forest of trees that stretches on for miles. We cannot tell whether the panels he looks through belong to a window or just a larger, more convincing screen, but it does not matter, because either way, the hyperreal existence

of this society means that there is no longer any distinction between the real and the fake. Bing remains miserable and disconnected from authenticity in his higher position just as he did in his lower one. In crafting Bing’s ascension this way, *Black Mirror* demonstrates in a self-aware fashion that Bing’s isn’t the only iteration of the pattern from genuine critique to phony capitalistic fodder—this episode does the same thing. Baudrillard asserts, when speaking of ethnography, that the study of a phenomenon automatically destroys any “natural” quality that phenomenon ever had—in his own words, “the duplication is sufficient to render both artificial” (Baudrillard 1489). In a similar way, *Black Mirror* itself is a stinging critique of capitalism, that, through its popularity and wide distribution, has made a lot of money and has effectively been incorporated into the very capitalist system it is critiquing. As with the analysis and codification of an ethnographic subject, the critique of the consumer culture-driven capitalist system in “Fifteen Million Merits” inevitably destroys the authenticity of its subject. Instead, the analysis offered in this episode “duplicates” the problem, creating more fodder for the consumer-driven capitalist system, unable to offer effective critique because its very creation acts as another commodity to be exchanged.

Though a straightforward critique of hyperreal capitalism under that very system is impossible, “Fifteen Million Merits” does the next best thing—it is self-aware in its depiction of the system’s co-opting of any critique of that system, and as such, it serves as a poignant, albeit nihilistic, analysis of the seemingly unconquerable power of the hyperreal capitalist system. However, popular criticism tends to stand in direct contrast to this reading of the episode; overall, it displays an overwhelming inclination toward reading *Black Mirror* as a moral authority that admonishes

viewers to take on the inevitably fruitless individual responsibility to try to change things set in place by an immovable system. Considering my reading of *Black Mirror* as self-aware and self-referential, this popular interpretation is the height of irony—it proves that the series has ultimately inspired the very thing it effectively showed to be impossible. Like the people in the episode, critics keep pedaling and pedaling, cranking out critiques that profess admiration for the messages of a successful series, unaware that the work they put into writing critiques of the profoundly unequal dystopian world they imagine only serves to perpetuate the bleak trajectory we are already on toward greater stratification of classes.

In her analysis of “Fifteen Million Merits,” Olthof interprets Brooker’s thesis for the series as encouraging viewers to be reflective of the dangerous tendencies in themselves. She quotes his explanation of the meaning behind the series name, *Black Mirror*:

What I took it to mean was when a screen is off – when a screen is off it looks like a black mirror. Because any TV, any LCD, any iPhone, any iPad – something like that – just stare at it, it looks like a black mirror, and there’s something cold and horrifying about that, and it was such a fitting title for the show.

Olthof evidently takes this statement to mean that Brooker intended the show to get the audience to reflect on the implications of their own relationship to technology. While many facets of individuals’ relationships with technology is indeed unsettling, I argue that a deeper understanding of the existential horror represented by the “black mirror” of a blank screen can be found when we recognize the forlorn, beaten-down face staring back at us as a cog in a greater, subjugating system. We are slaves to the technology

that keeps our social structure going, and ultimately, there is nothing we can do to change that.



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*Woman* (Charcoal on Paper)  
Amanda Dryer

# *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Its Intersection with the Lacanian Real

Carmen Thorley

*“Our need for [the Beatles] is neither sociological nor new, but artistic and old, specifically a renewal, a renewal of pleasure.”*  
—Ned Rorem, “*The Music of the Beatles*”

In 1968, local musician Ned Rorem published a review about a fairly new band to enter upon the scene called “The Beatles.” In this review, Rorem discussed the pop band’s discography up until the album *Magical Mystery Tour*, a historic album containing tracks like “I Am The Walrus,” “All You Need Is Love,” and “Hello, Goodbye.” A fellow musician and music critic, Rorem praised the Beatles for their shame-less pop sensibilities and lauded them for introducing fun back into the experience of making and listening to music. Rorem described some lost, core element of music that the Beatles were recovering, positing that, because of this recovery, the Beatles’ artistic output—despite being pop music—deserved the same amount of respect as high-minded art pieces.

Rorem admits that fun might not be the first descriptor that comes to mind when thinking of a high-concept art piece. Isn’t the good kind of art supposed to be deeper than

fun? Isn't it supposed to be concerned about effectively getting a representation across to the audience? Rorem would disagree: he insisted that this "renewal of pleasure" (78) in the Beatles' music is where the audience's intense social connection to them comes from, and that connection is not to be minimized. Rorem does not engage in the argument about a deeper meaning in the Beatles' strange and colorful lyrics; whether they are deep or shallow doesn't affect the fact the music has had and *still* has—a profound effect on many listeners. In short, lack of deeper motive behind the lyrics does not mean a pop piece of art is unworthy of critical consideration. My argument falls in a very similar place as Rorem's argument: I believe there is value in the Beatles' music, even when the song isn't saying something particularly deep or important. I don't argue that there is a tight symbolic meaning behind the strangest of Beatles songs, nor do I argue that they are simply vapid, surface-level pop songs. In actuality, the Beatles' growth as a band is more complicated than that, and so are their artistic motives.

Like any other band, the Beatles experienced many changes in style and content as they matured as artists. For example, the album *Help!* (an album including songs like "Yesterday" and "I've Just Seen a Face") exudes a subtle shift from a dreamy "boy-band" mentality (such as when they released songs like "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand") to what Rorem would define as serious artistic work. While I completely agree with Rorem's attitude about the band's significance, I would like to add that the most significant amount of growth is found with the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (*Sgt. Pepper*). It is with this album that the band began to create pop music that was truly worth critical acclaim. There are a lot of themes to unpack within the album, and the experience of unpacking is made all the more unique because of the Beatles' fun and psychedelic approach to their project.

Many people attribute this psychedelic shift in the band's sound to their documented drug use, particularly LSD, but to merely chalk up the album's success to the cool trippy hippy images the Beatles saw and experienced on drugs would be to minimize the album's impact and artistic importance. Although the members of the Beatles had been using a variety of drugs throughout their musical career, and the influence of these substances is clearly present in earlier albums such as *Rubber Soul*, I argue that the shift in content and quality that the band exhibits in *Sgt. Pepper* didn't come *directly* from drugs, but rather from being introduced to the Lacanian concept of "the Real" *through* drugs. I also argue that this album, better than any of their others, exemplifies the feelings associated with being a creature of "the Real" that has to comply with language from the Big Other. I see evidence of this idea at work in the Beatles' lyrics, music, and the construction of the album itself. With this approach in mind, I argue that *Sgt. Pepper* is most effectively analyzed through the theoretical framework of poststructuralism, specifically Lacanian language theory. This connection can help to illustrate complex Lacanian philosophy into a graspable concept for a larger audience, and can be a useful tool for teaching about poststructuralist concepts and postmodern art.

Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist philosophies are complex, and my analysis will make little sense without some context and an establishment of key terms. Once I establish the framework, I will filter the Beatles' drug experiences and their construction of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* through this lens. The album exudes pain, boredom, and euphoria, and an inescapable frustration with the inability to represent/replicate experiences of the Real. This tug-of-war between joy and pain persists until the very last song. Although the band members are optimistic in some songs about relieving the existential anxiety caused by this

constant struggle, they also concede that this rift between us and the Real can never be fully healed.

### **Theoretical Terms**

The basic poststructuralist theoretical framework is well summarized by Catherine Belsey in the book, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*. Belsey explains that Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure divided the concept of “sign” into two separate parts: the “signifier” and “signified.” Belsey defines these two words as “the signifier, the sound or the visual appearance of the word, phrase, or image in question; . . . the signified, its meaning” (11). For example, the word *tree* is a signifier that sparks the idea of a tree in someone’s head, this idea being the signified. Rather than a traditionalist view where words represent ideas, Saussure’s view of language is poststructuralist and asserts that words alone produce meaning. In other words, rather than believing that ideas are put into words and that the meaning of the idea is accurately expressed through language, the poststructuralist view of language believes that words are arbitrarily created, and meaning is only reinforced through cultural training. Because this view of language implies that meaning is born and reinforced by culture alone, poststructuralist theories reevaluate language’s ability to truly grasp a concept, or, what Lacan calls the Real. Furthermore, Jacques Lacan’s theories can be read in a variety of mediums, one of which is his collected seminars. Lacan’s writings are extensive and complicated, but there are moments where he simply defines his concepts. I will be using Catherine Belsey’s summary of Lacanian theory to supplement Lacan’s complex theory.

Because Lacan uses many of Sigmund Freud’s topics as a starting point for his own theories, “the ego” plays a big role in Lacanian theory. In his seminar, “The topic of the imaginary,” Lacan discusses the long-term consequences

of the formation of the ego in the early stages of human life. Before we learn how to speak, Lacan believes that humans start out as organisms without any ideas of classification or language, including a sense of self. When we want to communicate our desires and needs, we have to borrow language that is outside of us. This borrowing forms what Lacan calls the “symbolic structure” (73). This symbolic structure gives humans the perspective that separates our ego from everything else by providing a language by which to identify ourselves as “subjects.” In his seminar, “The Other and psychosis,” Lacan gives this symbolic structure the term that I will be using for my analysis: “From the moment the subject speaks, the Other, with a big O, is there” (41). In other words, the moment humans acquire the language to identify themselves as a subject, the big Other forces its presence and influence on the subject. While the formation of the ego through the symbolic structure gives the subject a means to communicate its needs, and is arguably indispensable, the big Other separates the subject from the primordial, formless existence that Lacan calls “the real” in his seminar, “The topic of the imaginary” (73).

Catherine Belsey discusses the consequences of ascribing to the rules associated with Lacan’s concept of the big Other. In *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*, she explains, “Something is lost here—experienced, perhaps, as a residue of the continuity with our organic existence, or as wishes that don’t quite fit the signifiers that are supposed to define them. Lacan calls what is lost the real. The real is not reality, which is what culture tells us about. On the contrary, the real is that organic being outside signification, . . .” (58). In other words, the Real is an organic experience outside of language’s grasp. Or rather, the Real is our experience that is not filtered through the limiting qualities of language. Even though we have all experienced the Real when we were

newborns and unaware of our ego, poststructuralists like Lacan believe that the Real can never be represented in language because the language we are borrowing from the big Other is not our own; it is the language of the culture imposed on us by which we identify ourselves and others. As Lacan claims in his seminar, "On creation *ex nihilo*," an essential characteristic of the Real (or "The Thing" as he calls it here) is that "it always presents itself as a veiled entity" (118). We can never experience the Real in its pure form, according to Lacan.

Everybody feels this same separation from the Real even if they cannot articulate it. Incidentally, if we want to communicate *anything* to each other, this borrowing from the big Other is necessary. Even though we know we cannot truly represent ideas with borrowed devices, we have to settle for the use of signifiers and supplements. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," calls these signifiers or supplements "metaphors" (890). Nietzsche's usage of this term isn't quite the same as the modern usage, but they are connected. Most people use metaphors in everyday language or writing to illustrate a concept in a creative way. "She was as ravenous as a wolf" is a useful way to communicate how hungry a subject is because, with our cultural understanding of wolves, we know how ravenous wolves can be. For Nietzsche, a metaphor can be these combinations of signifiers as well as anything that Saussure or Lacan might call a "signifier" or a "supplement."

Metaphors, like signifiers or supplements, are only useful in communicating an idea if there is an established understanding and acceptance of it. A precursor to post-structuralism, Nietzsche believed that metaphors still couldn't capture truth with language, and the pursuit of truth through the classifications and categories of language was therefore "something not in the least worth striving for" (890). In



other words, there will always be a degree of discomfort, a lacking feeling, when using language borrowed by the big Other because it is incomplete. No matter how hard we try to fill that space between signifier and signified, that discomfort is an essential consequence of any language we use. Accepting the futility of our language isn't easy; because the big Other is a system that does not belong to us, antagonism can result from the alienation we feel. This antagonism, as well as these other poststructuralist ideas, can be represented through postmodern and modern art.

These two artistic terms can be slippery to try to grasp, but Jean-François Lyotard does well in his essay, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" First of all, Lyotard describes modern art as a direct response to the idealized classic values of realist art. Realist views of art are very similar to traditional views of language, in that they both believe that a reality can be accurately expressed through supplements/signifiers/metaphors. Modern art rejects the belief that signifiers can come anywhere close to capturing a concept. Lyotard specifies that modern art "will please only by causing pain" (78) in this realization and will often elicit a sense of nostalgia to the viewer. Lyotard says the viewer is feeling nostalgic for past forms of representation—the Realist forms that gave the viewer a sure sense of reality. Postmodernism, he adds, will express "jubilation which result[s] from the invention of new rules of the game" (80) and often exudes a sense of celebration in the vast amount of ways a concept can be created and communicated. Lyotard claims that both modern and postmodern art deny comfort and familiarity by avoiding "figuration or representation" (78). However, with loss of comfort can come a sense of exhilaration: a kind of thrill in the face of the unknown and unrepresentable. This reaction is what Lyotard calls the "sublime" (77). Pieces of art with

themes revolving around the sublime may never quite satisfy the viewer, but they can fill them with wonder and wild speculation.

### **Let's Take a Trip**

Even if the Beatles and Lacan seem like two utterly unrelated topics, I have reason to believe that the Beatles experienced the Lacanian Real in their musical career. As noted above, Lacan believes that the Real involves the dissolution of all classifications. This includes the classification and notion of “the subject.” Bert Olivier, in his essay “Lacan and Critical Musicology,” writes, “For Lacan such ‘recognition’ of one’s image as ‘oneself’ is a *misrecognition*; moreover, it is a *fictional* construct which—and this is of crucial importance—lays the foundation for the further development of the subject along a trajectory marked by identification and alienation” (3). Olivier is essentially saying that Lacan believes that language implies the idea of a separate, independent self, an idea like the subject, but to call an experience subjective would be inaccurate. Lacan believes that we are really a collection of adopted cultural traditions rather than personally and individually constructed subjects. Our experience only feels subjective because our language invented the notion of the subject.

Related to this subject is the effects that the drug LSD has on a person’s notion of the subject. In a peer-reviewed, scientific study on LSD, Matthias E Liechti discovered that “The LSD-induced increases in global connectivity, particularly in the temporo-parietal junction and insular cortex, correlated with feelings of moderate ‘ego dissolution’ that were produced by LSD (Tagliuzucchi *et al*, 2016). ‘Ego dissolution’ refers to a disintegration of the sense of possessing a ‘self’ or identity that is distinct from others and from the environment (Preller and Vollenweider, 2016; Taglizucchi *et al*, 2016)” (2119). Here, Liechti explains how LSD

erases the notion of the subject from within someone through a process called “ego dissolution.” Remembering that Lacan argued that the erasure of the subject is a key characteristic of the Real, it is reasonable to argue that using LSD can potentially open a door to experiencing the condensed sensory experience of the Real. I believe that, under the influence of this drug, the Beatles likely experienced a degree of ego death and a reality without signifiers imposed by the big Other; or, they experienced the Lacanian Real. Even though the Beatles took drugs during the creation of albums before *Sgt. Pepper*, I believe *Sgt. Pepper* is the most valuable representation of their experience of the Real as experienced through LSD.

### **The Album's Story about the Real**

Considering the Beatles' lyrics, music, and the framework of the album, I will show how *Sgt. Pepper* exemplifies poststructuralist themes like the Lacanian Real. The album is not without its basic-sounding pop songs, but they should not be considered any less valuable or “worthy,” as Rorem insisted earlier. In some sense, every song on this album addresses or illustrates a part of the theory I have laid out, but to focus on the strongest evidence and to avoid being too repetitive, “Lovely Rita” and “When I'm Sixty-Four” will not be included in my analysis. Excluding these two songs, I will analyze *Sgt. Pepper* song by song in the same order they appeared when the album was released.

In wanting to understand this album and its relation to Lacanian theory, a listener should look for three main themes: First, themes about the oppressive nature of having to live within a “symbolic structure” adopted by the big Other. These songs will discuss repressed feelings, boredom, or even pain with having to live within any kind of system that doesn't quite fit the needs of the individual. These songs

will also talk about possible solutions in healing pain felt for the lost Lacanian Real. Second, the listener should look for themes that exude a sense of the sublime. The Beatles will use their songs to approach the sublime in two ways: they will either lament language's limits in expression or they will celebrate the implications of those limits. When perfect representation is not possible, how does *Sgt. Pepper* approach representation? Finally, the listener should pay attention to the format of the album. It is unlike any of the previous Beatles albums, and accepting the framework that the Beatles present to the listener is key to a fruitful understanding of their experience with the Real in relation to Lacanian theory.

In his analytical essay issued in 1967, "The Beatles: Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," Johnathan W. Bernard explains the significance of this different approach to frameworks. Bernard asserts that this album:

[D]efinitively signaled the Beatles' withdrawal from the presumed immediacy and spontaneity of live performance and their desire to communicate with their audience thenceforth solely from the recording studio. Indeed, it was difficult to imagine hearing most of *Sgt. Pepper* in a concert setting; as a kind of substitute, also ironic and probably intended that way, Pepper's band (the Beatles' collective alter ego for the occasion) gives us a 'concert,' the central, nominally unifying conceit of this first, thereafter much-imitated 'concept album' (375-376).

Here, Bernard introduces the idea of a "concept album." Before *Sgt. Pepper*, the Beatles created albums like most other artists: they compiled a collection of popular songs after performing them and gaging their success. *Sgt. Pepper* was written specifically to be experienced as an entire album though, and the "concept" within the album reinforces this notion.

The opening track, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," establishes a fake audience along with a fake band

performing for them. Details are given establishing a time period (“It was twenty years ago today . . .”) around when the fake band was formed, and one of the band members is introduced as the fictional Billy Shears. Real recordings from the Beatles’ live audiences from previous shows were woven into the fake band’s performative introduction. The lyrics, “We’re Sgt. Pepper’s lonely hearts club band,” are repeated often, as if they’re trying to make listeners forget that they’re actually listening to the Beatles. Everything seems to be presented in such a way as to recall the old style of the Beatles’ live performances. The intimate interaction between the band and the audience could be easily believed to be authentic if one didn’t know the context of the album. The significance of this framework will become clearer later, but it is important to note that all proceeding tracks are supposed to be performed under the persona of the fake band.

The first track the fake band performs is “A Little Help From My Friends.” With this chummy, happy song, the band immediately presents one of their suggestions for healing the pain caused by living with the limits of the big Other. As the song suggests, because we are all going through the same existential pains as displaced creatures of the Real, we can “get by with a little help from [our] friends” by commiserating and connecting with each other. This kind of “getting by” for the band also involved getting “high with a little help from my friends. . . .” While drugs have always been popularly used as a distraction from the pain of complying with the big Other, the band’s drug use is not portrayed as purely escapist in this album: instead, drugs are portrayed as the path the band took to access the Real. If this song can be accepted as the moment the band used the ego-dissolving effects of LSD to access the Real, the next song can perhaps be seen as the climax of their experience, the true peak to their “trip.”

“Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds” is one of the most significant tracks on the album, mostly because of the bizarre imagery the lyrics provoke. When the band experienced the Real in its pure, unfiltered sense, they realized that there was a limit to how they could represent it. This song shows that they chose to avoid any attempts to literally represent their experience with the Real. Instead, they used Nietzschean metaphors. As Nietzsche claims in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,”

with creative pleasure [the intellect] throws metaphors into confusion and displaces the boundary stones of abstractions, . . . That immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, it is demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by concepts (895).

This smashing of the framework that Nietzsche is talking about here is about rejecting “normal” uses of language. “Throw[ing] metaphors into confusion” is exactly what happens in the nonsensical lyrics of “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds.” Metaphors only work to communicate a concept because we have established rules and meanings for that concept derived through cultural training. In this ode to nonsense, the band rejects these conventional rules and uses metaphors that have no context or established meaning. Lyrics like “tangerine trees and marmalade skies” are not supposed to be literal descriptions of the band’s experience with the Real. They are supposed to exemplify the band’s rejection of the rules of traditional representation; their

new metaphors don't have any cultural relationship to a concept. As listeners, we have no established idea of what "looking glass people" might mean symbolically, so we are left with no real signified firing off in our brain. There are listeners who might try to look into the deeper meaning behind some of these types of lyrics, but I strongly assert that this it is not a useful way to analyze the album. I argue that to be introduced with these foreign metaphors is the whole point; we aren't supposed to connect their metaphors to anything familiar. There isn't some deeper meaning behind them. We are supposed to feel as confused with language as a means of communication as the band was. Through this use of nonsensical lyrics, the band calls attention to the limits of language and linguistic rules. They convey their experience of the Real through unrelatable metaphors, and, with this device, they show the true inexpressibility of the Real. Their attitude in "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" is celebratory and exciting because it represents the vast amount of possibilities of artistic expression when one admits that the rules aren't comprehensive or even compulsory. Because of the rejection of these rules, I believe this song is the purest attempt in the album in capturing the Real because it most accurately exemplifies the lack of accessibility of the Real through its bold usage of nonsensical lyrics. Every track after this one is the afterglow of that euphoric sense of returning to a reality that is free of signifiers.

Once one experiences the Real, it is hard to forget. Going through life feeling like there is something missing between you and the means of expression is one thing, but it is another to *know* that there exists a place called the Real where the anxieties of the inability to express are completely gone. In "Getting Better" and "Fixing a Hole," the band again talks about how they heal from the intense

cultural and social training that has made them a compliant subject within the symbolic structure: "You're holding me down, turning me round, filling me up with your rules . . . I've got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time" ("Getting Better"). This song suggests that there is time and opportunity where we can undo some of the cultural training that has created so many limitations in our expression. There is a future where we can be freed from the restrictive nature of the big Other: "I'm fixing a hole where the rain gets in and stops my mind from wandering where it will go" ("Fixing a Hole"). This song shows that even if we can never fully extract ourselves from the demands and rules of society, we can be ever mindful that we are acting within its limitations, and at least that's something. It's a step in the right direction if we can "fix the hole" that keeps us from letting our minds explore creative ways of expression.

A narrative version of these concepts is found in "She's Leaving Home." This song is an interesting and unique look at some of the effects that the big Other has on our concept of identity and ownership. From the perspective of the parents, this song tells the universal story about a child leaving home. The parents are devastated that their child could leave them behind after their continual sacrifices to raise her right ("Why would she treat us so thoughtlessly?"). It's hard to listen to this song and not question the parents motives: aren't the continual sacrifices working specifically toward making your child independent and self-sufficient? It is the natural course for a child to leave home, and yet it seems to affect most parents very personally. I believe this song is a representation of what we think we can capture and keep for ourselves because of the systems by which we ascribe. The child, a product of her parents and the cultural training she received growing up, is a piece of the parents'



identity since they have passed on their systems of behavior to the child. When she leaves, they face an identity crisis. The entire song can act as a metaphor for what we lose when we realize we can't capture pure truth within the symbolic structure. Just as the parents falsely believed the term "child" implied some intrinsic ownership, our intentions and beliefs can't be contained by the language provided by the big Other. It is natural for us to grow up like the girl in this song and shed the old frameworks after realizing they are inefficient. This kind of growth doesn't come without pain, and this song accurately represents that pain.

Pain is not the only way to react to the realization of the inefficiency of signifiers. In the boisterous, embellished music of "Being For the Benefit of Mr. Kite," the chaos of the band's experience with the Real and the sublime can be felt. The calliope music in the song elicits images of carnivals and circuses, and the lyrics are aggrandized descriptions of the chaotic and awe-inspiring feeling that a classic circus scene elicits. This results in a kind of intimidating and unhinged sound, but also the sense that the band is clearly having a lot of fun in a reality untouched by the big Other. Contrary to this wild reaction, the enlightened, peaceful feeling that can also sometimes result from the inability to fully express oneself is found in "Within You Without You." A dreamy sitar is played throughout the song, and the lyrics include phrases like "To realize it's all within yourself, no one else can make you change, and to see you're really only very small and life flows on within you and without you." This song comes off as a bit heavy-handed, but this doesn't change the efficacy of its allusion to the Real. The lyrics are cheesy affirmations about transcending, but the sitar has a connection with music that is often associated with Hindu activities like meditation. When done right, meditation is also supposed to dissolve

the notion of the subject. This music, just like any signifier, elicits a genuine response in the listener. The connection this music has with meditation can make the listener feel as though they have an idea of the enlightened state the Beatles were in when creating this work.

The last song before the framework's close is "Good Morning, Good Morning." This song is a bitter look at the frustration we feel when having to comply with these rules ("Going to work don't want to go feeling low down . . . Everyone you see is half asleep and you're on your own . . ."). The song continually weaves the ironically cheery greeting of "good morning!" into the daily frustrations of being overworked and isolated in a system that does not seem to offer much comfort. If this album gives the listener a bit of emotional whiplash, then it is doing its job in representing the different emotional responses to the Real and the big Other.

With the track "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (Reprise)," the framework of the fake band ends. Through several listens, I have come to believe that the purpose of this framework is to give the Beatles a familiar way to express their experience with the Real. The fake band members uncoincidentally correspond with real band members, so it's almost as if the Beatles displaced the obligation to express the experience of the Real onto a fake band. I suggest that the distance this seemed to create gave the Beatles a better view of their experience. Because of the very nature of the Real, it could have been much easier for them to express their experience by not attaching a personal narrative to it. This framework also acts as a remembrance of old forms of representation. It's as if the Beatles are leaving behind the old way of performing their music with the introduction of this "concept album" in the same way that they are leaving behind the old forms of expression

through which they used to communicate their experiences. This shedding of past perceptions is vital to establishing this album as the true masterpiece it is.

### **After the Concert Ends**

Surprisingly enough, there is one track on the album that lies outside of this fake concert framework. In "A Day in the Life," we are once again reminded of the frustrations the band feels when complying with the rules of society. This song has basic, poppy descriptions of a normal day: waking up, getting on the bus, all communicated through first person language like "my" and "I." These normal, everyday scenes are interrupted by a terrifying cacophony of orchestral dissonance, a musical sound much more akin to "Being For the Benefit of Mr. Kite." These musical sections grow and escalate into something almost unbearable to listen to until they break back into more relatable lyrics. I think these strange musical moments illustrate the terrifying and thrilling freedom from the limiting language of the big Other. In the face of sublime, one can be both terrified and thrilled. I believe the juxtaposition of the basic pop song and the chaos of the swelling symphony serve to remind the listener that there will be a constant struggle with the dissonance we feel when complying with the big Other. We will always have to act as subjects in the system. The "trip" can't last forever.

Perhaps even more significant than the song's juxtaposition of sounds is the fact that it lies outside of the fake band framework that the Beatles constructed. The purpose of this is to show the sobering truth that our default position is in a system established by the big Other. If one were to listen to the album on a vinyl record, the last thing the listener would hear is a strange refrain, repeated over and over again until, presumably, the listener lifts the needle

from the record. There is a lot of speculation as to what the Beatles are saying here, but I tend to hear “never could be any other way, never could be any other way . . .” This is a strange and almost ominous way to end the album, but I believe it was to reinforce this paradoxical nature of a creature of the Real living in a world ruled by the big Other. When we live in a system constructed by a language outside of ourselves, our relation to the Real cannot be any other way. We will always have to work within the system that so limits our expression.

The layout of *Sgt. Pepper* is essential to fully grasping its value as a Nietzschean metaphor for Lacan. While it is not necessary to listen to it on vinyl (although if you have the opportunity to do so, let the refrain at the end play for more than 2 minutes and see how comfortable you are), listening to the album in order, from beginning to end, is essential. The Beatles reached the Real through LSD, and the journey the album takes the listener on reflects the subtle changes and the ebbs and flows of that accessibility. Peaking early with “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,” the subsequent tracks are organized in a fashion that constantly switches between the thrilling and cathartic parts of experiencing the Real and the shock and frustration when one is forced to go back to living with the systematic rules of the big Other. The layout of the album serves to show that there will be a constant struggle associated with being a creature of the Real.

Lying outside of the fake band framework, “A Day in the Life” is possibly the most important track on the album. The feeling a listener is left with after listening to this song is some delicate combination of pleasure and pain. There is pain in the dissonance of the music and lyrics, but there is pleasure in what the dissonance excites: “a renewal of pleasure” as Rorem put it in his review. This type

of pleasure is unique from the pleasure one feels before understanding the limits of language. That type of pleasure is simplistic and surface level. The type of pleasure that is “renewed” through listening to the Beatles, especially *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, is complex and meaningful because it comes from understanding that its mediums essentially belong to the big Other and can therefore never capture the true experience of the Real. Without understanding Lacanian theory, the significance of this approach to the album could be lost, and I believe this approach is essential to grasping the true implications of what the album tells about the Real.

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*Balance* (Photography)  
Alexandra Webb



# Effective Activist Literature: Nuances of First-Person Narrative in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

Lauren Johnson

Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House* (2012) has accrued great critical acclaim as a piece of activist literature for both its powerful prose and cultural impact, calling nationwide attention to two pressing jurisdictional and social issues: limited sovereignty for Native nations and systematic violence perpetrated against Native women. As proof of these successes, the novel won the National Book Award for fiction in 2012 and is widely cited as a proponent to the 2013 amendment made to the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, which provides legal jurisdiction for tribal courts over non-tribal defendants. In a piece titled "Erdrich's Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*," Julie Tharp disentangles the impact of the novel's activism as coming from three major components: depiction of real, tribal law within the novel; Erdrich's activism outside of the novel; and Erdrich's strategic narrative tactics (25). While these first two points are indisputable, the last seems open to critique. Tharp continues, positing that Erdrich's use of the first-person narrative in her novel invites

the reader to serve as a first-person witness to the events that take place, allowing one to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of the events and themes than if they were told to them by an outsider perspective, or by someone outside of the victimized community (25). Yet, if Erdrich's novel is meant to make readers a first-person witness to the rampant violence against women, why is the story told from the perspective of a male, albeit the son of the rape victim? I propose that what previous critics have neglected to address is the possibly problematic implications of the power and potential damage inflicted on the overall message of the novel by Erdrich's use of a male first-person perspective. Specifically, by turning the story into Joe's bildungsroman, Erdrich shifts the focus away from the women of the novel's stories. This shift risks not only allowing a primary part of the novel's activism to be lost in translation, but allowing the focus of the discussion on native women's suffering to become centered around male development, which, in my view, gives in to patriarchal pressures to cater to the male gaze and undermines Erdrich's feminist message.

In *The Round House*, Erdrich depicts a fateful summer on a fictional, North Dakota Ojibwe Indian reservation when 13-year-old Joe Coutts faces the aftermath of a nearly-fatal sexual attack against his mother, Geraldine. Geraldine is broken following her attack, leaving her husband and son scrambling to pick up the pieces and bring their lives back to normal. While her husband, Bazil Coutts, works tirelessly to bring about some form of justice using his career experience as a tribal judge, Joe and some of his friends attempt to investigate and make sense of what happened to his mother—drinking a few beers, participating in summer camp, and meeting some cute girls along the way. Throughout the narrative, Joe's situational evidence and

findings lead him to uncover the identity of the attacker and the cause of his mother's attack, concluding in a shocking finale where Joe and his friend Cappy shoot Geraldine's attacker, killing him. This conclusion is deemed suitable by the characters of the book as a fulfillment of old tribal justice procedures concerning the execution of a wiindigoo, and thus, Joe is never formally accused of nor tried for his own violent crime. Erdrich presents this narrative of growth and learning as a first-person memoir from Joe on the summer that changed his life forever.

Erdrich's chosen tactic of first-person narration is particularly pertinent when reading literature such as *The Round House*, as the novel's element of activism adds yet another layer to its underlying meaning. Though it may seem obvious, scholars have addressed that it is imperative to remember the tactics of narrative delivery when examining literature; Henrik Skov Nielsen argues that we must remember to "posit an impersonal voice of the narrative" (133) when critiquing fictional, first-person narrative specifically, being constantly mindful of the author behind the narrator. In other words, though fictional first-person narratives are designed by the author to make us feel as though the narrative is a lived, true experience, the narratives are obviously not written by the fictional character. In this way, we must surpass our tendency to willingly suspend our disbelief and posit in the voice and perspective of the author in place of the fictional reality the author has created.

Along this same thread, however, it is precisely the reader's natural tendency to unquestioningly believe a first-person narrator that makes first-person narrative an incredibly effective tool for authors in inspiring empathy within one's reader. In an article titled "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," Suzanne Keen asserts that empathy comes

naturally in oral storytelling (209), a tradition many Native tribes, and Ojibwe tribes specifically, maintain. Keen avers that during oral storytelling, “[t]he oral storyteller not only takes advantage of our tendency to share feelings socially by doing the voices and facial expressions of characters, but also tacitly trains young children and members of the wider social group to recognize and give priority to culturally valued emotional states” (209). In this way, the method of oral storytelling contains built-in tactics that establish the storyteller as a medium for other characters’ emotional states and establishes those emotions as shared and understandable. Thus, as the storyteller takes on different characters, the audience is visually and auditorily aware that the storyteller is empathizing with different characters as they express them, inviting the listener to do the same, or at least demonstrating to the listener that it is possible.

Written storytelling can achieve the same phenomenon, though authors must intentionally manipulate their text and utilize strategies that create the same empathy that comes naturally through oral methods. Specifically relating to first-person narration, Keen assesses that “an internal perspective, achieved . . . through first-person self-narration . . . best promotes character identification and readers’ empathy” (219), and furthermore, that “the similarity of a reader to the characters is widely believed to promote identification” (217). Keen considers it commonplace in literary theory that writers regularly develop personable and relatable characters to invoke character identification. However, this tactic should not be considered an end-all-be-all; Keen theorizes that “readers’ experiences differ from one another, and empathy with characters doesn’t always occur as a result of reading an emotionally evocative fiction” (214). Essentially, while narrative and fiction can

open the door to empathy, the reader still has to choose to walk through. The difficulty of narrative activism lies in this uncertainty, as “human beings, like other primates, tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us . . . [w]e may find ourselves regarding the feelings of those who seem outside the tribe with a range of emotions, but without empathy” (Keen 214). Essentially, though it can be an effective tactic, Keen concedes that the process of character identification through first-person narration is neither guaranteed nor clear cut and can lead to readers either missing the meaning of a text entirely or misinterpreting the text. If a reader finds themselves feeling too dissimilar to a character, and that is their only stock in empathy with the character, one can easily lose all empathy for the character’s story.

Native scholars have also celebrated the power of empathy in first-person narration and honed in on its relation to Native traditions of storytelling. In an article titled “Literary Activism and Violence against Native North American Women: The Urgency for Sovereignty,” Maggie Ann Bowers analyzes several examples of Native literature that depicts Native women’s suffering, highlighting parallels between the texts. Discussing the plot of *The Round House* in relation to another Native novel, Bowers directly praises Erdrich’s novel for the solutions it presents for Native American communities; by means of wiindigoo justice, Bowers asserts, “[w]hat these novels propose is that it is possible to counter the traumatic effects of colonial sexual violence against women and children by drawing upon tribal belief,” arguing that the novels promote an engagement with indigenous thinking, allowing readers to challenge colonial and patriarchal systems (53). Additionally, Bowers commends that through the subplot of Mayla, the intended victim of Linden Lark’s attack against Geraldine, *The Round*

*House* includes an open template and clear allusion to all stories of Native women who have fallen prey to violence and abuse. Examining the novel's commentary on violence against women, Bowers eyes the method of delivery: "the focus of the narrative perspective from her teenage son makes clear to the reader that such sexualised violence has further traumatic effects in generations of families and communities beyond that of the immediate victim" (50). Bowers notes that Erdrich chose not to depict the rape itself, but rather, the fallout, which is exemplified by Joe serving as the first-person narrator of the novel and the story following the effects of the incident on Joe.

In Tharp's aforementioned close reading of *The Round House*, our attention is called to this same tactical choice. Tharp dissects Erdrich's strategy in placing Joe at the forefront of the novel as beneficial: "Placing the reader in Joe's position shifts the focus away from women's veracity and enables an understanding of the wider effects of violence against women and an appreciation for the complexity of the male sexuality" (32). Tharp proposes that by doing so, male readers can relate to Joe and feel connected to the narrative, rather than feeling disenfranchised and disconnected by a narrative they cannot understand. This aligns with Tharp's earlier claim that the novel is meant to pull the reader in as a witness, meaning that the novel must be read with the understanding that the rhetoric and diction therein is meant to make the reader feel urgent and deep compassion for the cause the novel presents. Thus, from Tharp's perspective, if the male reader is Erdrich's target audience, choosing Joe as the first-person narrator of the novel creates the perfect structure, as it "increases the likelihood that the novel will be read by men" (31). Without explicitly stating it, Tharp is applauding Erdrich's *essai* towards character identification and concluding that this

attempt is surely a large part of what caused the novel's success. Tharp also characterizes the novel as utilizing the "suspense novel format," which not only increases the audience base, but contributes to the enticement of readers who are anxious to uncover the whodunit mystery of the novel (29). This assumption echoes Keen, who assessed that "[c]haracters' involvement in a suspenseful situation provokes physiological responses of arousal in readers even when they disdain the quality of the narrative" (217). Following this argument, Erdrich's choice to place a male-driven mystery at the center of the novel could entice readers who would be likely disinterested in a book or topic they perceived to be too dissimilar to them: too Native or too feminist.

Not all scholars agree with the method of, essentially, baiting one's audience base. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn observes a major flaw in the presentation and analysis of Native work, arguing in a scalding hot critique that both are being reduced to cosmopolitanism—that is, reducing specific genres to a generalized American literary canon—instead of recognizing Native work as a unique school of literature that deals primarily with issues of sovereignty and oppression. On the writing side of the issue, Cook-Lynn evaluates that while *The Round House* utilizes some structural elements faithful to Native traditions (such as incorporating Ojibwe words without translation), overall, "Louise Erdrich . . . may have also moved away from [Native] concerns in order to gain the interest of mainstream readers" (27). To Cook-Lynn, this pandering to broader audiences rather than writing in the Native style for Natives is a big problem, as she states, "the violation of 'nationalistic' and/or Third World models in fiction and criticism should be of legitimate concern to scholars . . . about which mainstream critics can no longer be ignorant nor silent" (28). While Cook-Lynn acknowledges the pressure Native writers face

in that the Western-dominated field of editors and publishers oftentimes demands this sort of alteration, she does not support any form of cosmopolitanism or hybridity. Her observations are that playing into these Western structures perpetuates the problem of Western audiences expecting these structures and exercises their colonial power over non-Western structures (30). Cook-Lynn's conclusion is that in order to produce authentic, Native literature and to have it be fully effective in the sense that it is unadulteratedly understood and not gentrified or appropriated, Native writers must stay true to Native modes/structures of writing, which then in turn must be analyzed solely within Native theoretical considerations.

Similarly to Cook-Lynn's criticism of activist literature, I argue that if in order to be effective, Native literature cannot water down its Native structures and messages, then in the same way, in order to be completely effective, Feminist literature cannot water down its central focus on women's stories and women's experiences from their viewpoint. Otherwise, it is possible for the male perspective to overpower the female message of the text, and "[n]arrative empathy becomes yet another example of the western imagination's imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to feel with, in a cultural imperialism of the emotions" (Keen 223). Thus, when Erdrich made the strategic choice to use narrative tactics that attempt to make readers, specifically male readers, relate to Joe's narrative, she chose not to extend the same effort to make readers relate to Geraldine's narrative. As Cook-Lynn critiques Native authors who pander to non-native audiences, I argue that we must also critique a clear pandering to male audiences. While some critics may argue that this choice was a wise and effective move overall, the tactic becomes evidently problematic when one examines the



near-erasure of Geraldine and the implications of allowing male readers to relate to and normalize Joe's treatment of women in their perpetuation of harmful cultural norms.

At the front of this issue, Geraldine's near-erasure in the novel is almost entirely structural. Because of the novel's first-person perspective format, Geraldine is thrust from the spotlight of the novel and her story is told from another's perspective, unintentionally silencing her voice. While Geraldine also verbally chooses not to speak for some time following her attack, the structure is significant because it refuses her the choice to begin with. The scene in which Geraldine breaks this silence is pivotal, as Erdrich breaks the first-person structure and allows Geraldine to speak for herself. About midway through the novel, after refusing to speak or answer questions for several weeks, Geraldine explodes in a five-page-long narration of what transpired on the day she was attacked (158-62). Geraldine verbally recounts the attack to both Bazil and Joe, briefly allowing for the first-person narration to shift to Geraldine's perspective. The shift in narration is so dramatic that Erdrich marks this shift with typographical section dividers to make it clear to the reader when the first-person narration shifts back again from Geraldine to Joe. From a theoretical perspective, as Keen established, this tactic is obvious: the first-person narration from the person with the first-person experience is the most effective and empathetic mode of storytelling (219). So why, then, did Erdrich choose to only to give Geraldine those five pages of the most effective, most empathetic method of relating her story? The irony is that if this moment being told from Geraldine's perspective was not effective, Erdrich could have continued to utilize Joe as the narrator throughout that five-page scene, as well. As Erdrich did not, her choice to structurally empower Geraldine to tell her own story negates the

effectiveness of Joe's ability to share Geraldine's story throughout the rest of the novel.

Why, then, did Erdrich choose to structurally exclude Geraldine's voice from the majority of the novel? Tharp paints this structure in a positive light, claiming that "Geraldine's silence . . . fuels the suspense of the novel, forcing the other characters and reader to piece together scant clues," and that "[e]ven if [Geraldine] could regain her voice, she would make a poor narrator at this point, and perhaps there is little political ground to be gained by going through the emotional agony with her" (30, 29-30). In terms of this "political ground," Tharp posits that "[m]any have argued that sexual violence will not be taken seriously as long as it remains a women's issue. Women are often considered interested parties, overreactors, whiners, and even yes, false reporters" (32). Here, Tharp submits to the social, general mistrust of women, unwittingly highlighting that the central flaw in the structure presented by Erdrich is the perpetuation of the precise problem of society not trusting, listening to, or caring about women's suffering. By this logic, the only way in which the male reader is ready to accept the possibility of injustice is by "shift[ing] the focus away from women's veracity . . ." (Tharp 32), for who could trust a woman to tell her story outright? Thus, by means of Erdrich's example, Tharp presents the idea that women are considered too untrustworthy for men to listen to women tell their own stories. Playing into the misogynistic distrust of women and disallowing women to speak for themselves is such a clear part of the cultural inequality that it is disheartening to witness this bias play out in an activist piece like *The Round House*. I argue that as long as society continues to overly and unfairly consider whether or not women sharing their stories are truthful, the inequality will only continue. The use of fiction should be enough to

deter misogynistic criticism, as “readers’ perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion” (Keen 220). When reading fiction, readers recognize that a novel is a part of a fictional universe that is created only by the truths the narrator relates to the readers, and readers willingly suspend their disbelief of the reality the author portrays. This automatic trust readers must place in their fictional narrators is sufficient for most novels and should be sufficient to establish the ethos of a female narrator in a prose work, and if we do not expect this trust to be equally applied, we perpetuate the issue.

Furthermore, while it may be effective to interest or lure readers into the story by creating models for them to relate to the characters, it is my perspective that it should be considered an ill omen if a reader relates to or identifies with Joe’s treatment of women and that this strategy risks normalization of Joe’s behavior. The novel is riddled with portrayals of Joe’s sexuality; despite his young age and the fact that he doesn’t know what the word rape means when his mother’s attack occurs (Erdrich 14), Joe is very much familiar with themes, terms, and depictions of sex. Almost immediately in the novel, upon our first impression of Joe’s friends and first look into Joe’s life and the way he thinks, we are presented with the information that to Joe and his friends, sexual violence is a joke. “Naturally, we all wanted to be Worf . . . In the episode [of *Star Trek*] ‘Justice’ we found out Worf didn’t enjoy sex with human females because they were too fragile and he had to show restraint. Our big joke around pretty girls was Hey, show some restraint” (Erdrich 20). The idea planted in the minds of these young boys from aspiring to be Worf is a perpetuation and normalization of the idea that sex is inherently domineering

or even inherently rough on women. Despite the dramatic irony readers experience to be a clear link between themes of sexual aggression, the boys fail to recognize this, considering it light-hearted humor and fun. The boys repeatedly exemplify an extensive sexual knowledge base, Erdrich depicts a quick banter of a scene of the boys listing all the words they know that are just too similar to sexy words, resulting in the boys taking a break from biking (70), and “each went off alone and in three minutes relieved ourselves of all those words and then came back and got on our bikes and continued riding . . .” (Erdrich 71). Not only do the boys have an extensive knowledge of at least sexual vocabulary, but they’ve also begun to “relieve” themselves of this sexual pressure. The boys are continually obsessed with sex and girls throughout the entire novel, even up until the last scene in which the boys hit the road to try to rescue Cappy’s summer love from her strict parents, and we witness Cappy in a crazed state claiming “our hearts listened to divine will. Our bodies, too” (Erdrich 312). In light of Cappy’s tragic death in the consequent car crash, it is never addressed that the “divine will” Cappy claims to be experiencing is most likely the lust-driven fantasy of a pubescent boy.

Joe’s personal hyper-sexualization in the novel is perhaps best articulated through the arc of Sonja, Joe’s aunt. From the moment we meet Sonja we are thrust into Joe’s fixation with her breasts: “Sonja was her name, and I liked her the way a boy liked his aunt, but I felt differently about her breasts—on them I had a hopeless crush” (Erdrich 24). The descriptions of Sonja’s breasts throughout the rest of the novel are extensive and lengthy, ranging from “[f]ull, delicate, resolute, and round, Sonja’s were breasts to break your heart over,” to “[a]nd my loves, her breasts . . . pushed at the seams of the breastplate . . .” (Erdrich 25, 219).

Each time, his fascination extensive, grotesque, and bordering on the fantastic—this fantastical portrayal of Sonja is precisely what moves her portrayal across the line from the real to the unreal. As an unreal, fantastical figure, Joe doesn't see Sonja as an equal human: he sees her as an object.

The implications of the rhetorical tactic of depicting this overt toxic sexualization are grave, though not fully explored in the current critique of the novel. Tharp analyzes this arc by positing that Erdrich placing this event during the climax of Joe's puberty "places Joe in a deeply conflicted situation. On the one hand he is just beginning to see women as desirable sexual objects, and on the other hand he is witness to the devastation of his mother by one man's sexual aggression. He is in the perfect place and time in his life to give these events full consideration" (31-32). According to Tharp, this portrayal of a supposedly normal, pubescent teen's foundation of sexual knowledge is intended to be deeply disturbing in light of what happened to Joe's mother, and Erdrich knowingly crafts this juxtaposition. Thus, the depiction of Joe's overt sexualization is meant to draw in the Western male, and hopefully make him recognize his culpability in the prevailing, sexist culture. However, without direct, textual denunciation of Joe and the other boys' action, I think it is fair to claim that the desired outcome can only be hoped for. As Bowers asserts, "there is danger in simply representing and acknowledging the extent of violence against indigenous North American women, without altering the systems that allow it to occur. It is significant that the extent of the violence has become internationally recognized without reducing the number of occurrences" (49). Erdrich's depiction of Joe's disturbing sexual ideas without a total denunciation allows male readers to identify with Joe and not fully confront their own internal issues, just as Joe does not. Perhaps

they are more aware that violence against Native American women is a pervasive problem, but they think nothing wrong of the fact that they too can't help but stare at their aunt's breasts. Therefore, readers are allowed to be comforted with communion in their self-identified misogynistic traits, which, rather than challenging them, further cements them. Arguably, even Tharp's use of "objects" to describe women in the above quote is emblematic of the potential for residual problems left from inadequate denunciation of Joe's toxic sexualization (31).

There is one scene in the novel in which Joe is forced to face his own culpability in toxic sexualization, but based on my research and my reading of the novel, I argue that it is insufficient. Following a scene where Joe essentially forces himself into the room to watch Sonja perform one of her exotic dances, she finally cracks and give him a piece of her mind:

[A]ll along you were just itching. Sneaking a good look at my tits when you thought I didn't know. You think I didn't notice?

My face was so red and hot that my skin burned.

Yeah, I noticed, said Sonja. Take a good look now. Close up. See this?

I couldn't look.

Open your frickin' eyes.

I looked. A thin white scar ran up the side and around the nipple of her left breast.

My manager did that with a razor, Joe. I wouldn't take a hunting party. (Erdrich 222)

In this moment, Joe is finally confronted with a first-person example of someone who he cares about being physically

hurt by toxic masculinity. While one can argue that Joe has had this first-person account already with his mother, for whatever reason, seeing his mother go through her pain isn't enough to shock him out of his own participation in the culture. The difference is that Sonja is someone that Joe has sexualized, and so this is the first moment where he must confront his own participation in the pain of someone he cares for. Joe keeps one of the tassels from Sonja's costume for the rest of his life, and resolves, "every time I look at it, I am reminded of the way I treated Sonja and about the way she treated me . . . how I was just another guy. How that killed me once I really thought about it. A gimme-gimme asshole. Maybe I was. Still, after I thought about it for a long time—in fact, all my life—I wanted to be something better" (223). My reservations with this resolution lie in the incompleteness of it: we are not given textual evidence to support that Joe became something better, and without it, we cannot make assumptions. Without textual evidence, readers are left to merely hope that Joe fully recognized his culpability in rape culture and modified his actions accordingly. In the passage in which Joe reflects on the confrontation with Sonja, he only reflects that he wants to be something better. Again, perhaps this is just the structural limitations of the novel. By having the fictional structure of an adult Joe choosing to look back on a summer in his life in which something changed him, the reader is excluded from watching Joe change first-hand; the only textual evidence the reader has of Joe's mindset about women is from the perspective of a grimy 13-year-old. Without textual evidence of Joe exhibiting better behavior, the reader may want to assume that Joe's hopes turned into reality, but we have no proof.

Similar to how Mayla's story is meant to serve as a blank template for all abused, Native women's stories, Sonja's is

likely meant to do the same by enticing the male reader to examine their own culpability in rape culture. Tharp's interpretation of the novel is that "Erdrich implicitly challenges the reader to walk away from the extensive damage seen and do nothing about it" (30). I argue that the structure of the novel allows/enables the reader to do exactly that. Erdrich gives us the line, "Open your frickin' eyes" (222). Sonja—Erdrich by extension—is literally forcing Joe and the reader to open their eyes to the issue; Joe feels uncomfortable and resists, and theoretically, so does the reader. Most men's Sonjas won't have the opportunity to force them to listen like that, a point that is self-evident considering the nature and need for novels such as *The Round House*, which attempt to tell the story of women who are denied that voice. More than anything, this scene with Sonja to me seems to prove the effectiveness of allowing women to tell their own story if we simply give them the opportunity. The tactic of a woman demanding *open your eyes and learn* seems to activate something in the listener; instead of the silent shock and confusion he feels when faced with his mother hurting, Joe breaks down in front of Sonja as she lays out his culpability for us, as if it wasn't plain enough to see already: "You're crying, aren't you? Cry all you want, Joe. Lots of men cry after they do something nasty to a woman . . . I thought of you like my son. But you just turned into another piece of shit guy. Another gimme-gimme asshole, Joe. That's all you are" (Erdrich 222-23). Here, in Joe's tears, the reader sees an emotional reaction (other than anger) from Joe for only the second time in the entire novel. Furthermore, Joe's reaction to this confrontation is markedly different than in the rest of the novel, as it is the only time that older Joe—who has been our narrator the entire time—feels the need to superimpose his matured reflections on his 13-year-old



perspective. Again, Erdrich resumes the narration following a typographical symbol, as if to say, enough of that concession, and on with the mystery!

As Geraldine's direct narration and Sonja's direct confrontation both function as pivotal moments in the novel that break free from the rest of the novel's typical structure, it does seem that Erdrich's more explicit narrational tactics prove to be effective. In this way, the novel's tendency to skim over its female characters' perspectives negates its activist message: Geraldine is silenced for most of the novel, Sonja is portrayed as a sexual object and given little time to confront her objectification, and it is both ironic and tragic that Mayla, the woman whose story propels the entire action of the novel, is never given the opportunity to speak for herself. Furthermore, the novel's design invites readers to empathize and identify with its narrator's problematic behavior but does not sufficiently confront the behavior or provide readers with a solution. All three of these structures risk the imposition of a misogynistic read of the novel. This being said, I consider the overall implications to be that the structure of *The Round House* is not fully effective in portraying its feminist message. Though it was surely not Erdrich's intent, by not allowing women to take the forefront in sharing their own stories and not condemning toxic masculinity more overtly, the novel can be interpreted by a reader to allow misogynistic behavior to persist; as Keen depicts, "the novel-reading situation allows empathic inaccuracy to persist because neither author nor fictional character directly confutes it" (222). Thus, while the onus cannot be entirely on the author in a postmodern era to perfectly convey the message of their novel, if one is truly to pose a first-person narration in order to enact social change, authors must strive to portray narratives that

elicit holistic understandings to nuanced messages, or we risk losing our message altogether.

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